

1 April 2003

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
Recipient William Thorburn, age 26
Project: Spend time with Capoeira masters to validate instructor status.

Dear Dr Lewis,

Thank you and the rest of the people on the Lisa Ullmann Scholarship Fund. I enjoyed a very fruitful couple of months, with only minor hiccups (leaving) and my apologies the report arrived in two parts. I hope it is what is needed, I will have further material written soon as discussed.

My scholarship award was used to purchase a two-month return to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I was in Brazil over the period of Dec 10th, 2002 - Feb 15th 2003. Additional supporting material provided - 1 hour 20 min documentary video (VHS copy) 'Capoeiragem'

Yours truly

William Thorburn ~

Report: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. Awarded 2002.
Aim: to visit Brazilian Capoeira Masters to validate instructor status.
Schedule and Outline of Trip:

Arrived Rio de Janeiro - December 2002

Rio das Ostras - January 2003

Capoeirando - Arraial de Cabo - January 14-19

Salvador - Morro de Sao Paulo, and Bahia, last week Jan, beginning of February. Finally returning to Rio to complete round trip.

Mestres of Capoeira and events attended

Mestre Gato (my master of Capoeira) training daily in morning at his house in Rio, and evenings at the Senzala group's Academy in Leme, an area in Rio next to Copacabana. Also workshop led by M. Garrincha, M. Beto, and class with M. Toni Vargas.

Mestrando Kaia, group Associacio Mundo da Capoeira- one month training and rodas in Rio das Ostras, a city in Rio state further north.

Capoeirando

>From Group Senzala, M.s Peixinho, Toni Vargas

>From Group Cordao de Ouro: M. Suassuana, M. Salvador

Also: Regional Mestres Deputado, and Onea Negra, Touro, Ze Paulo, c/m Pantera, Angola Mestres Claudio and Jogo de Dentro

Salvador da Bahia

Mestre Bamba - regional training & demonstration roda M. Bimbas academy, Pelourinho

Mestre Nenel - regional class with Mestre Bimbas son.

Mestre Roberval - one-on-one class in Angola academy, Pelourinho

Juranji - class in M. Pastinhas Angola academy, Pelourinho

Group Raizes de Rua, Mestre Neco - roda in street - Pelourinho

Mestre Americano - demonstration Mercado modelo - Bahia

Capoeira is a Brazilian art form, a cultural manifestation seen by many as a non-contact martial art or a dance. It was created by African slaves in Brazil, and since then taken different forms and styles. The Capoeira of today is seen as a game in which two players interact with each other using attacks and defence moves and even some acrobatic moves. The moves are often spinning kicks, cartwheels, floor movements and head-butts. This takes place in a circle with a live percussion "band". The spectators in the circle participate in the game by singing, and clapping. The music is percussive, with songs sung in Portuguese and clapping, instruments and the Berimbau, a one-stringed bow.

I have always been fascinated by Capoeira and the list of masters and places doesn't do justice to the amount of people and times I came into contact with the real deal in Brazil when I went between December and February 2002/3. I first saw and learnt Capoeira from a visiting choreographer and his dancers - Doug Elkins from New York in Inverness when I was still at school. My first brief taste developed over time and really developed when I trained as a dancer and began also to train in Capoeira in London while a student. I reached a level the year before last when I was facing a barrier, in that I was not eligible to teach and therefore graduate to a teaching level in my Capoeira school without experience of Brazil. Happily enough I was able to go and begin to learn just how it is there where it originated, and I feel deeply grateful, and not a little humble, at being funded to go and explore more deeply into this unique art again by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. So over Christmas and the beginning of the new year I stayed in Rio and developed my Capoeira with Mestre Gato for a few weeks, then travelled from Rio to a town further north and met a new group and got into a lot of Capoeira with them; finally spending ten days in Salvador in the north east of Brazil on the coast, the spiritual home of Capoeira.

About myself and my mission

I am a soloist and teach freelance for Union Dance in London. Union's repertoire contains much work with Capoeira as well as other martial arts and contemporary dance forms, as well as classical techniques. The education programme for Union dance is highly developed. Workshops aimed at all levels provide me with often daily contact with many young people as well as more experienced dancers studying everywhere from schools, performing arts colleges and open classes onstage in the theatres. I also teach Capoeira and hip hop freelance, my main Capoeira bases being my class in London, which I run for group Senzala, under Mestre Gato in Rio de Janeiro, and in Cambridge where I currently live, and teach and train Capoeira. Since returning from Brazil with the experiences the scholarship provided I have discussed with my master the situation regarding me teaching a children's group and developing my classes to form a group, training capoeiristas and developing Capoeira in Britain, as well as a good direction to aim for and potential pitfalls along the way. The scholarship gave me the chance to train for two weeks a couple of times a day with him, and discuss issues and ideas, solve problems and enjoy the hospitality and openness of his family and life in Rio. This especially helped me understand some of the finer points and general ideas considered important in Brazil about Capoeira as a game, a fight, music, training, teaching, and history. With many chances also to train and meet other masters within the group Senzala, some for the first time, some again in nice occasions like a class organised by M. Garrincha, taken by M. Beto for a group of 25 or so European students visiting together and training together in Brazil for a month.

I stayed a while in Rio das Ostras and met up with a group under M. Kibe, I trained with Mestrando Kaia, his son Instrutor Netinho, as well as other professors and instructors in the group: Associacao Mundo da Capoeira. He welcomed my girlfriend and I, along with another friend, also a student of Senzala. He ritually introduced all the teachers and instructors to all present at any gathering, including me every day as "Instrutor Ourico" (Ourico is my Capoeira name- meaning sea urchin. This for me was very concrete acceptance of my position as an instructor of Capoeira) He nurtured our Capoeira, pushing us, socialising, sharing songs, stories and organising demonstrations of Capoeira in the town centre. The video 'Capoeiragem' which accompanies this report contains footage from both this event and another he made as we were leaving to say goodbye for everyone to get together before we went our separate ways.

M. Kaia was a very active educationalist, sometimes, during his classes at a local academy, his students would be asked to present some exercises to show the police, who watched from the side of the space as he asked them to demonstrate throws from the Regional technique, takedowns and attack sequences. The police also watched as the players finished class. Kaia would get everyone to play in a roda (circle of Capoeira). Everybody played, kicked, got kicked and had great times. The Capoeiristas bodies pushing every limit, trying to not get knocked down, playing slow games, fast ones, applying all their cunning and skills, in the end trying to just to enjoy it without leaving with bruises!

Some say Capoeira is the second national sport after football, with a history of violence and outlaws, police suppression in the 18th and 19th centuries. Modern Capoeira is seen as a folk art, also a fight or martial art, with very pronounced features such as the music, acrobatics and movements low to the ground, spinning kicks and head-butts. The players treat Capoeira as a game, training often mainly for years to perfect their games in schools and academies of Capoeira. However in the past 'maltsas', bands of Capoeiras were thugs and fighters, robbing and causing trouble, attackers used to use a razorblade between their toes, aiming for the jugular. It has changed a lot over the intervening time, and Capoeira now is more popular than ever as a pastime and sport which is flourishing in its new incarnation. In a conversation with M. Gato on the same subject, he pointed out one of Capoeira's great strengths is its potential to develop people. It is an intensely demanding physical and mental activity, training combines learning a rich variety of skills and techniques in the movements including combative and ritual elements nowadays, less violent, but still aggressive and dangerous at times. People are drawn to it for all sorts of reasons, and as we pass into the new millennium we find a changed Capoeira, women play as equally to men now as the limits of the body allows, since it was outlawed music has become more fundamental, in short it's a much more inviting prospect, attracting many people eager to learn about Brazil's much touted "21st century zero gravity martial art".

The Capoeirando - Arrial de Cabo, State of Rio de Janeiro

This event was a week of Capoeira organised by the 'Senzala' and 'Cordao de Ouro' schools of Capoeira. The days were split into morning training classes in Capoeira regional, Angola, Afro-Brazilian dance, maculele and samba de roda. In the afternoon there were training rodas, and one day a boat trip to an island (see video). In the evening there were demonstration Rodas in the town centre, opening with Rodas de Crianca (children), and the week ending with a Roda on the big beach. This was televised live, adding to the media coverage during the week (I was seen on TV training by many Capoeiristas in Brazil who came later to congratulate and talk to me). I also took the chance to take part in a visit to a centre working with disadvantaged children, also functioning as an orphanage. This was organised by the minister for tourism and sport in the town who sponsored the Capoeirando as well. M. Gato encouraged me to participate as he pointed out it was excellent experience for me as an instructor in training, giving me real experience of the conditions, and a chance to work with Capoeira and children's development. We were giving a demonstration to the children and carers, as well as being given the chance to see how much progress is being made and how well the children are looked after in Arrial de Cabo. The Capoeira was a special day for them, and I saw toddlers pick up how to play in seconds, the still images and video try to give an impression.

After the event I travelled north to Morro de Sao Paulo, I took a regional class with P. Carlito of the Kilombolas' group and was invited to join two of their rodas on a wooden platform on the beach. It was great to see how they lived by the sea, making their living, and playing, and training Capoeira. They seemed happy and we enjoyed a beautiful tropical island and the hospitality of Capoeiristas opening their art to us. From here, we flew over the water between to Bahia.

Salvador da Bahia - North East Brazil

Salvador is the home of Capoeira for many people, as it is the area Capoeira survived the police repression of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as where it exists today in such rich variety and abundance. On arrival I went back to the regional and Angola academies I visited last year, and renewed contact, as well as playing, training, discussing Capoeira and even performing in a demonstrations! I felt that by this point I had learned so much and felt more sure in myself about how to be a good teacher and artist with Capoeira, how to train and develop myself and how also not to lose the balance of working, performing and teaching (many issues before I left to travel on the Scholarship). So by the time I arrived in Bahia itself my main focus was to improve my Capoeira.

I trained with the Academia de Mestre Bimba in Pelourinho. The demonstration I took part in was in the main plaza in Pelourinho with Mestre Bambas students. Classes start and finish there with everyone saluting the picture of Master Bimba on the wall. Mestre Bimba died in 1974, he started the modernisation that happened in Capoeira from 1920's to the 1940's. M. Bimba created 'Luta Regional Baiana', (notice it doesn't mention Capoeira), a style still evolving today across the world. This style was taken on and developed in Rio de Janeiro by group Senzala. Mestre Gato is one of the original Capoeiristas from this group who became mestres by winning the Berimbau de Ouro Capoeira tournament. As a student and instructor for him in Great Britain, I am by extension now a teacher of this style. Senzala practice and play both regional and Angola styles like most contemporary Capoeiras, however regional is the main focus.

I also went to train with Mestre Nene, M Bimbas son, in another academy, learning valuable details of the sequences developed by M. Bimba, and also seeing the master at work, creating berimbaus. This is the main musical instrument of Capoeira, it was very illuminating experiencing the work of all these Capoeira masters in Bahia, but some stuck out as even more profound than the rest, M. Nene is one of those: living Capoeira day to day, teaching his students, as well as being one of the sons of a legend in Capoeiras history.

I explored further through the Scholarship than previously was possible. One afternoon I had a one-on-one class with M. Roberval and his contra - mestre (c/m), in an Angola academy across the street from M. Nene's academy. It was great to play Angola again, they refreshed a lot of my previous 4 years training in Angola techniques, and provided a good balance in my Capoeira diet!

I played in the street rodas Bahia is famous for throughout Brazil and Capoeira circles, on several occasions with several groups, without fail were all welcoming in their own way and impressed at my dedication and understanding of their art. One Professor in group Raizes de Rua told me Capoeira was based around respect and I was doing just fine, but that people who came to fight would get the berimbau or atabaque (big drum) on their head!

I was careful to play safely at first, however mostly I felt at home and able just to get down and play hard. It is necessary to achieve a certain level of Capoeira first before starting to teach. Capoeira is considered a martial art, as a teacher, one must be both able and responsible. My communications with my master while in Brazil, and my continuing development have brought me to the point where he and other the other teachers believe I am ready to teach under continued guidance from them. They support me developing a group in London, as well as teaching further afield which goes hand in hand with my freelance work as a dance teacher, particularly with Union Dance. As I mentioned earlier Capoeira is a key element of Union's work, finally after two years of teaching 'Miudinho', a young Capoeirista (6 years old), and seeing so many children playing so well in Brazil, I proposed and have been authorised and encouraged to start a children's Capoeira group. It is called Senzala Mirim (mirim is Guarani Indian for young, and is used throughout Brazil to denote youth activities). I hope I can help children learn Capoeira and also hope to provide an unusual but interesting movement based class for young people and beginners too. I continue to develop my group in London. I teach in Norwich and work as a freelance artist both for Union Dance and as an independent. I use all my opportunities to work with dance to help educate, and try to encourage and develop performance skills, and people's development as individuals and artists. Capoeira is one of the strongest tools I have worked with as a teacher and a performer, I look forward to passing into a new phase of work, more informed and based on a better technical, linguistic and cultural understanding, mainly from two months of development the Scholarship allowed me to undertake in Brazil.

Future and other notes:

I am now invited to teach and demonstrate Capoeira in many local and regional schools and academies. I recently organised and ran a street demonstration by local Capoeira students in Cambridge city centre for Red Nose Day and raised £71.40 for charities. Mestre Gato will be visiting Britain later this year, I hope to introduce my students to him, and continue to develop our relationship, also M. Toni Vargas will be in London in June. I am organising a workshop to be taught by him. I hope to approach Laban or other institution to consolidate my Capoeira and dance work. I hope to go back to Brazil too, and see everyone again, pick up where I left off, and maybe next time return with some students who want to see it as much as I did.

Thanks to:

The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for its financial assistance towards my travel.

All the Capoeira masters, teachers and groups which welcomed me into their world.

Gabby Laborda for coming with me, all the support and help, especially for the excellent treatment of the film footage into a documentary to go with this report - 'Capoeiragem'

Clara Artaud Berthet and Roberto Sa for generous accommodation and so much help with my Portuguese!

Union Dance for letting me go away long enough to get deep into the experience. John Lesirge for organising and saving my bacon on the travel arrangements.

My parents and Doug Elkins, because without their inspiration and support I would never have been a Capoeirista and found this amazing art.

All my students and friends in Capoeira for their unrelenting support and enthusiasm. This is for you all.

Axe,
Instructor Ourico - William Thorburn