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LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

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F(r)ight: Angampora as a Method to Fight Stage Fright

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Abstract: Stage fright is a common condition experienced by actors during a performance. Bella Merlin, while exploring her own experience, emphasizes the importance of confidence, awareness and dual consciousness for actors to cope with stage fright in *When Consciousness Fragments: A Personal Encounter with Stage Fright in Performance*. Since martial arts have been used as a technique to develop confidence and awareness, this research explores whether angampora, the Sri Lankan martial art training, can be used as a method for actors to manage stage fright. The main objective of this research is to explore the capacity of angampora in developing awareness and confidence. This research employs a mix method. It studies the written literature to identify the characteristics of stage fright and angampora. Moreover, taking the AHEAD DOR Actors Lab as a case study, this research examines the lived experience of three actors who underwent angampora training at the Actors Lab and testimonials of Guru Karunāpāla, the angampora master. These reflections are analyzed through ‘state of readiness’ by Phillip B. Zarrilli and the suggestions proposed by Bella Merlin to overcome stage fright. The reflections of the actors claim that they have encountered a transformation of their confidence levels and awareness after practising angampora and how it has affected their performance practice. After analyzing the capacity of angampora in developing ‘readiness’, sense of the surrounding, dual consciousness and the nature of playing with an imaginary ‘other’, this study suggests that angampora training could support actors as a method to fight stage fright.

Keywords: Angampora, actor, dual consciousness, confidence, readiness, stage fright.

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1. Introduction

In 2015, I was in the middle of a solo performance named *Black*.¹ The play was going smoothly, but at the climax of the play, I missed a line. I stopped. Everything slowed down. I could see everyone in the audience, even the person in the last row of the balcony despite the darkness. I collapsed. Everything went literally 'black'... I wanted to run away from the stage. I said, "Sorry" to the audience and left the stage.

This is a true incident which happened to me when I was in the third year of my BA of Performing Arts at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka². I had never experienced something like it before, and later I learned that the condition is called 'stage fright'. Though many performers claim the need for tension to execute a good performance, Steptoe states that it is a misconception and the condition of stage fright is different to this 'tension' (1982: 538). Awareness, confidence building and activating dual consciousness are considered key elements of managing stage fright (Merlin 2013, Zakaira, Musib, Shariff 2013). Since martial arts have been used to develop confidence and awareness, this study discusses the capacity of angampora, a Sri Lankan traditional martial art practice to reduce stage fright. The main objective of this research is to explore the capability of angampora in developing awareness and confidence. Further, this study aims to examine the characteristics of stage fright and study the use of angampora martial art practices in acting.

This research employs a mix method. First, it studies the written sources to explore the characteristics of stage fright, the use of martial arts in actor training systems and angampora. Then, taking the AHEAD Actors Lab as a case study, this research examines the lived experiences of three actors through interviews and journal entries. Further, this research gathers the testimonials of Guru Karunāpāla, the angampora master to study the training system at the Actors Lab. The reflections are analyzed by the concept 'state of readiness' of Philip B. Zarrilli and methods proposed by Bella Merlin to manage stage fright.

¹ This play is a monologue, written and directed by Rithmika Wanniarachchi in 2015.

² This particular incident happened when the play was showcasing at Academic Thespian Theatre Festival organized by the University of the Visual Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

2. Stage fright: A brief overview

According to psychoanalysis, stage fright “is a universal human experience that occurs with varying intensity in everyone who stands before an audience” (Gobbard 1979: 390). It especially affects individuals in various endeavours, such as public speaking, sport, and the performing arts in dancing, acting, and music making (Studer et al. 2011: 3). This condition is also known as “performance anxiety” (Top Doctors n.d, Studer et al. 2011, Hinckley 2008, APA 2020, Powel 2004). In line with Freudian distinctions between “fear”, “fright” and “anxiety”, Glen O. Gobbard³ mentions that the term “stage fright” misinterprets the phenomenon of this particular experience. Instead, he suggests the “stage anxiety” as the accurate term to describe this condition (Ridout 2006: 56). Also, when stage fright is associated with both psychological and physiological symptoms, it is known as somatic anxiety (Kenny 2011: 10). According to clinical psychologists, one-third of the individuals with performance anxiety or stage fright are comorbid with other disorders such as depression or dealing with psychological conflicts (Powel 2004: 803). Several studies define stage fright as a characteristic of social phobia and social anxiety (Powel 2004, Anxiety and Depression Association of America 2016). But Powel (2004) negates this argument by presenting the difference of characteristics of social phobia and performance anxiety. For instance, in social phobia, self-expectation is very low, while self-expectation is high in performance anxiety.

However, stage fright is very common among student or amateur actors, and the following symptoms can appear in stage fright during a live performance: 1) Physiological changes that take place within the body, including increased heart rate, sweating, shortness of breath, shaking, numb fingers, clammy hands, dry mouth, upset stomach, headache, dizziness, nausea, and diarrhoea. (2) Psychological/emotional conditions such as intensified apprehension, fear of failure, irritability, and panic. (3) Cognitive problems include loss of confidence, lack of concentration because of interfering thoughts about the performing situation, memory lapses and interference in the creative process. (4) Behavioral changes include neck and shoulder lifting, trembling of knees and hands, and muscle tension (McGrath cited in Hague 2016: 25).

In *Stage fright, Animals and Theatrical Problems* (2006), Nicolas Ridout argues that stage fright is a phenomenon of modernity (40). He draws upon the ideas depicted in *The Metropolis and*

³ An American psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst (Gobbard 2015).

Mental Life by Georg Simmel to explore the influence of modernity on stage fright. He emphasizes the following: 1. Development of acting as a career; 2. Rise of an audience who buy a ticket to watch performances; 3. Emergence of naturalism; 4. Technology as facts that affect the growth of stage fright within performers. Further, he mentions that unconsciousness, theatrical naturalism and electric lights are the three main aspects of modernity which influenced theatrical productions. For 'life-like' theatre, the proscenium arch stages were promoted, and the experience of theatrical productions was like observing the general day-to-day life through the 'fourth wall'. Electric lights are a fundamental element in creating this illusion, and it differentiates the space from public and the performance. Thus, this illusion of realistic theatre demanded actors 'becoming' characters or 'live-in-the-part' rather than representing or portraying characters.

In the West, Konstantin Stanislavski was the prominent actor trainer and theorist who emphasized the need of awakening the subconsciousness and brought the concept of 'experiencing' to acting. In his book, *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski explains an experience of a student actor who went through an accidental moment of stage fright during a live performance (Stanislavski 2016: 9). The incident took place as he stepped into the electric lights from the darkness of wings. The lights have blinded him, and that blindness had created a boundary between the auditorium and himself. When his eyes adapted to the lights, he started seeing the audience through the darkness and felt the audience's attraction towards him, which escalated his fear and tension. According to Stanislavski's comprehensive description, the performer has experienced his face and hands turning into stone, throats becoming constricted, sound moving to high notes and hands, feet, gestures and speech becoming violent during a moment of stage fright (ibid). Further, Stanislavski states that though the actor is public surrounded by people, at the same time actor is in solitude because the actor is placed in a small circle of attention (Stanislavski 2016: 72). This is what he calls "solitude in public". In addition, he says "during a performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle like a snail in its shell" (ibid). Accordingly, the performer is more secure within her/his sphere of "solitude in public" and what the performer experience as stage fright is more like the feeling of vulnerability, insecurity and discomfort of a snail coming out of the shell or out of its comfort zone.

While describing the same experience, in *When Consciousness Fragments: A Personal Encounter with Stage Fright in Performance* (2013), Bella Merlin describes that her consciousness fragmented

into thousand pieces when she found that she was looking straight into the eyes of a man in the audience. In the light of Antonio Damasio's definition on 'consciousness'; the sense of self in the act of knowing, Merlin assumes that she was filled with a sense of herself caught in the act of knowing the actual reality of the communal presence of actor and audience, rather than the fictive circumstances of the character (2013: 59).

Merlin identifies three moments in fragmented consciousness: 1. Dislocation of actor and character, 2. Producing new inner monologues; 3. Experience of deluge of survival instincts (Merlin 2013: 60). Wilson and Roland also mention that the alarm reactions that occur at this moment would enhance survival if we were confronted with a Tiger in a jungle (2002: 48). On the other hand, this statement highlights the resemblance between the feeling of confronting the audience and confronting a predator. At that moment, the performer comes out of the theatrical reality into the actual 'reality'. The performer starts to feel the audience as a threat. That moment draws back the performer into human primitive survival instincts, which signal the body to escape from the situation. But this threat is not a physical attack. Rather it threatens human pride and increases the fear of humiliation and disgrace (ibid). Similarly, Kaplan claims that 'materialization of the piece of reality' begins stage fright (1969: 62). Further, he argues that the performers "fantasy of an audience' and the feeling of 'interacting as an exhibitor to onlookers" (Kaplan 1969) cause stage fright.

In light of these notions of stage fright, the presence of an audience and the identification of the reality can be identified as significant aspects of provoking stage fright. Merlin proposes that an actor should have a balance in 'dual consciousness' or develop two senses of awareness, the sense of being on stage and the sense of being in a fictional/dramatic situation, to overcome stage fright (2013: 61). On the other hand, Zakaira, Musib and Sharif state that confidence building and strengthening the mental state is needed to cope with stage fright (2013: 233). Thus, enhancing confidence to face the audience and building awareness of being on stage are key factors to reduce stage fright.

3. Use of martial arts in acting

Martial arts have been used not only as combative arts, rather as an exercise to build confidence and self-esteem. For instance, karate is a sport for building self-confidence, balance, coordination,

discipline and social skills. Further, karate has the ability to make the trainee stronger from the inside out (Christensen 2020: online). Adam M. Croom discusses the influence of martial arts in positive emotions, engagement, relationship and meaning (2014).

Theatre practitioners, such as Philip B Zarrilli, A. C. Scotts and Jacques Copeau, have incorporated martial arts, especially Asian martial arts training, in their actor training methods (Zarrilli 1995). In the article titled *On the edge of the breath, looking* (1995), Philip B. Zarrilli discusses cultivating the bodymind of the actor through martial arts (181-199). Further, he discusses how meditation and martial arts carry a practitioner towards the psychophysical state of 'readiness' and how readiness is applied in acting. The term, 'readiness' refers to "being dropped in, being centred, being available, being ready to whatever is called for, being aware, being open" (Creely 2010: 219). According to Cole and Chinoy, it is a state of "repose, calm, relaxation, detente, silence, or simplicity" (cited in Zarrilli 1995: 185). Additionally, in 2012, Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, Sreenath Nair and Deborah Claire Procter have designed a model including an Indian martial art training called *Tattu Marma* to reduce stage fright among actors (2012). That study proves that martial arts have the capacity to reduce fear and develop the confidence of the actors through testing heart rates and behavioural patterns.

There's a lack of written sources about angampora. Traditional angampora masters maintain the knowledge and the practice from generation to generation. Yet, the novel angampora schools have published writeups on angampora on their official websites. It should be mentioned that these internet sources contain a commercial value rather than an educational value.

Angampora is a traditional Sri Lankan Martial Art form. The etymological breakdown of the term angampora is hand-to-hand (*angam*) combat (*pura*). Due to the lack of literature on angampora, the origin of the form is not clear. Nevertheless, it is believed that this form is an indigenous combative art which was originated from *Yaksha* (Demon) tribe in Sri Lanka thousands of years ago. (Tale of Ceylon n.d; Lakpura 2021, Angam 2020). Opposing this idea of 'indigenous', P. Soma Palan (2019) argues that the term angampora is an adaptation of the Tamil term *Angampor* and it has a South Indian and Hinduism influence.

However, angampora is not only a martial art practice but a combination of self-defence techniques, sports, exercise, meditation techniques and spiritual practice, ayurvedic healing element and astrology (Lakpura 2021; Tale of Ceylon 2020; Mudalige and Dewapura 2021). This

art of combat was famous during *Uva-Wellassa* uprising⁴ and was banned by the British Governor, Robert Brownrigg, during the colonial period in Sri Lanka (Tale of Ceylon 2021: online, Liyanage *et al.* 2021). The ban was only lifted in 2019 (Tale of Ceylon 2021: online), and with the establishment of angampora schools and the emergence of TV shows and films based angampora training/warriors, this martial art became popular among Sri Lankan youth. According to Mudalige and Dewapura (2021), the emerging nationalism among the present young generation of Sri Lanka is the reason behind this huge attraction towards angampora (Dewapura 2021: 394).

The website www.angampora.com states that angampora teaches how to live and encounter each moment with open eyes, open mind, posture and tenacity. Further, it claims that angampora has the capacity to expand the sensory awareness of the practitioner and re-pattern the dysfunctional and habitual physical and emotional reaction to threat, stress, fear and anger.

4. Actors Lab (AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 Project): Case Study

Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka, launched a research project funded by AHEAD DOR HEMS 73, titled, 'Lamp in a windless place' in 2019. The research project aims to produce a novel actor training method inspired by the angampora traditional combative arts in Sri Lanka. Under this project, 16 young emerging performers are training angampora to test the capacity of angampora to develop a new actor training method. This team consists of theatre and cinema actors, mime artists, and traditional and contemporary dancers. Both female and male performers learn angampora at the Actors Lab under the veteran angampora master in Sri Lanka, Guru Karunāpāla. Most of the artists have not practised angampora before. During this training session, each trainee had to engage in a rigorous process twice a week and trained the twelve preliminary hand and foot movements *ath haramba* and *paa haramba* of angampora, including two elbow cicks (*cholle pabara*), two punches (*digguti pabara*), two slaps (*kane pabara*), two hand kicks (*ath dandu pabara*), two leg kicks (*paa pabara*) and two side-kicks (*pathi pabara*). The collective movements of these foot and hand movements are called *sellam*. All the movements are individual activities, and these movements are consists of attacks, defence and counter attacks.

⁴ A revolution for freedom conducted by natives of Kandy, Sri Lanka against the British colony in 1815.

According to Guru Karunāpāla, ‘patience’ is the key to this combative art form. Each practitioner has to have commitment and faith towards angampora. He mentioned that angampora is a single unit of Buddhism, meditation practice, astrology, architecture, ayurvedic medicine and combative art. Each training session starts after worshipping Buddhā⁵, God *Vishnu*⁶, God *Katharagama*⁷ and King *Rāvana*⁸. Then, the practitioners meditate for a while. Guru Karunāpāla asserts that these activities help calm the body and the angampora maduwa and bring the practitioner’s focus into the present moment. Further, he talked about how confident he is about his own capacity, practice and teaching. He mentioned that angampora could enhance the capability of reading the surrounding and others’ bodies. He explained how each movement in angampora sellam is interconnected with the balance of the body.



Figure 1: Guru Karunāpāla demonstrates basic warm up exercises at Actors Lab, Mirihana, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.
Photo: AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 Project: March 2021.

⁵ It is believed that angampora practitioner has to be a Buddhist person.

⁶ Though God *Vishnu* is a Hindu god, Sri Lankan Buddhists worship him as a god. It is mentioned that Lord Buddhā gave responsibility to God *Vishnu* to protect Sri Lanka before his death.

⁷ Also known as *Murugan* in Hinduism. In Sri Lanka the same god is known as *Katharagama*.

⁸ King *Rāvana* is Sri Lankan mythical king who lived 30000 years ago. He is considered as the founder of angampora. Moreover, he is a famous character in *Mahabharath* in India as a villain who stole Queen *Seetha* from *Raama*. But for Sri Lankans, this king is a hero who had special powers which includes having ten heads.

For this particular research, three actors: including two male actors and one female actor, among the practitioners at the Actors Lab, were interviewed about their experience of training angampora. These three actors: Biyanka Amarasinghe, Antoinette Thilakshini and Stefan Tirimanne, were selected based on the purposive sampling method. All the three actors are in 30-33 age range and emerging young actors working in Sri Lankan stage, TV and Cinema. They were asked about how the training affected them and how they used angampora in their performances to develop their confidence and awareness. In the journals that they maintained during the sessions and interviews, they mentioned that they encountered a difference in their focus, awareness, energy, stamina and body language. Further, they claimed that they had built confidence compared to the first days of their training process of angampora at Actors Lab.

Actor, Biyanka Amarasinghe said,

In angampora sessions, we were asked to do very challenging movements that we have never done before and I was very frightened to do those things at first. For instance, the Master asked us to jump over a pole. Every day he raised the pole higher a bit than the last day. Later, I noticed that I have gained the confidence to jump over that pole by challenging my fright... I am not much of a religious person. But I felt that meditating expanded my sense of the space (Biyanka Amarasinghe 2021, pers. comm. 8 September).

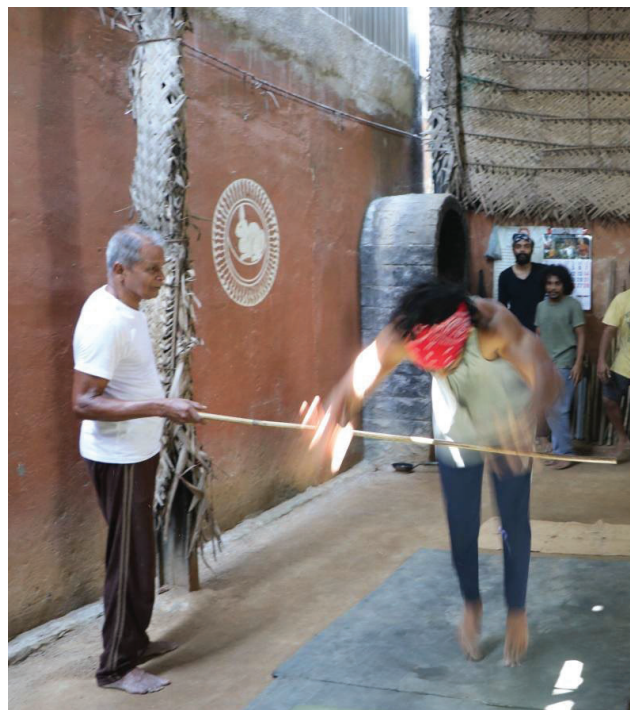


Figure 2: Biyanka, trying to jump over the pole at Actors Lab, Mirihana, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.
Photo: AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 Project, March 2021.

Since stage fright occurs due to a lack of confidence in facing the audience, strengthening the confidence level is highly important. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, ‘confidence’ refers to a ‘feeling or consciousness of one’s power or of reliance on one’s circumstances’ (“Confidence” n.d). Also, it is not an innate and fixed characteristic but an ability that can be improved over time (Psychology Today 2021). With the statement of Biyanka, it is clear that angampora training has forced him to do what he was scared of and has improved his confidence levels and sense of space by repeating the same challenge.

Actor Antoinette Thilakshini reflected,

I love the fact that I am learning angampora. It has lifted my spirit into a better place and has given me confidence...one day during a shoot I had to perform an argument followed by some physical fights with my co-actor, who played the role of my husband, according to the story. During that fight, my co-actor pushed me to the ground and I suddenly got on to my feet without having any time to breathe. My right hand automatically grabbed a fist full of sand while I got up and I threw it on my co-actor’s face... When I rethink the incident, I feel my body remembered the second sellama from angampora, it defended itself without my conscious decision (Antoinette Thilakshini 2021, pers. comm. 10 September).



Figure 3: Thilakshani practicing punch at the Actors Lab, Mirihana, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.
Photo: AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 Project, March 2021.

Quoting Jacques Copeau, Zarrilli states that developed bodies become capable of adjusting themselves and giving themselves over to any action they may undertake (1995: 185). Similarly, angampora training produces a disciplined body with techniques and methods to either attack or defend in any circumstance. Thilakshini didn't know what her co-actor would do. But after his unexpected action, Thilakshini's trained body has performed the second sellama/haramba immediately without getting nervous. This case indicates that angampora training has trained her body to react immediately without getting anxious or panicking. Since stage fright is provoked in an unexpected moment, this 'promptness' is an essential quality to deal with it. As Merlin explains, the first thing that happens during a stage fright is disconnection from the character. Thus, the actor needs to act immediately to fix the problem and continue with the play.

Actor Stefan Tirimanne mentioned:

While I was practising angampora at Actors Lab, I was engaging in a stage play named *Antique Kadayaka Maranayak* (2021) (Death at an Antique Shop). I am the first actor who appears in the play, and the play starts with my narration. It is a huge narration explainin' the play's back story, which runs for about seven minutes straight. Thus, I am responsible for the grip of the audience and the tempo of the play. Narrating the story without losing lines while maintaining the tempo of the play was very challenging to me, and it made me so nervous. Therefore, each day before the play, after I got into my costume and makeup, I started practising angampora *sellam* while reading my lines. I challenged myself to be conscious of lines while allowing the body to move in another movement pattern. It brought me some kind of a focus, relax and confidence within me' (Stefan Tirimanne, Pers. Comm. 24.08.2021).



Figure 4: Stefan training angampora at Actors Lab, Mirihana, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.
Photo, AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 Project, March 2021.

Stefan has modulated his angampora practice into a warm-up exercise, and he used it parallel to his line memorization. Then he moves his body according to the haramba and his mind recites his lines at once. Then he needs to unify the body and mind and be conscious about both the movement and lines. This ability to work within two parallel yet separate conscious entities is called dual consciousness.

5. Discussion

Zarrilli states that Asian martial arts practice develops the awareness of the physical and mental presence and relation to the other and the surrounding (1995: 279). Similarly, angampora, the traditional Sri Lankan martial art, empowers the practitioner with physical sense and with the practice, the practitioner begins to trust her/his intuitions while gaining the ability to read the physical energy, emotional states and the intension of those around her/him (Angam 2020). Biyanka's testimonial reflects that angampora has expanded his confidence level of facing challenges while expanding his sense of space. Thilakshini's experience shows that her embodied practice has driven her to take prompt actions to defend herself without panicking. This is what Zarrilli calls the state of 'readiness' (1995). Stefan has used angampora training not only as martial art training but as an exercise to open up his awareness during the performance. His expression denotes that he has tried to separate his consciousness into two regimes: lines and body. He has tried to activate the dual consciousness while forcing the consciousness to focus on the lines of the play and angampora haramba simultaneously, which are in two different contexts. As Bella Merlin mentioned, developing confidence and activating dual consciousness are techniques of managing stage fright. This dual consciousness provides the actor with the ability to be in reality while being in the fictive moment. Accordingly, these reflections of actors prove that angampora training can expand the awareness and confidence of the actors.

According to the characteristics, the presence of the audience is a major aspect of provoking stage fright. Thus, Bella Merlin also proposes rehearsing with the audience as a technique to defend stage fright. It implies the need of anticipating the nature of the audience. In angampora training, the practitioner uses her/his both hands when doing the exercises. But always, the left hand acts as the opponents' particular body part. For instance, during a *ath dandu pahara* or a punch, the practitioner punches her/his own left hand, and the left hand is imagined

as the jaw of the opponent (see Figure 3). Thus, angampora practitioner always imagines the presence of an enemy or an opponent in front of her/himself. Although the exercises are individual activities, the practitioner trains her/himself with an imaginary 'other'. In the context of acting, the audience becomes the 'other' of the actor. Hence, the actors who train haramba have already played in front of an imaginary audience. As Richard Schechner says, 'preparations are a constant state of training so that when a situation arises one will be ready to "do something appropriate"' (cited in Zarrilli 1995: 189). Therefore, by preparing with an imaginary 'other' or an audience through angampora training, the actors could 'do something appropriate' if they encounter fear in front of an actual audience.

6. Conclusion

Stage fright occurs when a performer senses the audiences' presence. Then, according to Bella Merlin, the performer dislocates from the character and gets panicked after being conscious of the actual reality. She/he starts to feel the need of getting away from the stage after feeling survival instincts. Merlin claims the need of activating 'dual consciousness': being aware of both fictive and real circumstances at once. Further, she proposes that the actor should develop confidence and improve the awareness to overcome stage fright. Philip B. Zarrilli argues that martial arts expand the state of 'readiness'. According to the actors' reflections at the AHEAD Actors Lab, angampora training has developed the confidence, energy, promptness, readiness and supports to activate the dual consciousness. Guru Karunāpāla debates about how angampora training helps the performer to achieve the sense of self and surrounding by training continuously. In line with these testimonies, this research emphasizes the capacity of angampora training to improve the qualities needed to challenge stage fright. Further, it argues that the nature of angampora, practicing in front of an imaginary 'other', could support reducing the fear of facing the actual audience during a performance. Hence, this study suggests that angampora training could be used by actors as a technique to fight the performers' stage fright.

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