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Diaphragmatic Breathing, the Starting Point of the Training Path Toward Effective Public and Stage Speaking

Kristjan Koroveshi*

Faculty of Performing Arts, University of Arts, Albania.

***Corresponding author:** Kristjan Koroveshi, Faculty of Performing Arts, University of Arts, Albania.

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Abstract

This paper will provide a detailed comparison between diaphragmatic breathing and instinctive breathing. The comparative methodology will be supported by two sample subjects, one person who has started vocal technique training and is currently working with diaphragmatic breathing, and another subject who has no knowledge on the topic and performs instinctive breathing for physiological functioning.

The thesis of the comparative viewpoints will be unfolded through the following questions:
- What are the effective and positive aspects of diaphragmatic breathing, and what is its visible impact?
- The importance of its correct usage and training for interpreting dramatic pieces on stage or delivering speeches and public appearances across various media.
- Breath control as a key to achieving successful performance—free of panting, gasping, or irregular breathing and exhalation patterns—also directly relates to the concrete work with the material being interpreted or read.
- The training journey toward achieving breath control and managing it across a range of physical and stage activities, whether in rehearsal or during live performance.
- The importance of body posture and preparatory exercises at different stages of the breathing process.

The aim of the paper is to provide a professional overview of the initiation of a working method toward full breathing through exercises and training sessions, using a comparative format that promotes effective stage and public speaking. The topic and the study are inspired by the misuse of language and the speech apparatus in stage and public discourse.

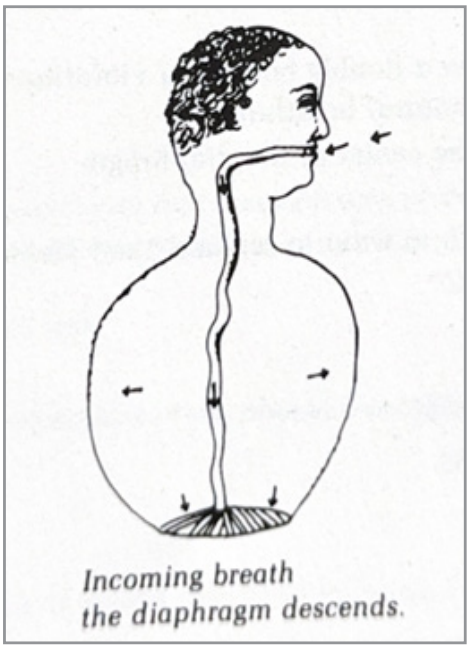
Keywords: Diaphragmatic Breathing, Instinctive Breathing, Breath Control, Stage Speaking

Introduction

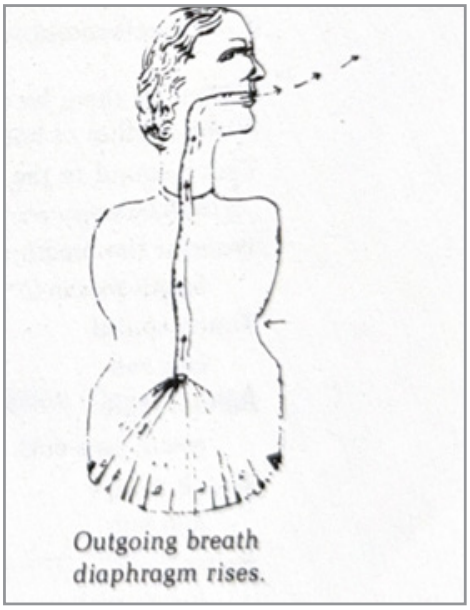
The meaning of the word "breathing": Frymëmárrj/e, -a — feminine noun; plural: -e(t) 1. the inhalation of breath through the lungs; the act of inhaling and exhaling air from the lungs: breathing pathways; light, heavy, deep, fast, frequent breathing. The above is the definition of the word breathing from the Albanian language dictionary. The word breathing is widely used in everyday vocabulary across all social groups, age ranges, and professions. Doctors talk about breathing during medical check-ups with patients; athletes talk about breathing during training and matches; psychologists during therapy sessions; yoga instructors during their guidance, and so on. Breathing is a physiological act. Through it, oxygen is absorbed and carbon dioxide is expelled. This act is divided into two phases: the inhalation phase and the exhalation phase.

Inhalation causes the expansion of the rib cage, while exhalation causes its contraction. During the inhalation process, the following occurs in the body: the diaphragm contracts and lowers, the chest cavity enlarges, the abdomen is compressed and pushed outward, and the muscles involved in air intake—the throat and facial muscles—contract. The dis-

tance between the ribs increases, the chest protrudes forward, and the thoracic cavity expands while the lungs increase their volume.



During Exhalation: The diaphragm rises, returns to its resting state, reduces the space in the thoracic cavity, and the abdomen returns to its original position. The ribs and sternum return to place due to their own weight, while the distance between the ribs decreases. The thoracic cavity narrows, and the lungs return to their initial position due to their elasticity and weight, pulling the rib cage and diaphragm back with them [1].



Diaphragmatic breathing is achieved through the contraction of the diaphragm muscle, which leads to the increase and expansion of the chest in its vertical diameter. It is worth emphasizing that this is the natural form of breathing during sleep. Costal-diaphragmatic breathing, also referred to in professional terminology as artistic breathing, is considered the most effective form of breathing. This is because the expansion of the rib cage occurs in two diameters—horizontal and vertical—thus achieving far greater efficiency than any other form of breathing, while consuming significantly less energy. Unlike instinctive breathing, this method develops a refined breathing mechanism with endurance during stage speech.

Diaphragmatic breathing is essential in theatrical performance and is one of the fundamental techniques without which actors cannot master the profession. Its impact is direct on voice control, physical stamina, grounding of expression, and emotional power.

Methodology

To explain and provide a concrete example of the methodological approach mentioned in the abstract, I refer to a group of six first-year acting students, with whom I work as an external lecturer for the course "Speech Technique." The work with the students begins with a few games or exercises based on the instinctive breathing that every person naturally possesses. Once they become aware of this process, the path toward learning diaphragmatic breathing begins—most importantly, transforming it into their new normal for both practice and stage performance [2].

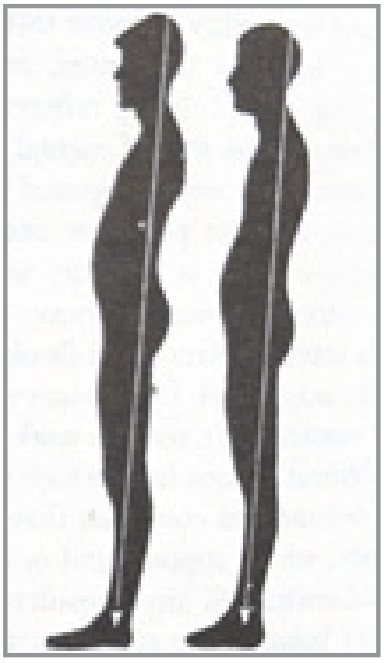
The Work Begins with Posture:

Unlike any other profession, an actor does not possess an external working instrument. Musicians have their instruments, painters have their brushes and easels, and so on. The actor's only instrument is their own body, their own being. Therefore, the training process begins with

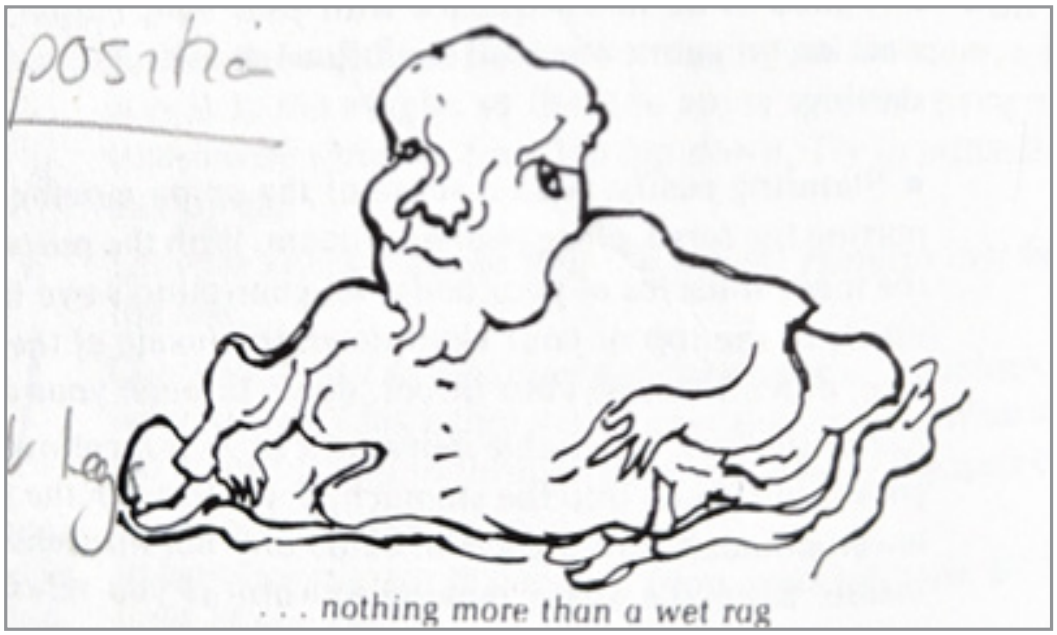
exercising how that instrument is held and positioned. The feet must be firmly grounded, the knees unlocked—this is essential to feel the true weight of the body and to allow the energy to flow freely throughout the body, which must remain balanced.

It is crucial that the knees are unlocked—not bent or collapsed. The space between the feet should be equal to the width of the shoulders in order to find full body balance.

The shoulders must be relaxed, not contracted.



As Jerzy Grotowski states and is quoted in Freeing the Natural Voice by Kristin Linklater:
"You cannot be completely relaxed as is taught in many theater schools, because someone who is completely relaxed is nothing more than a wet dishrag." As also quoted in the same book:
"The goal is to eliminate unnecessary tension so that the muscles are free to respond to the impulse," as shown in the illustration.



To further release the upper part of the rib cage, we try the following exercise:
With knees unlocked, arms relaxed, gaze forward, and the spine and back held upright, we slowly begin to lower the head toward the chest as if it is being pulled down by gravity. First, the chin comes to rest on the chest, and then, focusing attention on the vertebrae of the spine, we feel each one dropping in sequence—like on an abacus—one after the other. The arms remain relaxed, hanging freely, until the fingertips of both hands touch the ground. At this point, we feel the full weight of the body surrendering to the earth. Breathing throughout the entire process continues to remain natural.

After this position, we return to the starting posture by beginning the lift from the last vertebra of the spine that was lowered. The vertebrae are restored one by one into place; the head and arms remain relaxed until they too return to their natural position. The head is the last to come back up. At the end of this exercise, the body feels more relaxed, the head feels as if it is being pulled upward, and the body has taken on a new alignment, ready to engage with more focus and intention. After trying out this posture and training ourselves to get accustomed to this new state and position, we make the first attempt at diaphragmatic breathing.

We inhale through the nose and imagine that behind the nostrils lies an elevator, which fills with air, closes its doors, and descends as low as possible—then opens again to release the air into the diaphragm. Here, we will visibly see and feel the abdomen expand and push outward. One hand is placed on the abdomen and the other on the chest, where we will clearly sense the difference in movement. The abdomen moves forward, while the chest remains still. After several attempts to begin internalizing this breathing, we notice that the amount of air taken in through diaphragmatic breathing is several times greater than the amount taken in through instinctive breathing.

While learning and technically securing the air's path from the nose to the diaphragm, we then begin to release the air through the mouth with the sound "fff." A crucial next step after trying and understanding diaphragmatic breathing is breath reservation.

What is breath reservation and how is it performed?

Breath reservation is the conscious use of the air volume during speech, in order to preserve the energy of the breath to support a full sentence, phrase, or monologue—without interruption from panting, gasping, or inconsistent rhythm. During training, one of the most effective exercises is holding the breath for a few counted seconds (mentally) after fully filling the diaphragm, and then releasing it immediately with the sound "fff." Another exercise consists of inhaling in timed segments until the diaphragm is completely filled—for example, "inhale one," "inhale two," "inhale three," and so on, practicing a linear and gradual intake of breath. Then, after the lungs are filled, we repeat the retention of the breath using the same timed segments— "hold one," "hold two," "hold three"—and finally exhale again with "fff."

The exercise can also be done lying on the floor, where the spinal column and each vertebra are aligned flat against the ground, the shoulders are well supported, the knees are pointing toward the ceiling, the arms are relaxed, and the palms rest open against the floor. This position simultaneously serves as a relaxation exercise.

We begin again by filling the diaphragm with air, and we will once again feel the abdomen inflate and expand.

The inhalation is done in timed segments— "inhale one," "inhale two," "inhale three"—we hold for the same count, and then release with the sound "fff." Another method tested with students for applying diaphragmatic breathing is the etude. Once the understanding and experience of the breathing exercises have been established, the etude becomes a more loaded and expanded form of practice. This involves selecting certain physical actions, imitating elements of nature or sounds of various objects, mechanisms, or actions that are sustained or accompanied by breath or by the sound "sh." In this format, the student who is training to learn diaphragmatic breathing and breath reservation has the opportunity to engage all elements of their working instrument in fulfilling a physical task. Placing the student in specific physical conditions that require training in order to avoid potential tensions or to test the amount of air needed to perform the actions becomes an effective and meaningful exercise [3].

Results and Discussions.

After each practice exercise, a concrete discussion with the students focuses on distinguishing the difference between how things were before being introduced to the new term and approach, and how they are after practicing the exercise. The practical work with each individual follows the same conceptual structure, but the outcome varies from person to person, as the intellectual accumulation of knowledge and its actual execution naturally require an appropriate amount of time and space, depending on each individual's intellectual and physical capacity.

At the end of a cycle of training sessions or instructional hours that carry a specific topic and terminology, the comparative model of "before the exercise" and "after the exercise" becomes clearly observable. If we refer to the comparison between the initial posture at the start of training—with locked knees and an unrelaxed spine, where exercises like vertebra-by-vertebra roll-downs were completely unfamiliar to the group—now, the knees remain unlocked, the spine holds its proper alignment, and the physical readiness to act is significantly improved. The students themselves notice the results and express their satisfaction with this first step toward their professional journey.

Surprising—and almost unbelievable—is the transformation that occurs after experiencing diaphragmatic breathing, when the control is no longer dependent on placing a hand on the abdomen, or when the breathing, outside of the exercise setting, becomes natural throughout the student's entire training and daily life process. Its reservation and use in exercises—especially in etudes or games that demand full engagement of the breath and its controlled release to complete an action—show that fatigue is notably reduced compared to when the same exercises are performed using instinctive breathing. Take, for example, a game with a balloon, where students try to launch the balloon as high as possible by fully exhaling and emptying the diaphragm, coordinating the release of breath with the motion of the balloon.

The focus is on the full exhalation of breath, without contraction, without unnecessary tension in the arms, shoulders, neck, or jaw, but rather to dominate nature—just as Shakespeare says in one of Hamlet's monologues: "Training dominates nature." What we observe during the discussion, after trying the exercise first with the balloon and then imagining it without the physical object, is that the students' engagement increases—because once full control over the object is lost, they begin to improvise based on its imagined presence.

The Etude: A Concrete and Active Foundation for Applying Acquired Knowledge. Another active discussion arises during the professional studio work when students are given specific etude tasks—for example, finding a sound, improvising the noise of an object or process, and accompanying it with physical action and vocalized sound, activating the actor's entire instrument and involving elements of diaphragmatic breathing.

This type of breath-based etude carries a different degree of difficulty than an etude developed within the actor's craft class, where the student physically interacts with a concrete object—identifying its weight, shape, color, function, etc.—and builds a narrative around it. What becomes apparent in this process is the challenge of finding the key to the action and coordinating it with movement and sound, making the process more competitive within each individual.

The effort to understand this as an important component in the preparatory exercise list for effective stage or public speaking begins here—with the full process of inhalation and exhalation coordinated with strong physical action, in order to determine the precise quantity of air required to activate the entire instrument, as well as the amount or force of movement needed. Rationalizing and economizing breath is the foundation of vocal technique.

Group Work and Individual Training. The beginning of this process is important to take place within a group because the participants often come from a different cultural background—one unfamiliar with this working model and the need for such specific and refined training, as described in detail throughout this text. First, learning and processing these elements in a student group setting, where the exercises take the form of playful activities, lends a sense of discovery and enjoyment,

uncovering a new dimension of fun—yet with professional intent and without the stiffness that might accompany a more formal, individual development process.

Second, the interaction among students—most of whom had no prior knowledge of diaphragmatic breathing—builds trust and strengthens the learning experience from one exercise to the next. It also stimulates a healthy sense of competition, motivating students to progress from one phase to the next and to complete the full sequence of exercises. Third, group work supports and enhances each student's individual effort to achieve the desired results more efficiently. Fourth, the art of acting and theater develops primarily in relationship with a partner, so the new student who has just begun this journey benefits from discovering and experiencing these elements firsthand. This in turn reduces the likelihood of emotional blocks or discouragement during training.

Fifth, practicing in a group setting fosters a more inspiring and dynamic studio atmosphere, as the energy invested by everyone increases its overall intensity—encouraging observation and mutual interaction. Sixth, the process of self-monitoring and exercise observation becomes simpler and more easily absorbed when students work in front of one another. They witness whether or not the exercise is functioning, and then test that same outcome within themselves.

Seventh, the creation of a creative group dynamic lowers the level of muscular tension and reduces stage fright, allowing students to overcome the initial challenge of understanding and developing the exercise. Because, beyond every intellectual framework, the actor's art is the art of doing.

But can it be achieved only in a group setting and what role does individual preparation play?

Without individual preparation and independent training, none of this is possible. This process demands special attention and focused concentration, which is another crucial element in this kind of work. The exploratory process, the continuous effort to make each element fully functional within the actor's personal instrument, leads to the most fruitful outcomes.

Without ongoing individual advancement and careful observation—such as how much the diaphragm actually moves, how much the air volume changes from day to day, how the difficulty of breath reservation diminishes, how the breath becomes more natural through repeated practice, how well it coordinates with movement, the positioning of the knees, the placement of the shoulders, or the sensation and alignment of the spine before and after exercises—there can be no mastery. Recording and reflecting on all of these changes in memory or in writing helps ensure a more confident group performance and a clearly visible result.

Conclusions and Recommendations/Expectations

At the beginning of the work—or after a few short sessions where the understanding of the elements begins to develop—the student, whether an aspiring actor or simply someone undergoing this speech technique training, often seeks immediate results and tends to form the belief that they already understand and master the element and this is where neglect often begins. The greatest challenge to overcome in individual work—both physical and cognitive—is precisely this: "Training dominates nature," as Shakespeare states.

The tendency to minimize the implementation and reinforcement process of diaphragmatic breathing and other foundational elements reduces overall performance quality. The suggestion is for this work to become a short daily ritual—a few minutes each day in which attention and concentration are fully dedicated to the process of diaphragmatic breathing control, muscular release, and readiness for stage performance because these exercises are the starting point of what each person ultimately seeks in preparation for stage or public confrontation.

References

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2. Zhusti, V., Zheji, V., & Pajo, M. (1983). Fjala artistike. Tirana: University of Arts Press.
3. Shakespeare, W. (1603). Hamlet.

Appendix

The images are taken from Kristin Linklater's book Freeing the Natural Voice and from the student practice process.