Capoeira

The Brazilian tradition that's sweeping through American dance

By Elaine Stuart

About halfway through a beginner capoeira class at the Alvin Ailey Extension, students pair off to put the movements they've been developing into practice.

The instructor, Tiba Vieira, lightly pounds a tall, wooden drum to keep the time. Facing one another, the men and women rock back and forth low to the ground until one executes a surprise roundhouse kick, forcing the other to land on their back. It's entirely improvised.

"You're gonna get a free haircut," Vieira quips after one student just barely clears his partner's sweeping leg. "We say we dance like a fight and fight like a dance," says Vieira, who's been teaching and performing the style for almost two decades. "The movement requires you to be strong and tough, but also delicate at the same time." That unique combination has attracted the attention of the modern dance world in recent years. Choreographers like Ronald K. Brown and Larry Keigwin have infused their work with hints of capoeira, and dancers have discovered the benefits of studying the form.

A typical class begins with a warm-up followed by a succession of elements of simulated combat, starting with the ginge, a foundational swinging movement. [See sidebar.] From there the students learn various kicks and strikes as well as defensive moves like dodges and rolls to react to their partner's attacks. At advanced levels cartwheels, flips, and other tricks are added to the mix.

Once you break into pairs to play (capoeira is characterized as a game of fakes and feints as opposed to a contact sport), there are no set sequences to fall back on. It's entirely improvised. "There's a lot of room for personal expression," Vieira says. "Once you own the rules you can break them and bring creativity to it. You don't have to move exactly like everyone else."

This is one of the big advantages for classical dancers, says Katmilah Turner, a ballerina turned capoeirista who is currently the sole American member of Dance Brazil. (Founded by Julión Vieira—Tiba's uncle and teacher—Dance Brazil has toured the U.S. for more than 25 years.) Turner was introduced to the style as a member of the Chico Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble in Denver, where she danced for five years after a stint with Urban Bush Women and touring with the Broadway show Aida. "Growing up I wasn't exposed to improve," she says. "As dancers, we always want to be prepared before we get out there. But with capoeira, you're constantly in the moment. It helped me learn to move without thinking so much."

And the movements themselves are nothing like classical technique. "In ballet everything is up, up, up," says Turner. "But in capoeira you have to get grounded and feel the earth and maneuver yourself around people." Leandro Silva, director of New York City-based Silva Dance Company, agrees. "It's a different type of strength and coordination," he says. "In capoeira there's lot of changing levels—going to the floor, coming up to a jump and torque, and then going back to the floor." Silva also teaches at Steps on Broadway, where, he says, many professionals take his class to improve the flow of their dancing. "It's beautiful to see a dancer do 300 turns, but to do 300 turns and flip in the air and connect the two movements without stopping—that takes you to a different level."

Other dancers study capoeira for the physical workout. Vieira notes that many classical and contemporary dancers lack upper body strength, something capoeira demands. With its acrobatic elements, "your hands become another set of feet," he says. And