BREATH WORK AND THE ACTOR

By Chuck Richie

Note: This article is based upon notes for the presentation of the third part of a workshop session scheduled for July 27th “Back to Basics: Taking the Mystery Out of the Breath Body Connection,” at this year’s ATHE Conference in San Diego. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I was not able to attend the Conference. My two co-presenters, Judylee Vivier and Joanna Cazden presented their portions of the session, by all reports to great success. I offer the following as an additional perspective on the role that work on breath and breathing plays in the training of the actor.

My portion of the workshop was to be based on the three main sources I use in my own teaching of voice and speech for the actor. Those sources are: 1) The work of Donna Farhi as contained in The Breathing Book: Good Health & Vitality through Essential Breath Work (Henry Holt & Co., NY, 1996) 2) The work of Kristin Linklater and 3) My own work and experience over the past thirty years as a professional voice user and ten years as a teacher of voice and speech. The following focuses on the latter and would have formed the conclusion of my presentation.

Acting occurs when one person’s experience reaches another’s, either that of another actor or actors and/or an observer or observers, i.e., the audience. Those who are reached then share back their own experience and/or response and the process continues in a chain of communication until the end of the performance. Through my own work and experience, I now see a direct link between the openness and release and support of the breath and the strength of that communication between the actor and another. This has led me to the creation of the following exercise.

The Breathed Scene Exercise
With a partner, read out loud through a scene, either one you are working on or the following very short “open scene.” Then put the script down, face one another, make eye contact and “breathe” through the scene. DO NOT substitute breaths for syllables or words, but with an understanding of the thought and intention of the line, breath-communicate each one of those to your partner and as you receive their response, let it affect your next breathed communication to them. You will find that a change of thought or action will prompt a change of breath; sometimes the breaths will be long, sometimes short, sometimes regular and flowing, sometimes uneven and quick, all related to your actions in the scene. Now pick up the script and still making eye contact as much as possible, do the scene with the text again. You should begin to find that your breath is now supporting the communication more, and that your level of communication with the other has begun to deepen, even in this brief exchange.

A: I BEG YOUR PARDON?
B: I ASKED YOU A QUESTION.
A: I DON’T UNDERSTAND YOU.
B: CAN YOU GIVE ME AN ANSWER?
A: YES.
B: THANK YOU.

BREATH IS LIFE. That fact was brought home so clearly to me as I faced the family health crisis which prevented my attendance at the ATHE Conference. If breath is life, then, for the actor, breath is the source of the life that we create and we must become intimately aware of and in touch with it. Donna Farhi finishes her remarkable book with an inquiry called “Merging with the Breath” in which she asks the participant to surrender completely to the experience of breathing. I invite you to do the same, and as she concludes:

May each breath be like a footstep bringing you back to the home of yourself.*