

THE RIGHT MOVES

Authorities misunderstood and suppressed capoeira as it arose on the streets of Brazil, frequently arresting practitioners of the martial art. Assistant Professor of Dance Ana Paula Höfling thinks scholars have misunderstood capoeira's subsequent movement from the streets to the stage, an error she works to correct in her latest book, "Staging Brazil: Choreographies of Capoeira."

An acrobatic form with African roots, capoeira incorporates elements of dance, with dramatic leaps, flips, sweeps, and flying kicks. "Players alternate between strikes and defenses in an improvised and fluid call and response," says Dr. Höfling. "It is a combat game that requires intense focus and cooperation. There is nothing else quite like it."

Capoeira traveled from the Brazilian underclass to world stages in the 1960s, becoming "a moving postcard of Brazil," Höfling says. She became captivated as an undergraduate in California when she enrolled in capoeira classes at a school near her home. Her first instructor, Mestre Acordeon, studied with Mestre Bimba, "an amazing historical figure," she says, who created a well-known teaching manual and record.

Höfling has immersed herself in the practice and history of capoeira in the years since, making it the focus of her dissertation and her most recent book, published in 2019 by one of the top academic presses for dance studies. She interviewed practitioners across Brazil and in New York City. She spent time in libraries, newspaper archives, and people's homes, studying articles, photographs, and instructional record albums and manuals. "I tried not to reproduce claims that were made before without rethinking them," she says. The process corroborated some earlier beliefs about capoeira, but debunked others.

For example, some claim the transition from Brazilian streets to international stages robbed capoeira of its power and authenticity. Höfling challenges those arguments: "These spectacles were choreographed by capoeiristas; they were danced and performed by capoeiristas. Why is that not part of the practice?"

She tried moves based on illustrations and descriptions in the old manuals and records. Doing so helped with her analysis of larger themes involving cultural authenticity and how the form evolved. "Rethinking claims of what is and what is not African is part of my analysis. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson made claims about African dances in the 1970s that have become widely used in dance studies. But I think it's time to move on."

In her book, Höfling includes rarely seen historical photographs and shines a spotlight on previously unheralded capoeiristas. They include Emília Biancardi, the first woman to direct a folkloric ensemble featuring capoeira, and Mestre Canjiquinha, who taught a generation of capoeira instructors. Practitioners have thanked Höfling for those inclusions. "It's great when you see and hear the impact of your research," she says. "If people in the capoeira community are reading the book, that makes it worth it."

By Eddie Huffman • Learn more at go.uncg.edu/hofling • hfsbooks.com/staging-brazil



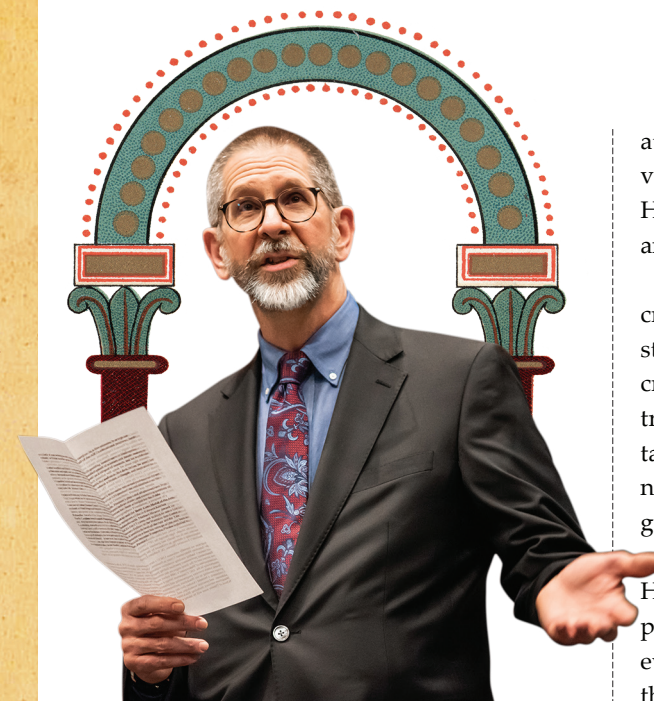
Höfling reenacts moves from a manuscript created by Mestre Vicente Pastinha.



Pastinha founded the first capoeira angola – or traditional-style – school in 1941.



He illustrated his manuscript by tracing the work of photographer Pierre Verger.



PROPHECY AS POETRY

Jews and Christians typically study the Bible – the world's most widely read book – to learn about their God and how they should live.

But how often do people open the Bible to enjoy it as art?

Dr. Christopher Hodgkins' newly published "Literary Study of the Bible: An Introduction," 25 years in the making, brings that possibility to the forefront for both scholars and ordinary readers.

"My book explores imagination throughout the Bible," the professor of English says. "And how – through lyric poetry, narrative, and drama – we are given kaleidoscopic ways of understanding God and his people."

The Wiley-Blackwell publication takes its name from a course Hodgkins has taught since 1994 and follows some of the structure of that class as well as the structure of his Renaissance literature courses.

He begins with short lyric poems, in this case the Psalms. Starting with those brief poetic works, he says, best prepares the reader to approach longer narrative sections, such as Genesis, in a more meaningful way.

The goal is to give readers a familiarity with the artistic and poetic conventions

at play. These include repetition, multiple viewpoints, and ironic dissonance, says Hodgkins, citing the creation story as an example.

"The Babylonians portrayed the creation of the universe as a deadly struggle for power, but the Bible retells creation as the work of a serene and transcendent poet, yet also of an intimate, tactile sculptor. At the heart of reality is not a death match, but an art of universal grandeur."

In "Literary Study of the Bible," Hodgkins often relates biblical texts to popular and literary culture – and to the even more ancient works that influenced them. "Looking back, we hear echoes of 'Gilgamesh' in Genesis, of Hammurabi's Laws in Exodus, and of Egyptian love lyrics in Solomon's Song."

Looking forward, he adds, "we can draw lines connecting Genesis and Jefferson, Moses and Martin Luther King, Job and George Bailey, Delilah and Dark Ladies, Ecclesiastes and existentialism."

When seen as "cosmic theater," Hodgkins says, "the Bible contains the great plot lines that still animate our favorite entertainments: from the alienated outsider hero to the king incognito; from the 'Jezebel' to the social prophet; and from the One Who Lived to the One Who Died. Luke Skywalker, Peter Parker, Harry Potter, Steve Rogers, Carol Danvers – they're all there."

The book also showcases recent scholarly findings on how many Biblical elements that appear chaotic, random, or overly repetitive to a modern Western reader have been carefully crafted over centuries of collaborative work.

"The Bible brings together the Hebrew commitment to multiple viewpoints, the Greek rational philosophical tradition, and the Anglo-Saxon statement of one true thing," Hodgkins says. "When you recognize these cultural traditions interweaving through time, you experience the scripture as a remarkable work of art."

By Susan Kirby-Smith
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