

# The Fourth Wall

## Introduction

We barbershoppers are always striving to entertain—not just in contests, but wherever we perform in public. We want to preserve our beloved musical style and still avoid having it be seen as an anachronistic, inbred art form that presents itself only in predictable, stereotypical ways. To become more relevant in today’s entertainment world, we might be wise to examine some of the proven concepts used successfully in other performing arts, such as the theatre. One such concept is called the “fourth wall.” It’s a simple yet powerful approach to define the relationship between the performer and the audience. Many of our barbershop performers intuitively understand the concept. This article is intended to help all of us (performers, judges, and coaches) to understand it more concretely and to provide a framework and language to describe it.

## The Fourth Wall, Created and Destroyed

The fourth wall is the imaginary invisible plane between the audience and the performer through which the audience views the action. When the performer mentally creates an intact fourth wall, he cannot see the audience—he “sees” the missing portions of the set and the missing characters in the setting. The term signifies the “suspension of disbelief” used by the audience, who pretends that the characters in the story are real “living” beings in their own world, and not merely performers on a stage. In order for the fourth wall to remain intact, the artists must also, in effect, pretend that the audience does not exist, by staying in character at all times and by not addressing the audience members directly. Most dramatic theatre relies on the fourth wall, as do most movie and TV dramas. Thus, audiences are well-conditioned to intuitively “get” the fourth wall concept. Use of the fourth wall is sometimes referred to as “representational” theatre.

“Presentational theatre”, in contrast, admits the obvious and demolishes the fourth wall, thus freeing the performer to acknowledge the presence of the audience, making eye contact with them, speaking to them, or even making entrances and exits through them. Most barbershop traditionally has been in the presentational mode. We have strongly encouraged direct eye contact with the audience.

## Representational Choices

If the performer chooses to work within the imaginary fourth wall, there can be several choices about how he represents the character he is playing. In every case, the performer needs to decide who he is and to whom he is speaking. These choices are usually based on the lyrical theme of the song(s), even if another theme is the primary one.

One choice would be to portray a character who is addressing a second, imaginary, person. For instance, in the song, “I Love You Truly,” the performer could be a husband speaking to his wife. She would be present within the fourth wall and, even if the performer is looking in the direction of the audience, he is seeing and singing only to her. His focal point would be at a place where she would logically be standing.

Another possibility would be to create a soliloquy—the character talking to himself. “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” could be done in such a setting. The character, talking to himself in a reverie, may not have a clear focal point, but be in an unfocused, dreamy state. Or even with occasionally closed eyes. His shifting emotions, however, would be clear to the audience, who is privileged to watch him with enormous rapport without threatening the intimacy of the experience.

The performers could choose to address each other in a closed environment that the audience views. A good example of that was Alchemy’s performance at the 2004 International Contest as jazz musicians doing “Old St. Louie” and “Birth of the Blues” in an after-hours jam session. In that case, the quartet stayed in character for the whole set, and never acknowledged the audience, even at applause. To have done so would have penetrated the fourth wall and, perhaps, destroyed the effect—even to the point of making the audience uncomfortable.

Alchemy’s costumed set, complete with props, was done entirely in character. But many contest sets can be done with only the individual songs, themselves, being performed in the representational mode. The singers create their characters and the mood as they establish a new fourth wall at the beginning of each song, but use standard entrances, bows, and exits. This is usually done wearing some sort of uniform outfit, rather than a costume that ties in with the songs. Gotcha!’s set that included “What More Can a Soldier Give” is one of thousands of examples of this approach.

Note that to be successful in any of the representational approaches, the performer needs well-developed visualization skills.

#### Presentational Mode Choices

Traditionally, barbershop quartets usually perform as if they were speaking directly to the audience, that is, with no fourth wall in place. Coaches and judges exhort them to maintain eye contact and clear focal point unity. This is a wonderful way to create rapport with the audience, as long as it fits with the lyrics. Use of the presentational mode should, however, be a choice made by the performer, rather than an automatic habit. In most of the examples above, direct eye contact with the audience would have damaged the performance. When the performer is in the narrator’s mode, such as in “When My Sugar Walks Down the Street,” he is in direct communication with the audience—telling them the story or making comments from his perspective. The audience needs to feel that contact.

There are many be cases where the performer uses the audience as a surrogate for the imaginary person within the fourth wall. It can be felt in songs such as “Smile, Darn Ya, Smile,” in which the performer is not in the narrator’s role, but in direct, persuasive, and personal contact with the audience, not an imaginary person.

### Shifting Modes

In many songs, the perspective of the performer can change within the song, often between verse and chorus. The performer should be aware of the shifts, and choose whether or not to establish the fourth wall. For example, in “Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie,” the performer could start the verse in the narrator’s role (fourth wall not in place) talking to the audience: “On a Sunday morn...” Then he could create the fourth wall and take on the persona of the girl, saying, “We must stay home, Joe...” After changing back to the narrator’s role: “Then the boy...,” he could become the boy: “Wait till...” As the performer changes roles as suggested by the lyric, he could be establishing or penetrating the wall, depending on what character he is playing and who he is addressing. As he does this, his focal points will likely be different. Or he could just choose to be in the narrator’s role throughout the song and stay in presentational mode with no fourth wall in place, simply quoting the boy and girl, not “becoming” them. But he should make a conscious choice. Otherwise, the audience might not understand what the song is about and what the performer intends--especially if there is not agreement among the performers.

In theatre, the technique of “breaking” the fourth wall is used when the plot of the story calls for some unusual event to take place that shatters the barrier between the fictional world of the story and the “real world” of the audience watching the story; it refers to the character directly addressing the audience, or actively acknowledging (through breaking character or through lyrics) that the characters and action going on are not real. It’s often done as a sly aside to the audience (like the famous Grouch Marx bit with the cigar). This technique is not normally done in barbershop performances, but it offers interesting possibilities—especially in comedy (think about FRED)! Once again, the performer gets to make the choice, but only if he is aware that the choice can be made.

### Implications for Choruses

It is a common practice for our choruses to perform in the standard “choral concert” style performance, on risers, in tuxes (or some other uniform), with a director who bows to the audience, then becomes the focal point for the chorus during most of the performance. There may or may not be much choreography. In this mode, our audiences are conditioned to expect to see a “conductor,” as with a symphony orchestra, and may be somewhat uncomfortable without one. A problem in this kind of performance is often the lack of contact with the audience--not “getting past the footlights.” Instead of staring *at* the director, however, if the chorus is truly in “presentational mode” and sings *through* the director in eye contact and emotional contact with the audience, the projection and rapport can be much stronger. This approach can differentiate our wonderfully entertaining barbershop choruses from most classical ensembles. Choruses can still choose the representational mode in the concert format, but the fourth wall concept is often more convincing in a theatrical setting.

For example, six of the top ten choruses at the 2004 International Contest were in costumes, not uniforms. Many used sets and props. Their use of the fourth wall concept was facilitated by the freedom and variety provided by the theatrical style. They mostly

stayed in character. If they looked toward the audience, it was usually to envision someone within the fourth wall. Many of the directors were not “in front.” Contemporary audiences might expect a staged, costumed, representational performance to look like a Broadway production number, in which there is no director. A visible director could be a distraction in that setting. Well trained choruses can perform with only subtle direction. This approach frees the individual performer to become more of an actor, who can perform with authentic emotion that the audience can connect with.

### Implications for Quartets

Employing a theatrical setting is more difficult for quartets because their range of movement is limited by the microphones and the lighting. Their use of sets and props is limited to what they can gracefully carry onto the stage. Alchemy’s set was a good example of the creativity required to carry off the “representational mode” for a quartet throughout a two-song set, from entrance to exit. However, quartets can still choose to establish the fourth wall within the standard, non-costumed format for convincing, powerful performances of individual songs. The key is to make the choice—and to understand the implications of that choice.

### The Value of the Fourth Wall Concept

- To the performer: The conscious choice of creating the fourth wall can simplify the task of the performer, and help him to visualize, focus, and stay in character without the distraction of seeing that frightening sea of faces (sometimes known as the “black giant”). It can provide a safer place to show emotion--like singing in the shower—and can allow the performer to become more vulnerable and available to the audience. If authentic performance is about “telling the truth” emotionally, this concept can help the performer find and communicate that truth. The conscious choice of penetrating the fourth wall can give the performer, by contrast, a strong feeling of connection to the audience, which the audience can then reciprocate.
- To the judge: Understanding the fourth wall concept can help the judge recognize whether the performer understands the technique and how well it is executed. Inconsistencies of focal points and visual effects can be seen in a broader, less mechanical way. Authenticity, believability and from-the-heart emotions can be placed in a different context, helping to define the cause/effect relationship between technique and mood. The fourth wall language can help in coaching evals to help the performer grasp the concept and improve more quickly. Remember, we’re judging the entertainment value, not the tool.
- To the audience: Audiences don’t care about technique. They are very intuitive. They will “get it”-- as long as it is done well. Hopefully, they will notice more variety, creativity and authenticity from barbershop performances. They will appreciate and reward good entertainment.

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October, 2004