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LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

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Lyudmyla Honcharova, Marlon Ariyasinghe

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The illustration on the cover pages is inspired by angampora wood carving piece at the *Embekka Devalaya* and designed by Nuwan Chamika.

“Lamp in a Windless Place”: Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Form Angampora An Introduction

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“Where hand there eye
Where eye there mind”
-slōka 36 *Abinayadarpana* (*Mirror of Gestures*)

1. Introduction

This collection of papers published in this edition of *Mise en Abyme* draws on a new field of study, bringing together a significant compilation of papers, case studies and reflective theory across a wide variety of disciplines of performer training and arts in Sri Lanka. The journal edition welcomes a group of academics and practitioners who are well versed in the field of performing arts to explore and write on the research project awarded to Prof. Saumya Liyanage in 2019

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during his tenure as the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA), Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Liyanage along with his research team, conceived a Development-Oriented Research (DOR) study titled 'Lamp in a Windless Place', aimed at developing an actor training methodology from angampora, the ancient combative art form in Sri Lanka. The objective of the research was to extricate the basic principles of bodily training from this corporeal tradition that can be used to develop an actor training system to train contemporary Sri Lankan actors.

This three-year research, funded by the Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD) project and the World Bank is a Sri Lankan government initiative that supports the higher education sector in promoting a vibrant research and innovation culture that can support economic development, especially the growth of higher-value industries and services. The project deals with studio-based enquiries that would benefit the development of a rich research culture and knowledge production in performer training and cultural economy. The key outcomes of the study are to compile a literary survey and an ethnographic field study, to develop a performer training audio-visual repository, a studio enquiry/training in angampora with actors and drafting of a method uniquely designed for the growth and training of a Sri Lankan actor/performer. The study was the first of its kind in Sri Lankan performer training research to explore an actor training methodology through a Sri Lankan combative art form. Further, this project provides two postgraduate student placements at the Faculty of Graduate Studies to undertake a Master of Philosophy degree covering all tuition and research costs.

Sri Lanka has a long-running history as a centre for intercultural discourses. Many Sri Lankan dance forms and traditional dance drama practices have been heavily influenced by the Asian corporeal arts traditions ranging from martial arts, kathakali dance drama, traditional folk theatre and many other arts and crafts. Sri Lankan modern theatre, in particular, has a direct link to the Indian subcontinent and theatre practices developed in the modern era in the early 1940s and 1950s had a strong connection to the Persi and Tamil theatre in India. However, in the development of modern Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala theatre, the actor training methodologies have been a neglected area where actors were not trained according to a training methodology. Unlike cinema in India or elsewhere, modern theatre was not flourishing as a rich and commercially-viable cultural industry. Developing an actor training system or establishing a scientific methodology to train actors was not a priority for the Sri Lankan modern theatre. In the early 1970s, theatre director Dhamma Jagoda and a group of theatre directors established Lionel

Wendt *Ranga Shilpa Shalika* and attempted to introduce the workshop method and other techniques to train actors (Haththotuwegama 1998). However, it was discontinued after the 1971 JVP Insurrection. In modern Sinhala theatre of the 1950s, 70s and late 80s, actor training was part of ‘on-the-job training’ where actors trained by self-learning and observing acting practices executed by their predecessors (Liyanage 2016).

2. Key questions

The key questions that need to be scrutinized in this research project are twofold: First, it focuses on how to develop bodily skills and competencies of an actor using angampora martial arts and secondly, it intends to answer some of the theoretical and philosophical questions on actor training and performance. Hence, a few of the key questions inquired by the project are: 1. How can Sri Lankan corporeal arts, especially combative arts such as angampora, be useful to develop a competent actor? 2. How can the actor be trained through angampora martial art to utilize her/his skills and creativity to cater to the contemporary need of Sri Lankan theatre and other performance arts? 3. What theoretical and philosophical premises, grounded in angampora martial art, inform the bodymind practices of acting? The six months long actor training laboratory supported by the AHEAD project intends to answer these vital questions.

This research is focused on the Sri Lankan combative art form angampora which dates back centuries. Deraniyagala postulates that angampora goes back two hundred years before Christ (Deraniyagala 1959: 2). Further, he argues that Arabs, Persians and Chinese who were “responsible for seaborne traffic of Ceylon” have appreciated this martial art referring to Abou Zeid’s records. As Deraniyagala’s research indicates, the oldest combative art form in Ceylon can now only be seen in some of the remaining sculptures, frescoes and lingual expressions to date (1959: 2-3).

The etymology of angampora explains how this name has been developed. For instance, *angam* (angé) means the body and *pora* means combat. In angampora, physical fighting is carried out either with or without weapons. However, with a clear understanding of the scope of the present angampora tradition in Sri Lanka and their various branches of practices and *gurukula* (teacher-disciple tradition), this research mainly focuses on the physical, combative movements and wrestling techniques.

As Phillip Zarrilli explains, when an actor performs, she or he enacts a “theory of acting”, a set of assumptions that guides her/his own ways of embodying the performance (Zarrilli 1996: 3). Further, these assumptions are culturally specific and related to certain philosophical and ontological meanings driven by that particular culture. In this sense, angampora and its underlying assumptions of training the human body and mind and its related ritualistic and cosmological practices correspond with key issues related to body, mind and spirit. Hence, the idea of selfhood, body, mind, emotions/feeling and the performance context also play a significant role in such an inquiry (1996: 3). The religio-philosophical foundation of angampora must be discussed in length to understand the basic principles aligned with an art form similar to Indian yoga or Japanese martial arts. In the traditional sense, the performer’s body is divided into body and mind while marginalizing the body, claiming that the mind is an ‘all knowing entity’ and the body follows what the mind wants it to do. The philosophical underpinning of the body-mind problems has been running throughout the history of performer training, and many theorists and practitioners have attempted to overcome such difficult ontological problems ingrained in Western philosophy (1996: 10-11). Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, first theorized and divided the mind from the matter, and he further saw the body as the servant of the mind claiming that “I think therefore I am”: The thinking substance of the body is the mind and the body is marginalized as a non-living entity separate from the supreme mind (Yuasa 1993: 9).

3. Actor training

The actor training discourse has also been heavily subjected to dichotomous thinking in the history of theatre. Many theatre directors and actor trainers in Western and European theatre started exploring the need for an actor training method that can be used to employ the contemporary human realities on stage without marginalizing the body over mind (Barba 1985, 1988, Grotowski 1968, Artaud 1994). Many of those practitioners first turned to the Eastern traditional corporeal practices and dance drama, and some of them travelled to the far eastern corners of the world to understand the rigorous practices and training paradigms that were utilized in Eastern dance drama and combative art forms (Hodge 2010, Zarrilli 2008, 1998, 1999).

As the father of modern acting, Constantin Stanislavski first attempted to theorize and use the acting system that he has developed over decades at the Moscow Arts theatre (Carnicke 2008). Stanislavski was heavily influenced by his contemporary theories of the mind, such as Objective psychology and Naturalism (Roach 1993). Furthermore, his overarching ideas on the actor's work on a role was developed through his close reading of Indian yoga and other combative art forms (Hodge 2010). German theatre theorist and the playwright Bertolt Brecht first encountered Beijing Opera actor Mei Lang-Fang at a private party in Moscow and was inspired to develop a methodology called *verfremdung* effect (Alienation or Estrangement theory) for his highly political theatre practice. Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski also encountered Asian corporeal traditions and developed their theories based on some of the principles pertaining to Asian meditative, combative and dance drama traditions (Schechner 2001).

The idea of actor training and methodologies came into play during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Russia (Hodge 2010). Constantin Stanislavski first formulated the idea of training actors for the revolutionary theatre practice he was developing with the help of Nemirovich Danchenko at the Moscow Arts Theatre (Liyanage 2016). However, the idea of actor training and acting as a craft and a set of habituated skills can be traced back to the writing of Denis Diderot in the early seventeenth century. Diderot first formulated the materialistic underpinning of acting practice and argued in his book *Paradox of Acting* (*The Paradoxe sur le comédien*), that the actor's work is not a spontaneous virtuosity but a closely articulated and finely refined set of habitual actions to be demonstrated on stage (Roach 1993).

Bruce McConachie, in his book *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962* argues (McConachie 2003) that the American actor training was established in parallel to the capitalistic development of the cinema industry in Hollywood, but as a country, way away from the cultural discourse of Asia and south-east Asia, the need to develop and sustain a continual production of professional actors or actor training school was not a burning issue for theatre practitioners. Further, in *The Politics of American Actor Training* (2011), Sharon Marie Carnicke also illustrates how the pedagogy of actor training in America became a political discourse through “cultural disinformation” and cultural domination in Russia during the cold war era. In this sense, developing a system of actor training within a specific social and cultural setting is not a neutral activity but is highly charged with political and cultural underpinnings.

With this understanding of the politics of cultural practices and their implications in creative culture, this research project proposes to develop and formulate an actor training system that has been a long-running need for the Sri Lankan contemporary creative industry. As stated earlier, Sri Lankan theatre did not need to think about developing an actor training system to train theatre actors over the past five decades. However, their training happened in an ad hoc manner within theatre ensembles and under the guidance of the director. Writing the history of actor training and traditional methods of actor training in Europe, Donald C. Mullin argues that “the traditional actor’s series of attitude usually was learned by watching other actors work; his resulting style was a combination of observed mannerism and individual interpretation. Accusations of imitation were common, precisely because learning developed from live models. There were no schools other than the school of performance” (Mullin 1975: 6). A similar paradigm can be seen in the Sri Lankan modern theatre where actors learn by watching other bodies and mannerisms and correcting their bodily attitudes through constant practice and performance.

However, within the development of cultural industries and theatre pedagogy in universities and other institutions in Sri Lanka, the authors of this research have identified that theatre schools and university study programs have not particularly employed systematic training actors. Many theatre programs and actor training courses in Sri Lanka have adopted ad hoc methods and systems to train actors directly or indirectly related to Eurocentric ideologies that came into play during the modern era of Sri Lankan theatre. Furthermore, one needs to understand that many established actor training systems derived from American or Eurocentric theatre traditions have been heavily influenced by Asian cross fertilization. Intercultural actor training systems have been experimented with and employed in the late nineteenth century and twentieth-century theatre traditions directly corresponding to the Asian corporeal traditions such as Noh, Kabuki in Japan and Kathakali dance drama in India (Zarrilli 1995: 85-87).

In developing an actor training system, there are two key questions which are still validated in the practice of performer training: first it is asked whether a universal system of actor training could be achieved through existing training methodologies? The second question might be, could a fundamental technique of one acting system be applicable in the creation of any form of theatre? (Hodge 2010: xxiv). These key questions are still valid in developing an actor training system in the Sri Lankan cultural context.

4. The AHEAD Actors Lab, Sri Lanka

This Actors Lab comprises ethnographic research, literary survey, visual documentation and reflective diary studies and writing of monographs. As a complex research project which comprises various methodological approaches, this project needs an eclectic approach to methodology ranging from ethnographic approaches to semi-structured interviews and also phenomenological description of actors' experiences. As mentioned above, the first stage of this project is used to understand the combative art forms in Sri Lanka. To begin with, the research team has spent time on literary texts, both in print media and the internet, to acquire a preliminary understanding of the Sri Lankan traditional combative art forms within the context of Asian corporeal arts traditions. Notably, Asian philosophies of body and cultivation of bodily practices in various performing arts and martial arts were considered. This helped the research team to map different combative art forms in the Asian context, and identify the distinctive nature of angampora martial art.

The next stage of the research was to establish the Actors Lab to implement angampora training under a traditional master. Sixteen young actors/dancers were selected to work with the Master to learn angampora basic stances and other combative forms. The Actors Lab work started in the early months of 2021 at the *Angam Maduwa* (Training Shelter) located in Mirihana, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. All the male, female actors/dancers were trained under Guru Karunāpāla and his disciples on a daily basis for six months. Along with the training sessions at the angam maduwa, actors were requested to maintain personal diaries where they reflected on their experiences of learning angampora under Guru Karunāpāla. These diary entries have been collected and preserved for further research. Actors' angampora training has also been documented through video and photographs, allowing the research team to gather important data for future research and writing. The data from these journals are used to understand the performers' insights, attitudes and mental as well as physical transformations during training sessions and aftermath of performance. This special edition of *Mise en Abyme* also includes some of the selected reflections extracted from those diaries that have been written by the members of the Actors Lab.

The final stage of the research project is to execute a performance project which will showcase the actors' performative skills that have been developed through the combative art form. Here, performers will showcase their acquired skills and underlying principles of a

combative art form to a public audience. After the performance, a questionnaire will be circulated to get the overall impact of the performance and the effectiveness of actors' contribution to the performance. Once these stages are completed, the research team will use the collected data to compile a research methodology/a monograph for actor training.

5. Conclusion

This special edition of *Mise en Abyme* is published in the second year of the AHEAD Actors Lab project. The latter part of the Actors Lab training sessions at the angam maduwa at Mirihana, Nugegoda were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, on several occasions, the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, where the main Actors Lab was established, was closed due to Sri Lankan Government health regulations. Amidst this health crisis, angampora training had to be shifted to the angam maduwa at Mirihana, Nugegoda, and the actor training was continued. During the third wave of the pandemic, the Actors Lab had to be closed once more as the Government implemented an island-wide lockdown. Due to these limitations, some of the project's key activities have been on hold, and the main funding body has extended the project time period providing a six months extension for the project completion. This writing project for the special edition of *Mise en Abyme* was carried out during the third wave lockdown, and the actors' training sessions at the angam maduwa will resume once the lockdown period is over in late October 2021.

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This special edition is dedicated to the actor training project titled “Lamp in a Windless Place: Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora” initiated by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA), Colombo Sri Lanka in 2019. The three-year-long performer-training project is funded by the Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD-DOR HEMS) Project supported by the World Bank and the Ministry of Higher Education in Sri Lanka.

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