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Ben Largusa

A SIMPLE MAN OF KALI

BY JOSE FRAGUAS



Ben Largusa, one of the highest ranking Filipino martial artists in the world, simply describes himself as a man of kali — a system so effective in combat that some southern Philippine island tribes successfully resisted the armored steel might of the Spanish Empire for nearly four centuries. Kali is the source of all escrima styles and Largusa is widely regarded as the final word on this devastating and effective method of combat. As the only student of Grandmaster Floro Villabrille, the Philippine's most revered fighter and victor of numerous stick-fighting "death matches," Largusa learned a unique blend of methods, strategies, and techniques unknown to any other man in the world.

As his years of training passed, Largusa realized that his training under Grandmaster Villabrille was primarily comprised of fighting techniques and theory. Because the only sparring experience he had was with Grandmaster Villabrille himself, Largusa realized that he could not teach the system the way it was taught to him. The genius of Ben Largusa soon became apparent when he broke down, step by step and move by move, Grandmaster Villabrille's complete system of kali. In recognition of this accomplishment, Floro Villabrille gave Ben Largusa a signed legal document designating him the sole heir to the Villabrille method.

On March 8, 1992 Grandmaster Floro Villabrille passed away, and Tuhan Ben T. Largusa automatically became the second grandmaster of the Villabrille-Largusa Kali System. Currently living in Kauai, Hawaii, Grandmaster Largusa continues to perpetuate the warrior art of kali and the Filipino culture as part of the legacy handed down to him by one of the most legendary fighters of modern times, Floro Villabrille.



Tell us about Floro Villabrille.

Grandmaster Floro Villabrille was a man of great integrity. He had sound moral principles, and was very honest and sincere. He firmly believed that giving was more important than taking, and he proved that not only as a martial artist but also as a civilian by making numerous charitable contributions for athletic scholarships and equipment.

His first martial arts instructor was his uncle, Master Villagano, and after many years he decided to search for another instructor. Moving from island to island and village to village, he finally met the blind princess Josephina of the Pulahane tribe in Gandari, Samar. Honestly, it would take a book to describe this extraordinary man's traits, feats, and achievements. He came to Hawaii during his late teens and settled in Honolulu. He later married Trinidad Pontis and became a well-respected U.S. citizen because of his involvement in community affairs. He loved singing and dancing and was a natural performer on stage. He loved Frank Sina-

tra — whom he met while employed by MGM Studios in Hollywood. To maintain sharpness and harmony through the philosophy of "Individual Oneness" and "Universal Oneness," he would sometimes work out with karate, kung-fu, aikido, and judo men. Grandmaster Villabrille was also a proficient fisherman. Two of his specialties were throw-net and spear-fishing. Through kali training he developed powerful lungs that allowed him to stay underwater much longer than normal. The practice of kali and his self-development through the *tulong pisage*, or "triangle theory" enabled him to achieve high physical and metaphysical peaks. He contributed annual scholarships to a high school and provided the varsity football team with complete new uniforms. His advice was sought by political officials and candidates alike.

How did he decide to train under Princess Josephina?

After years of training under his uncle, Master Villagano, he decided to travel and find other teachers. As I said before, he went to the tribe of Pulahane, in Gandari.

This tribe had the reputation of being very wild, and Grandmaster Villabrille was warned by many people to not make the trip. But he was sure nothing bad would happen to him because he had a positive reason to go there, wanted to learn, and also knew how to talk to people. He recited his *oraciones* or "prayers" so he could calm other people's anger by speaking nicely to them. He considered himself well-protected by the *oraciones* and by his *pangkubal* or "talisman."

So when he got there, he approached the leader of the tribe and asked to meet the best kali teacher they had. The leader introduced him to a woman, blind from birth, named Josephina. After talking to her for a while, Grandmaster Villabrille told the leader that she was nice enough, but that he wanted to learn from their top master. The leader replied, "If you want to learn from the best, then you must study with her." Grandmaster Villabrille was surprised and could scarcely believe what the man was saying. Finally, with many misgivings, he agreed to try out the blind princess but to take it easy on her so as not to hurt her. Josephina approached and asked him to attack her any way he chose. The grandmaster was very skeptical and also afraid of hurting her, so he attacked very soft and slow. The princess easily blocked the attack and then told him to attack harder. This time grandmaster held back his power but not his speed, and was surprised how the princess could avoid the blows without being able to see. Finally, upon the princess's insistence, he started to hit fast and hard. Easily avoiding the blows, Josephina began to move in a way grandmaster never had seen before. What shocked him the most was that she was able to read the first blow with no previous contact or positioning information of any kind. He realized that the princess knew a



method of fighting different from any he had seen before.

From his training under the blind princess, Grandmaster Villabrille developed a deep understanding of new principles and concepts such as offensive zoning, defensive zoning, minor and major movements, options and extensions, fluidity and sensitivity, large angle and small angle fighting, and the running attack. These principles made him look at kali from a very new and different perspective. A more sophisticated method of fighting was in front of him, independent of strength, power, and speed. The theories, principles, and laws of physics that he observed from Josephina allowed him to discover new and effective ways of training and fighting. He realized that everything Josephina did had an underlying principle and that understanding these concepts and principles was the key to his own personal development.

When did he decide to create his own method?

After training with Josephina, his kali no longer looked like the one taught by his uncle, Master Villagano, so he decided to develop his own method. It's not that he invented or created a new style; he integrated the teachings of his uncle and the blind princess and formulated a cohesive structure and method once he went back to his home in Cebu.

What method did he use to train you in kali?

At the time I started training under Grandmaster Villabrille, the training was somewhat clandestine and I didn't have any sparring partners at all. For my training he used something he called the "Four Corners System," where I had to visualize imaginary opponents and react to different kind of attacks. Occasionally, he used to spar with me to check my progress in fluidity, angling, pivot points, *de cadena*, and my ability to react to an unexpected attack or counter. In his method of kali, we used different principles illustrated by geometrical designs like the "Figure 8," "360-Degree Circle," "four-leaf clover," et cetera. Once you understand how these geometrical patterns work and how to look for them when you face your opponent, you'll be amazed by the number of techniques and possibilities you have. All of these patterns are incorporated in the logo used by the Villabrille-Largusa method, but it takes a qualified instructor to



Floro Villabrille

"Death matches

did not always finish with one man dead. It was up to the winner to decide to kill the opponent or not. Grandmaster Villabrille allowed many of his opponents to live, especially those who showed him respect before the fight."



take you to the highest levels of application.

Were death matches truly to the death?

Let me clarify a misconception about death matches. I remember a top escrima instructor telling me that Felicísimo Dizon never competed in real death matches, because he lost one but was still alive. Well, it is true that he did compete, did lose, and is still alive. Death matches did not always finish with one man dead. It was up to the winner to decide to kill the opponent or not. Of course, the defeated fighter might be maimed and crippled with broken bones and serious injuries — but if the winner decided to let him live it was well within his rights. Grandmaster Villabrille allowed many of his opponents to live, especially those who showed him respect before the fight. There were some others that were very cocky and disrespectful so Grandmaster Villabrille had no mercy with them. It all depended on the attitude of the opponent. He would mirror their intentions back to them. Unfortunately, and I need to really address this point here, a couple of books have been written in which Floro Villabrille was

mentioned. One of these books stepped over the line of good journalism by saying he exaggerated some of his matches. He never had any reason to lie or exaggerate, nor did he ever have to ride on anyone's coat tails to gain fame or notoriety. Many fighters did not walk over to their fallen opponent and deliver the death blow. Don't forget that the majority of the old escrimadors who fought in these death matches were honorable men, who, if they had the chance to spare the life of their opponent, did so. Not all of Grandmaster Villabrille's death matches ended in death.

In these death matches, how often was the rest of the body used such as fists, elbows, knees, and feet, for kicks and punches?

Very often! Stick fighting doesn't mean to fight only with the stick. The complete use of the body was necessary. The stick opened a lot of possibilities but in short range many times a kick, knee, elbow or punch was used with success.

How many death matches did Grandmaster Villabrille have during his lifetime?



Forty-four total — which it doesn't mean he only fought 44 times. That is the official record but he fought many other times that were never counted in his official record. He was never defeated. At that time, fighting and challenges were a common way of testing your skills. Through a challenge, you could find out whether a particular person was able to teach you something or not.

What can you tell us about Grandmaster Villabrille's fight in Mindanao?

That's a very interesting story! Felicisimo Dizon was defeated by a tribal prince from Mindanao who was a Moro fighter. Dizon sent a telegram to Grandmaster Villabrille and told him about this fighter. Grandmaster Villabrille was 18 years old and was working on a ship in Australia. The prince was really good and people said that he was like a kangaroo because his footwork was so good that when you tried to hit him in once place, he would bound to another almost before you struck. Grandmaster Villabrille decided to fight this man after learning of Dizon's defeat. Not wanting Floro to get hurt or perhaps even killed, his uncle Villagano tried to change his mind, but with no success. Grandmaster Villabrille isolated himself in the countryside and started his training for the fight. Training in nature allows you to interact with the forces of the Earth. The energy of the universe is there for you to grasp and your mind focuses with more power — with more energy. Being aware of this, Grandmaster Villabrille always trained in the open air, feeling the energy of the universe surrounding him. He realized that if his opponent was so fast with his footwork, he should be able to lure him in and then move back at the same time he delivered a powerful blow. This tactic of hitting while retreating allowed him to develop a very particular style of footwork. After practicing and perfecting this strategy, he became very proficient in moving back and delivering a finishing blow. Needless to say that during this time he always recited his oraciones in order to receive the supernatural powers he needed to win. The oracion is a very important part of the art of kali and Grandmaster Villabrille always recited those even when he was not training for a fight.

What happened?

He came back from Australia and finally fought the prince. In the beginning the prince was successful in moving in and out, but Grandmaster Villabrille had developed the strategy of allowing him to get close enough to hit — and that's what happened. The prince kept trying to strike, but the grandmaster moved out of range and returned powerful blows. Very soon, his uncle Villagano, who was in his corner, realized that Grandmaster Villabrille could handle himself and encouraged him to "fight his fight." Finally, grandmaster hit the prince with a blow to the neck that finished the match.

It's very interesting that Grandmaster Villabrille developed a certain type of footwork very similar to that used by Cassius Clay

"Once you have all these qualities, you need to put the emotional aspect in there. When emotions are involved, then you're not drilling, you're **fighting.** Your attitude changes, like night to day."



(Muhammad Ali). Ali became the greatest boxer in history and you can see how he used to lure his opponents in and then counter them while he was moving back.

You mentioned that Grandmaster Villabrille never had a sparring partner and neither did you. How can you develop fighting skills without any sparring?

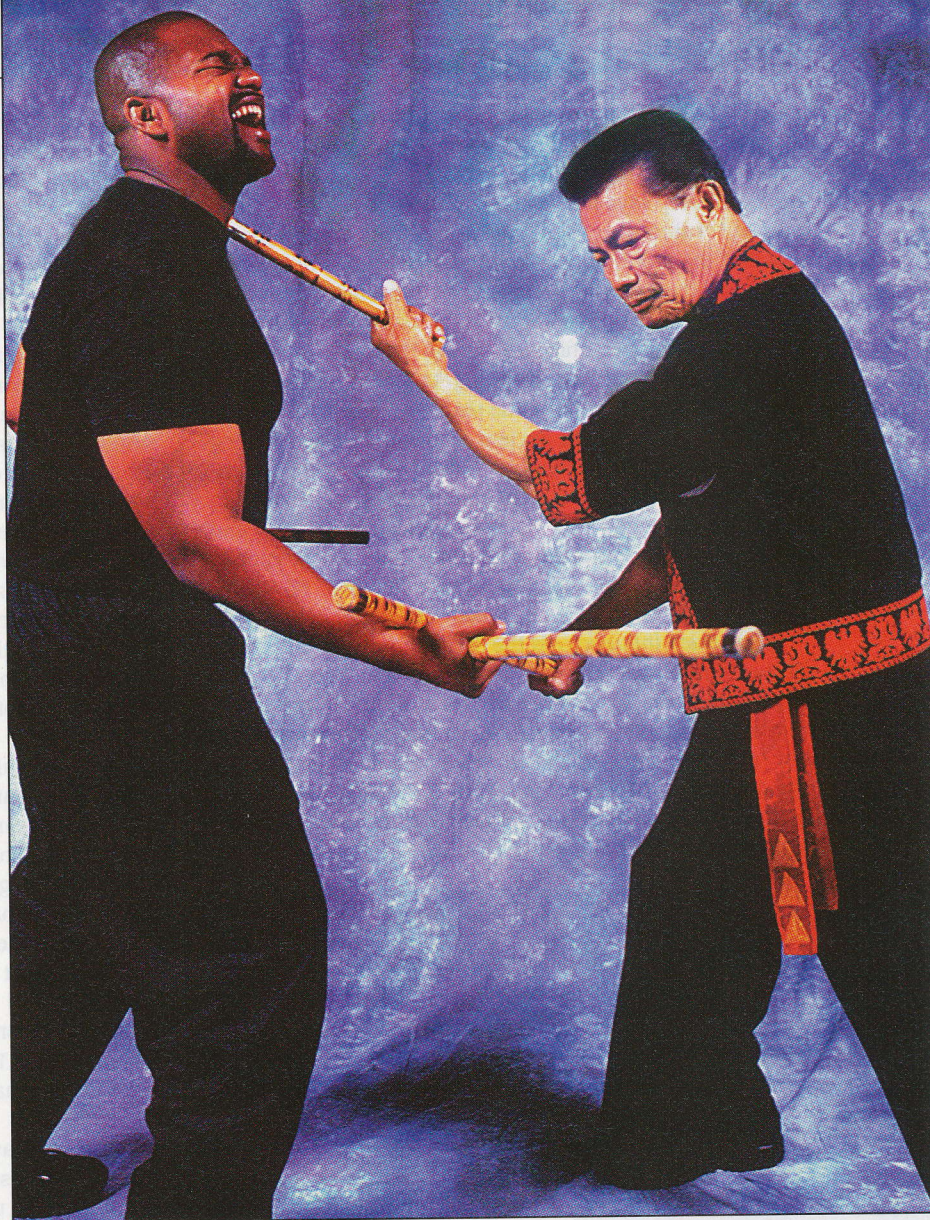
In order to be a good fighter it is not necessary to be fighting all the time. The actual fight can be broken down into many components such as reflexes, sensitivity, coordination, footwork, power, body angling and positioning, et cetera. If you don't have any of these it doesn't matter how many times you spar — you'll never become a good fighter. This is because your foundation is weak. Through drills, we can develop all the necessary qualities for fighting. It's like football: the players drill and drill for the whole week — but they don't necessarily play actual games every day. What is very important is once you have all these qualities, you need to put the emotional aspect in there. When emotions are involved, then you're not drilling, you're fighting. Your attitude changes, like night to day. Your body is ready but you have to make sure that your mind is also.

Through the proper drills used in kali, you can get really close to actual sparring. For instance, if you understand the drill progression in *sumbrada*, you'll see that when you incorporate feints, *enganos*, half beats, et cetera and keep increasing the speed — it becomes a fight. Everything is unpredictable and happens at high speed. You are actually drilling but it is close to a real fight. You can get seriously hurt if you're not careful. The higher the level of the drill, the closer to a real fight you are. The only difference is that when you have to fight, your mental and spiritual state is different.

When did you move to San Francisco?

When I was approximately 35 years old. Grandmaster Villabrille told me to train and spar with opponents of different styles. Once in the Bay Area I met some people from different karate and kung-fu styles. I remember being invited to a martial arts school and asked to

spar with practitioners of choy lee fut, wing chun, and praying mantis. I could easily handle these fighters and the student asked the teacher how long did he thought I had trained

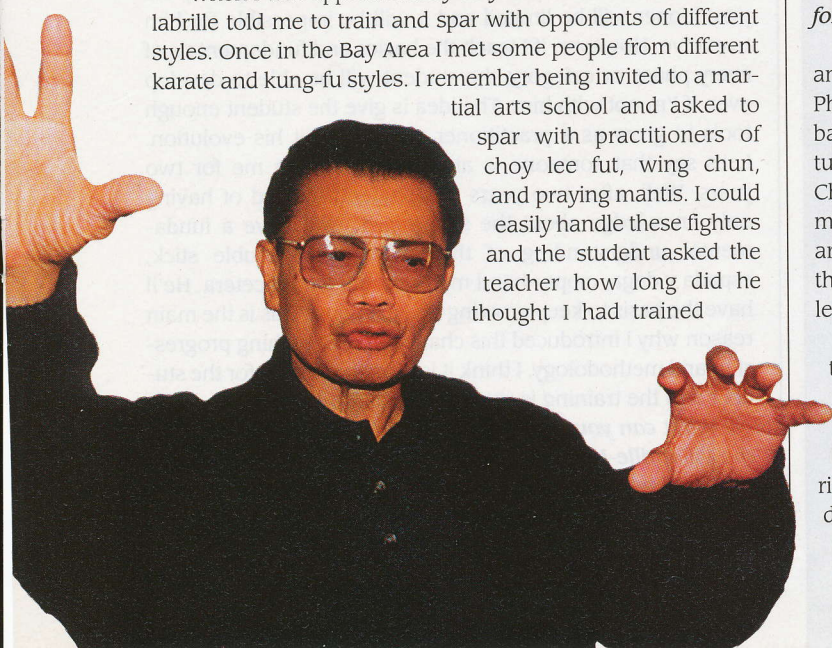


in kung-fu. The teacher said a minimum of ten years each! It was very funny. The principles and art handed down to me by Grandmaster Villabrille allowed me to effectively deal with these other martial arts styles.

Kali, escrima and arnis are terms used generally to describe the Filipino martial arts; are they different names for the same art or different methods as well?

Kali is the ancient form of the martial arts of Indonesia and the Philippines. Before the Spanish colonization, the Philippines was always part of the old Indonesian empires back to the Sri Vishayan Empire in Sumatra in the 5th century with Hindu-Malayan influence by Arab missionaries. Chinese records note that in 983 AD a ship owned or commanded by an Arab and loaded with valuable merchandise arrived in Khanlu (Canton) from Ma-I or Mo-yi (the Mayid of the Arabs). Mai is an island in the Philippines. Eventually this led to Ma-I Nila on Maynila and then to Manila.

The old art of kali was always played alongside its counterparts, the other Indonesian martial arts of silat, pentjak, and kuntao. Kali was the martial art practiced by the Indonesians during the Indonesian empires. Tribal chieftains such as the sultans, *datus*, and *rajahs* and their warriors fought with this ancient art. Magellan and his men were defeated by Chief Lapu-Lapu and his warriors with kali —



not escrima or arnis as is said and written in some places.

One theory says that the name came from "kalis," a bladed weapon; and the letter "s" was eventually dropped. Another theory says that "kali" came from the names "kali-radman," "kalirongan," and "pagkalikali." Still another theory says that the word comes from the first syllable of "kamut" (hand) and the first syllable of "Likok" (movements).

The names "escrima" and "arnis" came into existence during the Spanish colonization period. "Escrima" came from the French word "escrima" meaning "to fence." "Arnis" came from the Spanish word "arnes de mano" meaning "harness of the hands." Of course, the ancient art of kali includes fighting techniques of empty hands, feet, bladed weapons of a number of sizes and designs, hard rattan sticks, hard wooden weapons shaped like long blades, lances and staff, bow and arrows, and even explosive projectile weapons from guns to cannons. This makes an important difference. So "kali," "escrima," and "arnis" are not exactly the same.

How much influence did the Spanish culture really have on the Filipino martial arts?

Culturally, the Spanish had a lot of influence. As far as the martial arts, and kali in particular, not that much. Please note that I'm talking about kali. In other methods such as arnis and escrima they did have more influence. Kali was already developed when they arrived, and if you look at the different methods of fighting and training you'll see that the Spaniards were

mainly using what we call the small circle. Kali is based on the simultaneous use of the small and big circle. The Spaniards had big problems dealing with the kali men. The kali fighter used to move their weapons into the big circle, which completely surprised the opponent — since the Spanish had never seen an attack or defense from there — and placed them in a vulnerable position. This gave the kali fighter more than enough time to go to the small circle and finish the opponent.

Is the espada y daga method the basis of the Villabrille-Largusa system?

It is definitely a very important aspect of the art, and our system emphasizes this phase very much. The method of espada y daga opens many new possibilities to the student who has only trained in the single olisi (stick). It forces you to learn the use of the left hand in a more versatile way, for both defense and attack. In combat, the left hand become a very dangerous tool that can be used to finish your opponent. The very essence is that when facing an opponent with two weapons, the empty, or alive hand is in danger. It's very dangerous to block, monitor, or deflect an edged weapon with your empty hand. Using the espada y daga method, your left hand (where the dagger is in case you're right handed) can safely block the edged weapon without risk of being cut or damaged. Because of the training method, the left hand becomes more alive and reaches a new stage of combat skill. The possibility of seriously damage to the hand holding the dagger makes you aware of many other possibilities in combat. This aspect is definitely one of the most important in the Villabrille-Largusa method.

What about the sinawali — the double stick phase?

This phase offers a more aggressive approach. Both weapons are long and the reach is bigger than if you use the espada y daga. Therefore, is more commonly used for attacking, since you have the reach advantage on your side. Part of the strategy is similar — but only part. Don't think that because you have two weapons they are meant to be used the same. The sophistication in the use of the dagger is different from the use of the double sticks.

Some Filipino instructors teach the art starting with the single stick, then proceed to espada y daga, sinawali, dagger, et cetera. Do you teach phase by phase or you take the student through all the categories simultaneously?

In kali we try to make the student grow by themselves. If we teach only single stick and something happens to the teacher, or the student has to move to another place, the practitioner will be limited and it will be impossible for him to evolve. However, if I teach the basics and fundamentals of every phase or category, the student will be able to develop even if I'm not with him. The idea is give the student enough tools to grow as a practitioner and not limit his evolution. Let's say that someone is able to train under me for two years. Well, after two years this student, instead of having only knowledge about the single stick, will have a fundamental understanding of the single stick, double stick, espada y daga, empty-hand methods, dagger, et cetera. He'll have the basis to keep growing and evolving. This is the main reason why I introduced this change in the teaching progression and methodology. I think it is more beneficial for the student and the training is more enjoyable as well.

What can you tell us about the ranking system used in the Villabrille-Largusa system?

We have four different categories: the higher rank is called "apohang tuhan" and there is only one person in this



level, which is currently myself. Then we have the tuhan. Only one person can have this title also. From level 7 to level 10 they are called "Professor," and from level 1 to level 6 they receive the title of "Guro." There is no limit to the number of professors and guros, but there is a limit for tuhan and apohang tuhan.

Would you please explain the blood ritual ceremony?

In February of 1972, I gave the first public demonstration of the Villabrille system of kali in the Serramonte High School gymnasium, in Daly City, California. On that day I was presented with the red sash, elevating me to the rank of tuhan. This was made through the right of the blood ritual ceremony, which was presided over and performed for the first time before the general public by Grandmaster Floro Villabrille. In this ritual, blood is drawn from the person to be promoted and from the person presiding over the ceremony. Each participant writes their name from the drawn blood on a piece of paper. The paper is then burned and the ashes are mixed with red wine in a chalice. After the proper prayers are recited, each participant then drinks from the chalice. It is from this ritual that the blood of Grandmaster Floro Villabrille continues to flow from generation to generation. All certified guros of the Villabrille-Largusa system go through this ritual.

You were a good friend of the late kenpo master Ed Parker - what can you tell us about him?

Ed Parker was a great man and a great martial artist with a very open mind. I remember he asked me about the art of kali and said, "Stickfighting, right?" I replied, "No, there is much more than just sticks." And I proceeded to show all the empty-hand movements and techniques. He was very surprised and decided we should get together more often. He loved the kali hand movements and footwork. We used to get together with another friend who was a choy lee fut practitioner. When Ed Parker decided to put his tournament together he asked me to demonstrate there. He knew that the more people around me the better I did! I guess I enjoyed the adrenaline rush of being on center stage! Those were great times.

Is it true that you were approached by Ed Parker to be Kato in The Green Hornet?

Yes, that's correct. Ed Parker had a lot of friends in Hollywood and was teaching some of the top people in the industry. To make a long story short, I got a call from Ed saying that Hollywood needed a person for that role and he thought of two people — myself and Bruce Lee — but he decided to offer the part to me first and Bruce second. I told him that I truly appreciated his offer but that I couldn't answer right then — that I needed time to think about it. I talked with my wife and after seven days I called Ed back and declined the offer. He was disappointed I didn't accept but he understood. "I'll have to call Bruce Lee," he said. And the rest is history.

Why you didn't accept?

I'm a family man. I had a wife and kids and I was really enjoying their company and seeing them grow up. I was never attracted to the world of Hollywood — that world has always seemed shaky to me. My wife actually told me, "Go! Do it if you want!" But I decided otherwise. The Hollywood world is not something I was dying to get into. I decided that



my family was more important than fame. On the other hand, Bruce always wanted to be in Hollywood — it was his dream, he wanted it badly. He was ready to make any sacrifice to reach the top — and I wasn't. It was a matter of priorities, that was all. I met Bruce Lee several times after that — Bruce and I demonstrated together in Ed Parker's Internationals in 1964. But I never mentioned this to him and neither did Ed Parker. Bruce Lee deserves all the credit he has today because he took his opportunity and made things happen for himself and others. He helped to popularize the martial arts like nobody else before or after.

Did you ever regret not accepting Ed Parker's offer?

Not at all! I made a decision based on my personal principles; why I should regret anything? I had a great life, a good job I was truly enjoying, and a great family. Maybe I could have been a star, but maybe I would have lost something dear along the way. The things I could have lost were far more important to me than the glamour or stardom of Hollywood. It's true that sometimes you think, "What if had decided the other way?" But that is just human nature, right? Curiosity is human and that's all. No big deal.

It is obvious that many masters and grandmasters of other styles copied your movements, and added those to their systems without giving you credit. How do you feel about that?

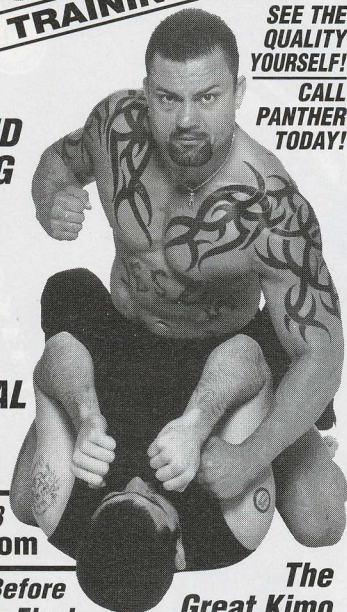
Well, let me put it this way, I could say they are copycats, but I would rather look at them as people who were touched by what I had to offer — they took kali into their lives and it improved whatever they were doing. As far as giving no credit to me — I don't really care. I know who I am, and what my art is all about. That's all I can say.

What to you feel about the idea of mixing different martial arts styles?

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BEN LARGUSA

You have to be careful with mixing styles. Sometimes it can be beneficial and sometimes not. It's important to have a strong base and foundation. Once you have this, it is not that necessary to incorporate many other things. You may look for some specific elements that help you to improve what you have, but you don't necessarily have to add more and more just for the sake of adding. If a martial art system is used for fighting then there's not too much to be added — if you do anything, I think "integrating" would be a better term. As I said, I don't really believe in studying many different styles of martial arts and putting them together to create a new system. Sometimes martial artists do this because they don't think what they have is truly useful. It's important to notice that a technique may look not effective at first sight, but after further analyses you may find out that a slight adjustment in the angle will make the difference. Sometimes a couple of inches in the body angle will give you a different view of what you're doing. What is important is to find a system that allows you to be efficient and competitive in the different ranges and situations. Then it is more a matter of polishing and refining what you have rather than adding movements to the style.

Did you modify what Grandmaster Villabrille taught you?

Not in the technical sense. I realized that in order to properly teach the art I needed a progression, a way of organizing the material so the students could go from A to Z and grow at the same time and at the proper pace. The way I was taught by Grandmaster Villabrille was a very intuitive one. I never had any sparring partners and all my training was one-on-one. When I started to teach I found out I couldn't apply the same method. Therefore, I decided to structure what I was taught by my teacher. It's not that I changed or altered the techniques, but I did organize them in a more cohesive and comprehensive way. I did this so the students in the class could follow a logical progression in their training, going from one step to another in an organized way. I understand that some people may think that some "original flavor" has been lost through this process. But I truly believe that nothing has been lost and a lot has been gained since this allowed me to reach many more people who were interested in learning the art of kali.

How important are the spiritual aspects of kali?

Very important. Grandmaster Villabrille mentioned that the oracion is as important as the physical techniques. Don't forget that a fighting art without philosophy and spirituality is only brutality. Without the spiritual and mental aspects one moves mechanically, like a robot, with no feeling or meaning. The oracion is important because it makes our minds stronger and develops our fighting spirit, what we can call plain old guts or courage. Everybody has a different degree of courage, and you're either born with or without it. Now with kali spiritual training one doesn't have to be born with courage — it can be developed. In the same way that our emblem, with the internal, external and rhythm triangles and circle, represents all the possible actions, and teaches how to break down the angles, attacks and counter-attacks when facing an opponent. The oracion allows us to reach the higher levels of spirituality and mental conditioning for training, fighting, and even daily life.

What did kali bring into your life spiritually?

A lot of things, but mainly peace, love, wholesomeness, and a oneness with others who love the art. Who could ask for anything more? ☯