

# Capoeira:

## A game of cunning, self control and respect

By Meredith Ahlberg

How do you respond if you are attacked – physically, professionally, or socially? Do you walk or run away? Do you get angry and fight back? Do you lose your cool, get confused and do nothing? Or, instead, do you stay on your feet, face your opponent, and move ahead with an intelligent and strategized counterattack? This is how good capoeiristas learn to defend themselves. Not only do they use attacks, kicks, and takedowns, but a good capoeirista is subtle and crafty in their intentions, reactions and movements.

Capoeira is a Brazilian form of self-defense that has been practiced since the 16th century. It combines martial arts, dance, music and cultural traditions in the context of a playful and tricky “game.” Capoeira has elements of both African dance and martial arts which were practiced in secret among slaves in Brazil. Some say it is like playing chess with your body. Others say it is like yoga in motion. These comparisons are true to an extent, but capoeira is unique in its wisdom, power, and cultural richness.

Today, capoeira is recognized all over the world for its graceful style and powerful acrobatic movements. While the more aggressive and martial arts aspects of the game are often emphasized in teaching, capoeira is always beautiful, graceful and cunning in execution. In fact, some players see this subtle and playful element, the *malandragem*, as the essence of the game.

At the New York Capoeira Center (NYCC) in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a style of capoeira is taught that emphasizes a balanced, mindful, but no less powerful version of the game. Michael Goldstein, known in the capoeira community as Mestre Ombrinho, is the founder and master teacher at the center. He has been teaching this style of capoeira for over 20 years to adults and children in the New York metro area, and it is his goal to make capoeira accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Mestre Ombrinho was given his master’s cord (similar to a black belt in Asian martial arts) by Grand Master Nô (Norival Moreira de Oliveira) in Brazil in 1988. Although he first studied the more aggressive and fast-paced Regional style of capoeira with Mestre Acordeon and Mestre Jelon, Ombrinho ultimately felt a strong affinity with the more relaxed and subtly potent Angola style taught by Mestre Nô. In 1989, Mestres Nô and Ombrinho established a center in New York for the group

Capoeira Angola Palmares and, in 1991, Mestre Ombrinho opened his own academy, Capoeira Angola Quintal, now housed within the New York Capoeira Center. According to Mestre Ombrinho, the beauty of Mestre Nô’s style of capoeira is its

deceptive power and thoughtful moves, which are never condescending or humiliating. Mestre Nô respects his opponents by showing them their weaknesses while allowing them to keep their dignity. Furthermore, Mestre Nô's style can be practiced throughout a person's life as it is not limited to the young and strong. His teaching provides a path to integrity, balance, and self-control.

Many of these aspects are hidden from the casual observer of today's capoeira, but they are essential to the art taught by Mestre Ombrinho. One of his major accomplishments has been to bring the art and discipline of capoeira to thousands of New York City youth. Every year since 1991, through his not-for-profit organization, Afro Brazil Arts, Mestre Ombrinho and his staff of teaching artists and performers have taught capoeira in schools in all five boroughs of New York. Many of the children in those classes have a difficult time interacting with peers, parents, and teachers. But through capoeira they learn to focus their attention, overcome fears and self-doubt, learn self-discipline and respect, and become part of a strong and supportive community.

Mestre Ombrinho also trains adult students at his academy, Capoeira Angola Quintal (CAQ). While classes are structured differently than those for children, his balanced and mindful style of capoeira offers a great opportunity for personal development and provides a strong feeling of community for adults of all ages. As a student of Mestre Ombrinho's students, I came to CAQ with a strong dance background, but absolutely no martial arts experience. Since beginning with CAQ, I find myself continually tested and inspired through this challenging art form. I can say that, even with my experience in dance and sports, nothing has helped me as much as capoeira to feel balanced, strong, and confident, both physically and mentally. The positive environment at CAQ and the controlled game taught by Mestre Ombrinho have taught me so much. Even in the most difficult moments—be it when I get knocked down or make a huge mistake—I am always encouraged to stay positive, move ahead, keep learning and to never stop improving and cultivating myself, as a capoeirista and as a person.

Capoeira is not just for those people who are strong and who can easily do flying kicks and flips, nor is it simply a unique workout or way to stay in shape. While it can contain these features, capoeira fosters mental and physical development in ways that other activities often fall short. It demands greater self-control, self-awareness, and flexibility, while cultivating community and cultural understanding. And as much as capoeira is unique and intensely challenging, it is tremendously rewarding and enriching.