

Studio Visit: Capoeira en Roda

by Jenna Bonistalli

Climbing up an old winding wooden stairway in a warehouse building on 14th Street in Manhattan, 57 students enter a wide-open room. Sunlight streams into the space, washing over the succulents and vines that line the windowsills. A parrot chirps “hello.” The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the air. Black and white photographs of Brazil and Africa adorn the walls. Sculptures, textiles, and mementos grace tables. A small colorful shrine is lit with candles. Joined by many musicians and capoeiristas, Mestre Bom Jesus and Mestre Carioca welcome their youngest protégés. *Olá. Good day. Bom dia.*

Capoeira Angola

Capoeira, an art with roots in Africa, is one of the many cultural art forms that were used to break the chains of enslavement in Brazil. Played close to the ground, *capoeira* combines fluid, dance-like movements with kicks, tripping sweeps, hand stands, and the appearance of playfulness or vulnerability. Music is played on traditional instruments, such as the one-stringed *berimbau* and drums, to accompany the players, to teach the rhythmic heart of the art, and also to

mask its power. For almost 400 years *capoeira* was taught and practiced in secret, and only in the 1930s did this African martial art become legal to teach and practice. Hailing from Salvador, Bahia, in Northeast Brazil, Mestre João Grande is a Grand Master of *Capoeira* Angola, with more than 50 years of experience performing all over the world. Since 1990, his New York City Capoeira Angola Center has been a hub for the Brazilian dance and martial arts community.

Studio Fieldtrip

In April 2010, students in Lydia Cruz’s 5th grade and Sindy Soleymanzadeh’s 6th grade classes visited the Capoeira Angola Center. Students had been studying *capoeira* and *maculelê* for four months as part of City Lore’s *Nations in Neighborhoods* program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. City Lore, in collaboration with New York City’s Community School Districts 28, 29, and 30, is implementing this program, now in its fourth year, in six schools in the borough of Queens. The program places working artists with classroom teachers to design arts-integrated units of study focusing on social studies, literacy, and community resources. It seeks to create

a replicable model for strengthening standards-based arts instruction in grades 3 to 8 and improving students’ academic performance, including their skills in creating, performing, and responding to the arts. Goals include building teachers’ capacity to use community resources and culturally responsive instruction in their classrooms and helping teachers address the challenges and promises of a highly diverse and shifting immigrant student population through cultural arts integration.

City Lore embraces art as situated in communities and homes, thus a focus of our work in the schools is to explore art outside the classroom. Fieldtrips are integral to the programs we design in collaboration with artists and classroom teachers. We try to imagine all the possibilities for designing trips that stretch beyond New York City staples and have the potential to enhance students’ understanding of the community contexts in which artists learn and practice their art.

Inquiry and Interviews

To prepare students for their visit, we read João Grande’s biography and looked at photographs and paintings of *capoeira* as practiced in Brazil. Students wrote questions they developed on index cards. Upon arriving at the studio, they investigated: “Walk around and find something that interests you. Draw it or write about it in the space below.” They practiced inquiry skills, dividing their thoughts into three categories:—*know* (describe what you see)—*think* (thoughts/feelings about what you see)—*wonder* (questions about what you see). Afterwards, students sat and asked questions of the *mestres*. Then, the sounds of the *berimbau* began as the *capoeiristas* sang and began to practice *en roda*, a circle formed by the *capoeiristas* and musicians. Students watched and were invited to join.

When artists visit schools, they enter the workspace of students and their teachers. When students visit studios, they enter the workspace of artists. Artists work in all kinds of spaces—outdoors, in their homes, in places of worship, in their studios, and in community



Students interview mestres at the Capoeira Angola Center

Photo by Catherine Fletcher

centers. Entering a studio space is a full sensory experience, where students can feel and see artists situated in the world. It provides a window onto the materials, practices, and contexts for creating. *What does it mean to be a working artist? How do you practice your craft? Who are your teachers? Where do communities of artists gather to learn from each other?*

To hear the *berimbau* echo throughout the room; To see and join a group of *capoeira* artists *en roda*; To ask questions of a *mestre* and listen to his responses in Portuguese, students enter a dialogue about an art form, in rhythm with *capoeira* masters. When Kareem asks, “Where was *capoeira* started?” João Grande gracefully replies, *A capoeira é como o oceano*. “*Capoeira* is like the ocean.” He describes how art flows where people practice it, without boundaries, no

beginning and no end. “Art worlds” surround young people. Discovering a painting on a neighborhood wall, watching a grandmother as she stitches a pattern on cloth, or climbing this steep stairwell on 14th Street, students become participants in these worlds.

To learn more, visit: Capoeira Angola Center of Mestre João Grande:

<http://www.joaogrande.org>

Nations in Neighborhoods Blog:

<http://nationsproject.wordpress.com/2010/10/11/capoeira-en-roda>

Jenna Bonstalli, former Education Associate and teaching artist for City Lore, now lives in New Orleans, where she works as an independent artist and as a teaching artist with KID smART.



Students pose with Mestre João Grande at the Capoeira Angola Center

Photo by Jenna Bonstalli

At the Capoeira Angola Center, students and teachers interviewed capoeira artists Bom Jesus and Carioca, Mestre João Grande, and Mestre Jelon Vieira, who was visiting the Center. This is a selection from the interview.

Q: HOW LONG HAS CAPOEIRA BEEN IN THIS COUNTRY?

Vieira: This year we are celebrating the 35th anniversary of *capoeira* in this country. Mestre Vladimir and myself were the first capoeiristas to come to the United States, in 1975. In 1979 there was Mestre Acordeon in San Francisco, California. There was a big gap between west and east. Nowadays this gap has been filled. You can find *capoeira* everywhere in the United States, every single state you can find *capoeira*, which is great because everyone has access to it. ... It's great to see kids like you coming here and doing research and meeting Mestre Grande. I'm very impressed and very happy and proud to see that. ... I brought Mestre Grande here the first time in 1989. It was Mestre Bobô, Mestre Pequeno, and Mestre Grande. They came here for the first time, and it was a big success. And Mestre João coming here, it start changing *capoeira*. It was one of the best things that happened to *capoeira*. It planted the seed of Capoeira Angola. I plant the seed of Capoeira Regional and he plant the seed of Capoeira Angola. Capoeira Angola is the mother of all *capoeira*.

Q: ARE AMERICAN CAPOEIRA STUDENTS DIFFERENT FROM BRAZILIAN CAPOEIRA STUDENTS?

Bom Jesus: “From my personal point of view, there's nothing different. It's person to person, how much they work, how much they dedicate themselves to learn the Brazilian culture. How much they learn Portuguese and how they sing the songs. Then you cannot tell if they are Brazilian or they are Americans.”

Vieira: “I would like to add one thing—it is rooted in Brazilian culture, but it is a human being thing. Anyone can

do *capoeira*, Like he said, it depends on how much time you devote to it, but it's an individual thing.... But when learning *capoeira*, you must learn all—the language, the culture. You have to be part of the culture to truly be called *capoeirista*. But anyone can become *capoeirista*. *Capoeira* is for everyone.

Q: WHAT IS YOUR HOPE FOR CAPOEIRA FOR THE FUTURE?

Vieira: Mestre Grande says, it depends who teach the generations. It's like a tree. If you treat the tree right from the very beginning, definitely that tree will give good fruits. I say we're all *capoeiristas*. We have a moral obligation with our ancestors to continue this art and pass it on to the next generation, so the next generation keep passing it on and on and keep it pure, like they just said. You have to keep pure. My dream is one day to see the whole world *ginga* (rock back and forth, a basic movement of *capoeira*), but *ginga* the right way. Because nothing promotes Portuguese more than *capoeira* does. I'd say 90% of *capoeiristas* in the world speak Portuguese. Here to Mestre Grande's class, they all speak Portuguese. You learn Portuguese. You learn the music. You're hooked to *capoeira*... I was surprised when I came here. I came here to see Mestre Grande, and I run into Mestre Carioca and Bom Jesus. I hadn't seen them for awhile. I've been kidding them saying they're like the equator. You know the equator line is there, but you don't see it. To see them was great. And seeing the kids was really a great feeling, seeing that *capoeira* is catching on with this new generation. Seeing them getting to them know Mestre Grande, getting his blessing, it really made my day.