

Back in the Roda

by James Willimetz

What possesses a man in his late 50's with bum knees, a big belly, an inguinal hernia, a little klutzy and forgetful, to want to take up capoeira, the beautiful Brazilian martial art disguised as a dance? It happened one Sunday walking around in Central Park and as I approached Bethesda fountain, I heard the melodic twang and buzz of the berimbau, the one-string instrument that dictates the style and tempo of the game. I was drawn to it and came to a roda (ho-da), the circle of capoeiristas in which two players face each other in a sparring match that is a flurry of cartwheels and spins and kicks and dodges. The berimbau was backed up by the atabaque (hand drum), pandeiro (tambourine), and the singing, "tamandua . . . como vai coroa?" (anteater . . . what's up, old man?). I instinctively tried to identify the mestre (master) and immediately picked him out due to his subtle nods to various people to do certain things. Not so immediately I came to realize I knew him. It was Ombrinho.

Michael Goldstein and I had studied capoeira together in Tribeca 25 years ago under mestre Jelon Vieira, one of the pioneers who brought capoeira to New York in the '70s. After a year I dropped out with knee problems and he, as I could see, went on and indeed was now a mestre. I hesitated to approach him but I took a card from one of the members, Tucano, AKA Bill, who told me about the group and said Ombrinho was the first non-Brazilian to become a mestre. He suggested I try it again. "Don't you think I'm too old," I said. "We have a guy, Karl, who is 68," he said. "He started three years ago."

For some reason Ombrinho, now mestre Ombrinho, walked over to us and I introduced myself. He couldn't quite place me at first, so I said, "I remember one time I told you that capoeira was half fight and half dance, and you said that, no, it was 100% fight and 100% dance. That impressed me." We talked a few minutes and he also encouraged me to try out a class at his academy and said capoeira can free up and strengthen tight and tender knees. He promised to go easy on me in the beginning. Well, if Karl can do it.

Capoeira Angola Quintal is in the Lower East Side in a cultural center near Delancey and Essex. I was welcomed by Dragao, who was born in the Philippines and, of course, has a dragon tattooed on his arm. Other students arrived and also said hello to me. When Ombrinho arrived, he started the class with stretching and then we went right in to doing the various kicks and dodges and aus (cartwheels) broken down into steps. A lot of the class focuses on what Ombrinho calls the base. There are a few basic moves that must be mastered correctly before you can do capoeira well. The most essential one is the ginga, done by swinging one leg back, opposite arm in front of your chest and then vice versa. All other capoeira movements, and capoeira is always moving, stem from this. Towards the end of the class we had a chance to spar

a little with a partner and finally all came together for a roda. Then we did some cool down stretches. We ended with singing, which together with the instruments and clapping, gives you a sense of rhythm, an integral part of the movement of capoeira.

Ombrinho had me singing in front of the group, something nobody had ever succeeded in making me do. I wasn't very good, way off in timing and key, but at least the windows didn't break. I walked home with a bit of a swagger. Sure, I was a little stiff and sore the next day, but otherwise psyched to go back. My progress was slow. The knees were holding up but the body was slow to respond and my brain even slower. Nevertheless, inch by inch, I was snailing along and not at all discouraged. A few weeks later, I arrived on a Friday, a day I had never gone, and it was only me and six other students.

Finally, I felt I was the strongest of the group, but the sum of all their ages added up to half of mine. I had come to a kids' class. When we were jogging around the room one of the four-year-olds caught up to me and I nodded for him to cruise on by. He smiled and zoomed off, looking up at me each time he passed again with a huge grin. I ended up working out mostly on my own, but enjoyed watching the mestre teaching them to cartwheel and more importantly, getting them to stay on task. I thought, "There's the future of capoeira, if they stick to it." I so envied them starting out at that age.

Though capoeira is a bona fide martial art, it may seem like some kind of glorified choreographed gymnastic dance. Mestre Ombrinho says, "Explaining capoeira to the unenlightened is like explaining colors to someone who is color blind. No martial art, no dance can match capoeira's spectacular and spontaneous conversation of flowing attacks and escapes." Capoeira Angola, the style Ombrinho teaches, according to the academy's website, is "The traditional form of capoeira that emphasizes wisdom over force, strategy over speed. It is said that capoeiristas are like chameleons, blending and adapting to their environment. The best capoeiristas appear calm when they play. Their game flows without resistance, defies gravity, and at the right moment, they strike." Sometimes capoeira can get a little rough. It's hard to say who would win in a match between a topnotch capoeirista and an equally well-trained practitioner of any other martial art, but I wouldn't bet against capoeira. "My early years in capoeira were violent and I loved it," Ombrinho says. "Capoeira had to be dangerous and real. If you didn't duck out of the way, you would get hit in the head by a fast and dangerous kick.

You had to have courage, be ready to defend yourself, and enjoy the thrill of real danger." One thing I personally don't worry about in Ombrinho's center is getting hurt in the roda. For the majority it is playful sparring. It's more getting in and showing you could knock your opponent down or deal him a severe blow than actually doing it. You might tap them or occasionally knock them down, but you stop short of trying to hurt them. However, as your ability grows, you do feel challenged to take it up a notch and if you don't duck you might get a nice little whack. "Accidents rarely happen," Ombrinho says. "I teach carefully and mindfully so that there are zero injuries, zero accidents, and no one ever gets upset. I do my best and our group is known to be low impact, low stress and freeing on the body."

Ombrinho, who just turned 50, has just had a hip procedure, which is unrelated to practicing capoeira. Indeed, his doctors say it has been the constant movement practicing capoeira that has kept his hip functioning for so long. He feels strongly that, “Capoeira practiced mindfully is healthful and supports and strengthens stronger, more flexible joints.” He avoids the extreme ways of some capoeiristas that can be too hard on the body, causing too much “wear and tear that ends with too many injuries and ruined joints to continue.” Ombrinho hopes to be able to return to the roda soon. In my case, after a few more weeks of classes, my knees do seem a little better, the belly is starting to go down and my response time is improving. Like many martial arts, it all began long ago. Brazilian slaves trained fighting and disguised it as a dance to the rhythm of a drum when the white overseer came by. After the slaves were freed in 1888 capoeiristas were marginalized, considered street thugs and sometimes hired out by politicians and businessmen to beat up their enemies. Some were even said to wear razors in their toes when they fought. A number of criminally-inclined capoeiristas did this, but capoeira took the rap and it was outlawed for years by the government and strongly repressed by the police. It is certainly true that many a love triangle and other feuds were settled with a capoeira “game,” in which the players weren’t playing around, sending some to the hospital and others to the grave. Capoeira’s reputation improved in the twentieth century with legendary mestres Bimba and Pastinha paving the way with the first legitimized schools for the capoeira that is practiced in Brazil and all over the world today.

Ombrinho first took up capoeira in San Francisco with mestre Acordeon, another capoeira pioneer who brought capoeira to California in the ‘70s. I was living in Brazil around the same time and studied it for a year under mestre Kenura, who had toured in the US with mestre Acordeon. We both had the same second mestre in New York, Jelon Vieira, in 1984. I, unfortunately, quit but he stayed on. I remember him being very dedicated and quite good in the rodas. In the late ‘80s, Ombrinho made several trips to Bahia, Brazil, the birthplace of capoeira and sought out the best capoeira environments he could find. On one trip to Bahia, he met the man who would be his third mestre, Norival Moreira de Oliveira, Mestre No, now 64. Ombrinho really liked his style and philosophy and became his apprentice and even lived with him and his family for a year. After a lot of intensive training and years of teaching, passing on the art to his own students, he finally attained the rank of mestre.

And it is this philosophy of mestre No, whose image is on a huge poster on the academy’s wall, that is what perhaps most informs Ombrinho’s own. “Mestre No’s capoeira,” Ombrinho says, “is characterized by extreme malandragem.” Malandragem is hard to explain fully, but its classic practitioner outside the context of capoeira is the malandro, a roguish scoundrel, a predator always looking for a sucker to take advantage of but yet a folk hero that Brazilians can’t seem to bring themselves altogether to hate. Some of these characteristics are positive in capoeira and indeed define its soul. A capoeirista should be cunning, an opportunist, tricky, a dodger, aware of everything around him, with a good vision of what’s happening in the game. “Mestre No’s malandragem in the roda is a thing of beauty,” Ombrinho says. “One does not feel ‘scared’ playing him. He gives his opponent space to

escape, dignity to keep moving, even though he is in control. His capoeira game does not even look like a martial art. He is so relaxed, floats effortlessly through attacks, escapes and acrobatics, and he even looks like he's not aware of his opponent. He is a capoeirista Angoleiro who embodies the most sought after qualities of being able to defeat the strongest opponents with the least effort; play any type of game--fast or slow, up or down, low to the ground, friendly or aggressive; and play into old age.”

Michael Goldstein has had three great mestres and now, with him, so have I. As he said 25 years ago, capoeira is 100% dance, 100% fight, and, I would add that Ombrinho is 100% mestre, 100% capoeira. What he wants is “to transform people’s experience of capoeira from one of ‘Wow! That is awesome but I could NEVER do that!’ to ‘Wow! I wanna try that!’” I’m game again.