

## Breathing and The Voice Practices on Stage

Anca SIMILAR\*

**Abstract:** In this article we examine breathing as a basic principle that lies in a better understanding of voice production both in art and in life. Breathing provides an essential key not only for our being, but also for our communicative function. Once we admit the breath in consciousness, we become aware that it is no longer just a psycho-physical phenomenon but it is a subject to social and cultural values. Therefore, the conscious use and management of breathing, especially in terms of an individual's ability to express himself, provides an essential key not only for our being, but also for our communicative function, which is fundamental in theater. Breathing is transformative. An actor's craft is not exclusively an art of breathing, but breathing is the basic action that supports the art of an actor who transforms for each role. Voice is significant to the theater in the same way that it is significant to life itself, and breathing is the relationship and a constant exchange between us and the world. Respiration, therefore, is the relationship of the experiential body to the world. Breathing is the fundamental element necessary to be conscious as an actor, as a human being.

**Key words:** breathing, autonomous function, breathing practices, breathing as metonym for life, voice on stage

Breathing is the ephemeral materialization of air at the interface of the body and the world, involving and modifying the qualities of both. It is the most common meaning given in terms of the process of inspiration and expiration that signals its physiological universality. In this way of understanding, breathing is an invisible precedent for life, an automatic and functional necessity. However, breathing is more than just a reflexive action, and not just because it can sometimes be controlled or manipulated and can affect or be affected by experiences, environments, and relationships. Despite the merits of exploring respiration as a phenomenon that is at the same time intrinsically shared but distinctly contextual, the meanings and embodiment of respiration have rarely been examined as a central research topic in the humanities and social sciences. One of the exceptions is the work of Luce Irigaray,

---

\* Dr. MS, Associate professor, Faculty of Theatre and Film, University “Babeş – Bolyai” Cluj Napoca

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

she questions conventional scientific traditions to propose an ontology of breathing as a means of exploring the reasons why consciousness and the body meet. Respiration is an essential autonomous function for life, writes Luce Irigaray in "The Age of Breath".

Respiration corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of living human beings. Being born into the world involves inspiration and expiration on one's own. In the womb, we receive oxygen through the mother's blood. We are not yet autonomous, we are not yet born: "In a less anthropocentric, more physiological sense, respiration, as a term, captures and reunites all those processes by which beings with lungs take (inhale) and release air: mechanical, chemical, affective and metaphorically"<sup>1</sup>.

With a rate of about sixteen times a minute, nine hundred sixty times an hour, and twenty-five thousand four hundred and twenty times a day, it is no wonder that there is a desire to ignore this complex, repetitive activity. On average, we will take 670 million breaths during our lifetime, the breath being nodal for voice production.

### Breathing as a metonym for life

Whether it refers to the basis of cosmological metaphors (pneuma), the rhetorical point of the arts (cola), the subject of medical examination (breathing) or the principle of bodily unity (prana), breathing is understood as a metonymy for life itself, rather than as a process. Physiologically discreet, breathing often acted as a first philosophical principle. Traditionally, respiration has been understood physiologically as a mechanical-material process of gas exchange and cellular respiration. But is the phenomenon of respiration only a physiological process that must be studied as a problem of the natural sciences? According to Havi Carel, "breathing has complex and powerful psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions"<sup>2</sup>. According to Carel, one could say that breathing is "a point of connection between physiological, psychological, existential, spiritual and cultural"<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *The Age of Breath*, 2004, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Carel, Havi, *Phenomenology of Illness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

From the perspective of the predominant physiological theory of respiration, respiration has no essential relation to these other dimensions which include, for example, spirituality, mental capacities, experientialism, voluntarism or the practice of philosophy. However, the phenomenon of respiration includes such dimensions that are not directly, or at least not entirely only, physiological causal relationships that can be studied by naturalistic scientific methods.

The dimensions of respiration that are dimensions of our lived experience could be called non-physiological dimensions of respiration. For example, the relationship between spirituality and respiration can be found both etymologically and practically. Etymologically, the connection between spirituality and respiration is found in the Latin word *spiritus*: the root of words such as "spirit" and "spirituality" comes from the Latin verb *spirare*, "to breathe". This connection between spirit and respiration becomes clearer if words such as "to breathe" and "breath" are taken into account, which come from the Latin verb *respirare* (re- "again" + *spirare* "to breathe"), i.e. etymologically: to breathe "again", as well as words like "to sigh" and "sigh", which come from the Latin verb *suspirare* (sub- "sub" + "*spirare*", "to breathe"), i.e. etymologically "deep breathing, breathing".

The practical connection between breathing and spirituality is highlighted by the fact that many spiritual or physical traditions (Buddhism, yoga, tai chi, qui gong, Taoism, etc.) that use various experiential breathing practices as methods of spiritual growth. Neither the etymological nor the practical aspects (breathing practices for spiritual purposes) of this connection between spirituality and respiration can (have) ever been truly understood or studied by physiology or the natural sciences in general. Regarding the question of voluntarism, it can be said that breathing is an involuntary and voluntary bodily function. In this sense, breathing is like "thinking [which] is also involuntary, but also voluntary"<sup>4</sup>. Most of the time breathing seems to happen involuntarily, but we also have a voluntary ability to vary the way we breathe and even stop it for a moment. This interweaving of the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of respiration is one of the fundamental aspects of respiration. This makes the phenomenon of respiration exceptionally and radically different from other vital

---

<sup>4</sup> Fitzmaurice, Catherine, „Breathing is Meaning”, *The Vocal Vision*, New York: Applause Books, p. 248

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

physiological systems of the body, such as the cardiovascular and digestive system, or the functions of internal organs, such as the spleen or liver, because these systems and functions are involuntary, which means that we cannot change any of them directly by choosing to do so.

There are, of course, many physiological and neurological investigations that explore the connections between breathing practices as forms of spirituality and the physiological body (e.g. brain functions), but at the same time it is important to be aware that spirituality is a dimension of lived experience of us. This means that physiology, neurology, or any other branch of science cannot study spirituality or breathing practices as dimensions of lived experience, because the scientific approach does not necessarily understand the meaningful world of experience. The natural sciences talk about cells, chemical compositions, hormones, etc., but none of us has ever experienced such a thing in our lived experience. At the level of significant experiences of human life, we do not experience anything that deals with the natural sciences, we experience meaningful relationships and encounters with things, others, emotions and the world. In experiential terms, breathing is a relationship and a constant exchange between us and the world. Respiration, therefore, is the relationship of the experiential body to the world in contrast to other vital physiological functions, for example the cardiovascular system, which is an internal function of the body. Also in experiential terms, breathing is a certain type of exchange, and a cycle of inspiration and expiration could be initially defined as follows: breathing is an experience of the perpetual relationship of exchange between us and what is not our self, that is, what is outside of us, but which is inspired by us and turns into an engine for the voice, our voice or the voice of a character.

The voice is significant to the theater in the same way that it is significant to life itself. Many expressive forms combine social and artistic functions - rock painting, mural painting, incantations - but none as complete as the voice. It is "the instrument" by which some of the most common but also the most sophisticated of human expressions are communicated. The voice is the channel and the amplification, the impulse and the expression, the thought and the sound, it is art and it is life. "The actor, in his/her creation, uses on one hand his/her memory (sensorial, visual, auditive...) and his/her past experiences and, on the other hand, his/her sensations, perceptions, representations and his/her reproductive imagination. If through memory the actor, in a scenic context, has the capacity of reproducing, evoking and

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

experiencing sounds, images, ...from his/her prior experience, thorough representations, images and reproductive imagination, he/she detaches him/herself from the concrete reality, passing beyond it, into a new, imaginary and fantastical one"<sup>5</sup>. And to use another voice, for each character played. So, a multitude of voices in just one body, and beyond , the own voice, which is difficult to define. So what is actually the voice? For many, the voice remains one of the most impalpable and invisible factors of all visible and measurable knowledge about the body. Rocco dal Vera and Robert Barton, in the first chapter of the book "*Voice on stage and Off*", state that the voice is the least known entity of all physical arts: "Your voice is hidden in a cave. The cave is your body. You will never know your voice as well as your body, because there is no photo, scale, measuring tape, mirror or zipper to help you. No one will kiss, slap, caress or push your voice. It hides well. "<sup>6</sup>.

Breathing can be understood as a basic principle that lies in a better understanding of voice production both in art and in life, breathing providing an essential key not only for our being, but also for our communicative function. Once we admit the breath into consciousness, we become aware that it is no longer just a psycho-physical phenomenon but is subject to social and cultural values. Therefore, the conscious use and management of the breath, especially in terms of an individual's ability to express himself, provides an essential key not only for our being, but also for our communicative function. Even if it is used as a measure or relaxation, the breath gives meter (in music or poetry), dictates the pause, conditions the meaning, or indicates the limits of semantics, presents the actor, the musician, the artist at a certain moment in a certain place.

Kristin Linklater states about breathing that "There is no one correct way to breathe. There is breathing that works for yoga. breathing that works for swimming, there is the proper breathing for martial arts and the best for playing the trumpet, there is meditation breathing and at least a dozen different 'correct' ways of breathing for singing. Our breathing muscles are multifarious and adaptable. They can perform both voluntarily and involuntarily. Their primary purpose is, of course, to keep us alive; this they do on the involuntary level. My particular interest in breath is the way in which it creates voice as it passes through the vocal folds and how it helps us either

---

<sup>5</sup> Curuțiu – Zoicaș, Camelia, Representation and the Internal View of the Instruments of Scenic Creation, Theatrical colloquia, no 2, 2019, p. 135

<sup>6</sup> Barton, Robert, Dal Vera, Rocco, *Voice: Onstage and Off*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 3.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

to reveal or hide the truth as we speak. The role played by breathing in the art of acting has occupied me professionally for 50 years and, in the art of acting, the goals are believability and a sense of limitlessness. We search for truth in the language of extremity and in the most intimate emotional expression. The alchemy of inspired communication is a mix of emotion, intellect and voice. The 'prima materia' is breath. This fundamental element of truthful speaking is accessible for anyone involved in speaking publicly or indeed privately. How do you experience the alchemy and art of breathing for voice? My starting point is to pay attention to the center of the diaphragm and, with the lips slightly apart, to tune in to the rhythm of natural, everyday breathing allowing the outgoing breath to escape over the lips in a small loose puff of air 'ff' <sup>7</sup>.

The first books dedicated exclusively to stage voice in theater emerged as vocal pedagogy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This new discipline is beginning to be associated with science, as a consequence of the positivism of the mid-nineteenth century. The notions of scientific reasoning offered the possibility to legitimize the vocal aesthetics and from the perspective of the evolution of medical science and related physiological, acoustic and mechanical knowledge. The emergence of stage vocal pedagogy is synchronous with the new emerging science of musicologist, laryngologist, and speech scientist. The first textbooks appeared immediately in the early twentieth century, Elsie Fogerty (1907) top British practitioner or voice specialist H.H. Hulbert published in 1912 "Voice Training in Speech and Song: an Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation" and, on the first page, the author notes: "The treaty is generally intended for voice users, singers, preachers, lawyers, actors, public speakers and lecturers, but especially teachers, who are probably the biggest users of the voice and therefore the ones most in need of vocal training."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, as mentioned above, vocal pedagogy, even if formulated by practitioners in direct relation to the theater, can be extended to many other areas where communication is crucial.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Breath in Action. The Art of Breath in Vocal and Holistic Practice*, edited by Jane Boston and Rena Cook, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2009, The Alchemy of breathing, Kristin Linklater, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> Hulbert, H. H., *Voice Training in Speech and Song: an Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation*, p. 1.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

At the London School of Speech and Drama in the 20th century, Gwyneth Thurnbrun, J. Clifford Turner and Cicelly Berry taught and published methods, textbooks or treatises on the performing arts. The solid phonetic beliefs of H.H. Hulbert are similar to those in the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, under the influence of English phonetician William Tilly of Columbia University in New York, phonetics is used to ensure the scientific verification of voice, like the manner sought by H.H. Hulbert in the United Kingdom. Tilly's student in the 1920s, Margaret Prendergast McClean, opined that the science of phonetics is the only way in which pronunciation can be studied correctly and accurately represented, and her book "Good American Speech" published in 1928 became a widespread text used in American high schools, universities, and theater schools. In it, she points out that a solid knowledge of the science of phonetics can help students acquire good American speech without regionalisms.

The Romanian Voice School for the performing arts of the last century is also based on a phonetic methodology, even speech therapy, with exercises applied on logatomes, syllables, groups of words. Thus, Cella Dima publishes "From speech to eloquence", Marietta Sadova, "Exercises of dramatic art", Sandina Stan, "The art of scenic speech", Valeria Covătariu, "Words about the word", and Nicolae Gafton "Treatise on speech therapy and sonopoetics". Of these methods, only Sandina Stan's book presents breathing exercises, which are built more on quantitative and qualitative breathing formulas and do not include muscular-mechanical procedures. Also, in the same book there is a description of the types of breathing, and the author recommends the use of costal-diaphragmatic breathing, without other details about the mechanics of breathing. Therefore, the Romanian school of theatrical vocal pedagogy is not connected to the theories of voice production ( myoelastic aerodynamic voice production theory as we use it today) through the prism of phonation theories, modern source-filter theories, the theory of resonant formants, or other related disciplines, from neuroscience to phoniatrics or vocology.

Who can then benefit from careful examination of the breath? All those who want to communicate effectively, from a teacher with his students, to an actor who sings in a music hall, a lecturer who holds a public conference or a lawyer in court. The thin, inaudible voice of the actor, the restrained speech of the teacher or the weak breathing of the lawyer, all share the common challenge of breathing because their communication is inhibited successfully. The desire to establish meaningful

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

communication with an audience, to hold students' attention in class, or to win a favorable verdict, are all destabilized and hindered by inadequate breathing. Although, on the one hand, these examples are clearly representative of very different applications of respiration, they all demonstrate the key importance of respiration in awareness of transformation of all kinds. So, breathing training procedures can address many professions, as evidenced by one of the first books ever written for voice professionals, namely that of H.H. Hulbert, dating from 1912, "Voice Training in Speech and Song: An Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation," a book dedicated, as I quoted above, to actors, teachers, lawyers, singers, preachers.<sup>9</sup>

The function of the voice in the theater is extremely important: each actor is involved in managing his vocal instrument, in establishing his acoustic sensitivity to the theater space and the vocal nuances used in relation to the audience's response. The functional "triangle" that appears serves as the operational basis for efficient vocalization. It offers a distinction between the optimal voice or the voice that is just a voice and the vocal ornamentation that appears from a certain ethos, textual impulse or act of speech within the framework established by the aesthetics of production. Breathing is transformative. An actor's craft is not exclusively an art of breathing, but breathing is the basic action that supports the art of an actor who transforms for each role. Awareness and connection to breathing, the release of excessive muscle activity, which inhibits breathing and restricts the voice, is essential to be able to play on a stage. The action of the breath, the nucleus of the impulse is the inspiration, and this impulse is necessary for the breath to enter and be received by the body, and there is born the moment for action. The impulse for breathing is the source of life: it reflects emotions, physical condition and intellectual states, it is the vital spirit, the soul and the mirror of everything that happens between birth and death. Without a complete, deep, coherent and conscious breath, it is easy to be disconnected from that vital essence which is the very source of life, the breath of consciousness in action and the self. Breathing is the fundamental element necessary to be conscious as an actor, as a human being.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hulbert, H. H., *Voice Training in Speech and Song: an Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation*, p. 1.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

While much of the research that deciphers the breath focuses on its correlation with life, death, healing, and illness, capitalizing on the breath or its experience can also be crucial to understanding the voice, in any way a person can. use, and vocal pedagogy for theatre becomes an art form, in addition to a science.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barton, Robert, Dal Vera, Rocco, *Voice: Onstage and Off*, Routledge, London, 2011  
Boston, Jane, *Voice*, MacMillan Education, Palgrave, Londra, 2018.  
*Breath in Action. The Art of Breath in Vocal and Holistic Practice*, edited by Jane Boston and Rena Cook, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2009  
Curuțiu – Zoicaș, Camelia, Representation and the Internal View of the Instruments of Scenic Creation , Theatrical Colloquia, no 2, December, Iași,2019  
Carel, Havi, *Phenomenology of Illness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016  
Fitzmaurice, Catherine, „Breathing is Meaning”, *The Vocal Vision*, Ed, Dr, Marian Hampton, New York: Applause Books, pp. 247–252, 1997.  
Hulbert, H. H., *Voice Training in Speech and Song: an Account of the Structure and Use of the Vocal Organs and the Means of Securing Distinct Articulation*, Chicago, 1912  
Irigaray, Luce, *The Age of Breath*, 2004  
Linklater, Kristin, *Freeing natural voice*, Methuen Drama, London, 2008.  
Nestor, James, *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2020