

Breathing is Meaning

by

Catherine Fitzmaurice

Roland Barthes (1977: 183-4) writes: "The breath is the pneuma, the soul swelling or breaking, and any exclusive art of breathing is likely to be a secretly mystical art." In studying breathing I have recognized something of its spiritual and transformative potential, but in teaching actors my aim has been to demystify the process whereby presence and power may be achieved, offering pragmatic exercises which may be practiced by anyone. I have looked for information not only to arts technique, but also to science, philosophy, and psychology, as well as esoteric traditions. Here is a brief history and general description of my voice work which has come to be called Destructuring/Restructuring, and Fitzmaurice Voicework.

In an analysis of the physical components necessary for sound production – power source, oscillator, resonator - breath occupies the most active place in human vocal production: it is the energy impulse that excites the vibration in the vocal folds and the resulting resonance in the body - starting, continuing, and stopping it. Because of the living and therefore infinitely changeable quality of the particular actions and structures that are responsible for this sound vibration, the way in which the human body breathes impacts the voice a great deal, much as the hands of a good pianist and a beginner create different sounds with the same instrument. Breathing, then, makes an essential difference in quality of vocal production. By quality I refer not only to timbre, but to the entire range of use of the voice.

Voice is an action. It has no location in the body except when it is in action, sounding. The essential physical structures - diaphragm, intercostal, abdominal and back muscles; larynx; articulators; body form and cavities - are in themselves virtually mute until with a particular use of the breath and vocal folds they all inter-relate as power source, oscillator, and resonator to create sound. It is for optimal functioning of the breath energy, as power source, that I have searched.

A singer's voice work deals largely with the use of the vocal folds, practicing different pitches, onsets, durations, trills, and cessations, enjoying the bird-like flutter sensations at the throat, and finding, in the added manipulations of the pharynx, jaw, and articulators, delightful variations of phoneme and tone, while using the breath for tone initiation, consistency, pause, and volume. However, for those without musical skills or aspirations, the voice is usually simply a means of direct communication of ideas or feelings, requiring no conscious effort other than some acquisition of language skills. Actors in the theatre are caught between these two poles. Since the speaking voice is not as determined by meter, melody, or tone as a singer's voice, and since an actor's textual interpretation and given circumstances (real and imagined) of place, time, action, and person are constantly varying, the act of speaking is always somewhat improvisatory, based on impulse, and essentially immediate. It is a commitment to the manifest present.

In my thirty years of work with actors' speaking voices I have focused on breath as the vital active ingredient for physical sound-making as well as for the expression of ideas. "Inspiration" denotes both the physical act of breathing in, and the mental act of creating a thought. The expiration (breathing out) or expression of the thought is likewise both physical and mental. It is the harmonizing of these twin aspects of speaking – the physical needs and impulses and the mental thought processes - that I address, and through them the harmonizing of the two functions of the nervous system in the act of breathing for speaking: the autonomic (which is an unconscious response by the diaphragm to a need for oxygen) and the central (which can override autonomic respiratory rhythm through conscious motor control). The diaphragm contains both unstriated and striated muscle and is responsive to both the autonomic and central nervous systems. It is therefore uniquely appropriate as a site to create such harmony, so that the healing of the culturally prevalent body/mind split is not merely a metaphysical, but is actually a physical and obtainable, goal which brings impulse and thought together as action.

In searching for models beyond my own empirical experience and my observation of students and actors, the modern and ancient somatic training systems of Bioenergetics, yoga, and shiatsu have been most influential. In experimenting with these exercises myself and on others I explored means to most directly affect breathing and vocal sound, and the adaptations of these systems that I use with actors have over the years resulted in a series of exercises and interventions that I call Destructuring.

The Destructuring work consists of a deep exploration into the autonomic nervous system functions: the spontaneous, organic impulses which every actor aspires to incorporate into the acting process. The tendency of the body to vibrate involuntarily as a healing response to a perceived stimulus in the autonomic "fight or flight" mode (as in shivering with cold or fear, trembling with grief, anger, fatigue, or excitement) is replicated by applying induced tremor initially through hyper-extension of the body's extremities only, thus leaving the torso muscles free to respond with a heightened breathing pattern. At the same time a great deal of unaccustomed energy, waves of tremor, and, ultimately, relaxation, flow throughout the body, sensitizing it to vibration, and increasing feeling and awareness. The introduction of sound into these positions allows the ensuing physical freedom to be reflected in the voice too, not just the body, because this freedom also naturally affects resonance and laryngeal use, so that pitch range and inflectional melody are improved, as are tone, timing, and rhythm, and even listening and inter-relating.

Destructuring affects not only the vocal performance as well as the daily breathing (and vocal) habits of the actor, but can also radically alter muscle tone and body organization, allowing sound vibrations to extend beyond the conventional resonators of chest and head throughout the body, adding harmonic range and natural volume to the voice. It encourages the breathing (as power source and therefore timing) and the body (as resonator and therefore tone) to respond organically to shifts in mood and idea, thus achieving variety and complexity of meaning and eliminating unintentionally dry, flat delivery.

Since the physical and emotional aspects and the awareness levels of the actor can be deeply affected by this work, the resulting growth of the personality helps create a more mature artist, with increased potential for both sensitivity and pro-action. Through self-reflexive contact with the autonomic nervous system the actor acquires not only a more functional vocal instrument but also gains in autonomy, authenticity, and authority, which impact both personal and social behavior, as well as aesthetic choices.

When the autonomic movements of the "Deconstructed" muscles of respiration are less inhibited it becomes easy to "Restructure" by introducing the traditional European breathing techniques taught to actors in London at the Central School of Speech and Drama by Elsie Fogerty, Gwyneth Thurburn, J. Clifford Turner, and Cicely Berry. As a child I studied with Barbara Bunch, Cicely Berry's teacher, and I was fortunate to have for three formative years Alison Milne, Thurburn, Turner, and Berry as my teachers at the Central School. I returned there to teach before coming to the United States in 1968. It was the lack of ability in most of my students in both countries to isolate, without undue tension, the breathing actions of the vocally efficient rib swing and abdominal support that caused me, not to give up the idea of technique as others have done in response to the perceived difficulty, but to look for methods of reducing body tension in faster and more radical ways than the voice work or the Alexander Technique which I had experienced at the Central School, so that the breathing isolations could become effortless and therefore economical, limber, and effective. The rib swing and abdominal support actions are, in fact, what an uninhibited body does during speaking.

In 1965 in London, David Kozubei introduced me to the work of Dr. Wilhelm Reich. Influenced by Reich, Kozubei had developed a means of reducing muscle tension which he called "Movements," and he founded a group to study Reich's work in a practical way. In this group I began to study Bioenergetics with Dr. Alexander Lowen, then later in the United States with several of his trainees, and more recently I worked with Dr. John Pierrakos in Core Energetics. Both Lowen and Pierrakos were students and colleagues of Reich, and all three have written extensively. In 1972 I began to do yoga. My own adaptation for voice work of bioenergetic tremors and yoga stretches exists in their combinations and in a focus on a fully relaxed torso to allow maximum spontaneous breathing movement, and, more specifically, in the use of sound on every outbreath, no matter how the body is breathing, without changing the placement or rhythm of that breathing. This accustoms the actor to the integration of breath impulse and tone, while it tends to use only semi-approximated vocal folds resulting in "fluffy," released, feeling sounds which are very soothing to over-used, tense vocal folds, and which can resemble the sounds that, according to Charles Darwin (1969), precede language, and which give individual paralinguistic meaning to speech. Then, after carefully integrating the unconscious (autonomic nervous system) patterns with the conscious (central nervous system) pattern of rib swing/abdominal support, speech sounds and then speech are introduced as an extension and application of the primary breathing function of oxygenation. This is what I call Restructuring. Restructuring gives the actor control over the timing and the variety of delivery choices of pitch, rate, volume, and tone, and allows approximate repeatability without loss of either spontaneity or connection to impulse.

Restructuring, then, is not only the introduction of intercostal and abdominal breath management into the act of speaking, but is also the harmonizing of that pattern with the individual's physical and/or emotional needs for oxygen moment to moment. It requires the ability to isolate particular parts of the abdominal muscle and of the intercostal and back muscles, without interrupting the organic oxygen need.

The Restructuring work for the inbreath expands the chest cavity where the lungs are largest, in the lower third of the ribcage, thus bringing in as much air as needed phrase by phrase without undue effort in the upper chest but also without inhibiting any movement that might occur there as a result of physical need or emotional involvement. I do not teach Clifford Turner's "rib reserve," but the actor will find that as the body accustoms itself to the Restructuring the ribs will naturally stay out somewhat longer during speech because the abdominal support movement (as the Restructuring work for the outbreath) becomes the vocal action, replacing the rib-squeeze or neck tension which often seem to recur when the actor only attempts to stay "relaxed" while speaking. Speaking requires an active use of the outbreath during its role as excitor of vibration.

An awareness of oxygen need on the autonomic level, and a trust in his right to pause, or to breathe in when he has a new thought, are all essential for an actor while learning Restructuring, so that upper chest, shoulder, and neck tension do not develop, and so that hyperventilation does not occur since the lungs may take in much more oxygen than normal at one time. I always work the Restructuring with speech sounds, nonsense, impromptu speaking, and later, text, because there is no need to have control over breathing placement or timing if the actor is not using the voice. One may then practice the breathing pattern with various speech sounds in combination, with varying lengths, speeds, pitches, and volumes of phrases, with and then without pauses, and later again with different styles of texts, character voices, emotional expressions (e.g. laughing, crying, shouting, screaming), and body positions, actions, and interactions, etcetera. I encourage actors finally not to monitor problems nor even the involvement of the breath tract and articulators in the act of speaking, but, with the help of an imaged "focus line" traveling from the dynamic abdominal action on the outbreath around the pelvis to the spine and up into and out from the "third eye" area, to engage fully, from the intuitive, physical (and metaphysical, "chi") centre at the abdomen, in the action of meaningful communication with another, which involves receiving as much as sending.

The sometimes physically and/or emotionally painful work on the release of inhibitory tensions in Destructuring, combined with the mastery and application of technique in Restructuring, is a long and often frustrating journey for the actor, but the rewards are great. The emotional and artistic growth which occurs during Destructuring is audible in the tones of voice and the delivery choices; and just as one may take a while to learn to ride a bicycle or drive a stick-shift, but later one is only focused on arriving at one's destination, the initially consciously monitored breathing actions of Restructuring become finally an automatic response to an actor's need to communicate meaning effectively. It is at this point that voice work becomes indistinguishable from acting.

An examination of the early development of my Deconstructing work can be found in an unpublished 1978 M.F.A. thesis by Penelope Court for the Goodman School of Drama through the Art Institute of Chicago, and a later look can be found in an unpublished 1993 M.F.A. thesis by Michael Barnes for the National Conservatory, Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Penelope Court, the first of my students to teach my methods.

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