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# LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology  
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

Issue Editors: Saumya Liyanage,  
Lyudmyla Honcharova, Marlon Ariyasinghe

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*Lamp in a Windless Place*

Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

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### Cover Picture

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

## Actor's Day at Angampora Maduwa

*Antoinette Thilakshini Rathnayake\**  
*Actors Lab, Sri Lanka*

\*\*\*\*\*

From my early childhood I always felt unknown.

Unknown to the family I was born into, unknown to the surroundings, unknown to my own body, the skin and features. This made me curious about my own existence. I often look at myself in the mirror and wonder how I have this long face, curls, long slender legs, wide hips and thin hands. Also, I've been trying to realize that why we feel about certain things in a certain way.

This realization was first introduced to me by religion. Religion and its orthodox practices led me to find the free-willed actor in me.

Acting has always something deeply personal for me. It's an engagement with myself. Even after a performance, I would spend the rest of the time acquiring, practicing skills and reading. My life has changed after I became an acting practitioner. I can never walk the way I used to. My mind was conscious of each step I took and the way my body balanced the weight in feet. An actor must practice each movement of her/his performance. It's a daily practice. As humans, we walk, sit, carry things, shake hands, and protect ourselves from harmful exterior occurrences. Yet, we don't actually practice any of those actions or movements. They are performed without a prior plan and, influenced by our surroundings.

Have you ever thought of the gestures we make while we sit, walk, kiss, eat, agree, disagree are in that particular way? Why do we do things in the way we do? These gestures are believed to be natural. But if you closely monitor each of these movements, they are determined mostly by culture, social status and profession.

Different cultures determine different body techniques, how people walk, with shoes or without shoes. Whether they shake hands on agreements or hug each other, these gestures are performed daily unconsciously without any effort in the daily context of the body. But in a

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performance, there is a different body technique. According to Barba, it is possible to distinguish between a daily technique and extra daily technique. (Barba 1995:15-16). Daily techniques are gestures we do unconsciously in our daily life. For an example, we Sri Lankans mostly eat rice for all three meals in a day. And we do not use cutlery. We eat by hand using fingers to mix the rice with curries. And it's a daily technique. Its effortless yet gives the maximum outcome. On the other hand, if we are to practice eating the rice with chopsticks as Sri Lankans, it needs more practice which is an extra daily technique. The more daily techniques are unconscious, the more functional they are. The first step in discovering what principles governing an actor's life might be lies in understanding the body's daily techniques can be replaced by extra daily techniques which do not adhere to the habitual conditions of the use of the body.

My angampora training was mainly and thoroughly focused on footwork, kicks and hand movements performing the *haramba* (exercises) in angampora. The foot is always placed on the ground. When we walk, in our day-to-day life, we do not drag our feet, but the katas in angampora require the dragging of feet for every movement.

Each day we practiced repeated the same foot movement, and the next day the hand movements at the *maduwa* (hut). Each day my body was able to step in to the right position. Once you complete an angampora movement accurately it leaves symmetrical squares drawn in the sand by our foot on the ground at maduwa.

Back then, I lived in a very urban area with multicultural surroundings. Yet we were all bound by one thing, which is the ocean. I was closer to the ocean than trees and mountains. Ocean was the whole nature to me. I observed that it produces wave after wave, doing the same thing but each time differently. You really cannot visit the same ocean twice.

I realized the elements of art through nature. The movements involved in angampora also require a lot of repetition and practice. As trainees, we had to spend a lot of time and energy practicing a simple footwork to make it smooth and precise. I often wonder, "have I spent this much time and effort on "practicing" walking as a child?" Usually, daily body techniques do not require much effort yet, we can obtain maximum results. On the contrary, extra daily techniques require maximum effort and energy for a minimal result.

At a certain point, I felt bored and wanted to do something else, a different exercise routine or something. But then again, I made up my mind, and told to myself that I should be disciplined enough to adhere to this session. I continued practicing the haramba no matter how much I wanted to do something else I kept focusing on the angampora routine.<sup>1</sup>

Once you get that practice into the muscle memory the whole movement flows like water. But why it is so necessary to perform these movements with such accuracy? I found the answer while I was practicing the haramba at maduwa. “Those movements: they defend me”. I could either get injured or worse get killed by my opponent if I don’t perform the movements accurately. That’s the whole purpose. But when it comes to an actor who uses angampora techniques in her/his performance it’s beyond just defending yourself. It is an emotion that you try to convey to an audience through movements. The gestures we use in our daily life usually convey a message. We use those daily techniques to communicate. On the other hand, extra daily practices lead to information. It creates an artistic form out of the actor’s body.

Practicing the haramba regularly helped me to overcome my inhibitions as an actor and the resistance I had towards doing the same thing again and again. A well-trained angampora performer should be able to move on its footwork with such ease. The training has also made me a confident actor. It gives me a sense of confidence in each move I make on stage. Also, the angampora training made me more aware of the connection we build with the floor/ground.

Practicing angampora haramba with other actors created so much energy and allowed one to navigate that elevated energy to the whole movement. The energy helped us to maintain our breath. A full breath allowed us to perform the movements accurately. Unlike practicing alone, when practicing with other actors, we could correct ourselves by observing each other.

On the other hand, practicing the haramba alone required the imagining of an opponent, one outside of your body, trying to attack you. This practice allowed me to be mindful of my existence in that particular moment, to be present in my whole self, from head to toe, fingertips, hair and breathing, all coming together to perform a specific movement. The focus I gained through these techniques also improved my psychological well-being.

As actors, we talk about achieving a relaxed body and mind in order to put on a meaningful performance. Several actors and training schools have their own set of exercises to achieve body relaxation and mind relaxation. Some practice meditation, yoga, walking, swimming,

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<sup>1</sup> Thilakshini Rathnayake 2021, Actors Lab Journal Entry: 17 February

drawing or other such activities in order to become calm and focused. The calmness and the focus of the mind have always linked with a bodily function. For an instance, if we are sad or stressed, we go for a walk or a swim or writing. The psychological ease comes when you focus your mind on a physical action.

Practicing angampora haramba as a daily practice allowed me to focus on my every step, hand movements; breathing and having an opponent imagined made it feel like a meditation. I was very conscious of each movement and breathing as well as the movements and breathing of my imaginary opponent. To better understand the behaviour of my imaginary opponent, I sometimes asked my fellow actors to attack me since imagination grows with knowledge.

Learning a combative art form will not just make you a fighter it makes you an artist and a mindful human. This is what I learnt from my time in angampora training. When you are focused enough to accept your reality you can put on any mask and get on to the stage.

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