



SECRET
SECRET
LIVES

THREE PROFESSORS DON'T
JUST SHINE IN THE CLASSROOM;
EACH HAS A TWIN PASSION



LAW PROFESSOR & DANCER

POET & BOXING COACH

ECONOMIST & MUSICIAN

HERE, THEIR DOUBLE LIVES
ARE REVEALED.

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In a family of doctors, Khiara Bridges is the black sheep, having earned a law degree and a doctorate in anthropology.



The Balletic Legal Scholar

❖ WORKING FOR A MORE JUST SOCIETY, DANCING FOR THE JOY OF IT

BY SUSAN SELIGSON

KHIARA BRIDGES COULD be called a law professor who dances or a dancer who teaches law, but both descriptions fail to capture the force of her twin passions. Whether the tall, graceful Bridges is conducting a Fourteenth Amendment seminar or turning en pointe as the Sugar Plum Fairy, she is thoroughly in the moment, both mind and body.

Although she doesn't broadcast her virtuosity in one discipline while immersed in the other, word occasionally gets out, and Bridges is faced with a question that won't go away: "How do you do it?"

"It's a crazy existence and the only one I know," says Bridges in her office in the School of Law tower on a typical afternoon—the associate professor of law had been up until 2 a.m. grading student papers, up again at dawn to work out with the Boston Ballet. Engaging and spry, Bridges describes herself as an unconventional ballet dancer. As she does hamstring stretches before a recent rehearsal, her dancer's taut contours are lost in a wash-worn hoodie and outsized red BU sweatpants. But that's not the only thing lost: under the voluminous clothes, Bridges' body is a

canvas of colorful tattoos that crawl around her ankle, up her flank, across her shoulders and back.

A Miami native who jokes that in a family of doctors, she's the black sheep, Bridges graduated as valedictorian from Spelman College, earning a degree in three years. She went on to obtain a law degree and then a doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University, where she was a member of the *Columbia Law Review* and the recipient of numerous awards. Folded into these pursuits was Bridges' training at the Miami City Ballet, the Atlanta Ballet, and when she got to New York, the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She has also written a book and worked as a model for Capezio dancewear.

Bridges chose this hectic and hyperactive life and revels in it. And she thrives on simple pleasures, like the quiet

hours she spends with her students' papers every weekend on the Amtrak Acela as it races along Long Island Sound to and from New York City, where she rehearses and performs. In a fiercely competitive calling, she has shared the stage with some of the finest dancers in and around New York, performing with Ballet Noir, the Hartford City Ballet, and the Brooklyn Ballet.

She takes on occasional classical roles—last winter she was the Sugar Plum Fairy in a production of *The Nutcracker*—but she is rarely another swan in the corps.

"I can feel like a fish out of water," Bridges says.

For one thing, classical ballerinas don't have tattoos. "None are merely decorative," says Bridges of her body art, her O-shaped leather earrings swaying like tire swings. The red hibiscus blooming on one leg pays homage to her home state of Florida. The writing that spills across her shoulder blade is the last line of her



MELODY KOMYEROV

theory and practice became all too real during the long hours she spent among poor, mostly immigrant women in that hospital. Now an associate professor on the College of Arts & Sciences anthropology faculty as well as at LAW, she says she decided not to practice law because she'd much rather research and write.

That existence could not have seemed more remote during a New York rehearsal for an upcoming New Haven performance with Classical Contemporary Ballet Theatre, founded in 2011 by artistic director

James Atkinson. Her solo, which she'll dance with a young corps de ballet from a performing arts high school, is a riveting, unpredictable mix of classical ballet moves, melded with modern and jazz. But Bridges dances it en pointe, elongated into brisk relevés and curling soulfully into moves way downtown from the clean, floaty George Balanchine ballets she and Atkinson revere.

Atkinson, also a classical ballet dancer, spotted Bridges at a master class three years ago and asked her to perform with his company. The two are friends as well as collaborators, and at this rehearsal at a midtown studio it's just the two of them, fine-tuning moves Atkinson choreographed to the music of electronic composer Lusine.

As they rehearse, Bridges sheds first the hoodie and then the sweats until her bare legs lunge, leap, and pulse in pink toe shoes. Several hours later, she grabs her bags and heads to Penn Station with little time to spare. "I have a mountain of papers to grade," she says, her exhausted body gathering steam.

"I used to dance and know in the back of my mind that I was good at something else, so I didn't have to be so good at dance, and vice versa, but at some point it shifted," Bridges says, "and I had to reach for excellence in both." She pursues both dancing and her academic efforts "doggedly," she says. "One doesn't take precedence over the other—each is all-consuming."

Among the tattoos on Bridges' body is one that reads, "Also reproduced is the possibility—the hope—of a different, more just, society."



thesis-inspired book, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization*, the results of her research in the obstetrics clinic of a huge, chaotic, but exceptional New York public hospital, where she spent 18 months and found herself pulled into the lives of the indigent women she studied. She took her time, going from being a fly on the wall to someone the women grew to trust and respect. Now, indelibly inked into her skin are the words, "Also reproduced is the possibility—the hope—of a different, more just, society."

Bridges' research at the hospital came after graduating from law school in 2002. She stayed on at Columbia to pursue a doctorate in anthropology—she was awarded a PhD in 2008—because she "wanted to learn about the law as culture." Laws may look impressive and thorough on paper, but what she finds compelling are people's experiences under those laws. Even laws with the best intentions are "permeated by isms," says Bridges, who focused her research on laws governing universal health care. The gap between

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of dancer Khiara Bridges at a rehearsal at bu.edu/bostonia.

A photograph of Robert Margo, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark suit jacket over a blue shirt. He is seated and playing a light-colored lute. The lute has a rounded body with a decorative sound hole and a long neck with many strings. In the background, a piano is visible on the left, and a rack of various stringed instruments, including mandolins and mandolas, is on the right. The setting appears to be a music room or library.

Robert Margo admits that part of the appeal of BU was Mugar Memorial Library's extensive collection of music.

The Musical Economist

❖ CAS PROF MOONLIGHTS AS CLASSICAL LUTE, MANDOLIN PLAYER

BY LESLIE FRIDAY

NEARLY EVERY SEAT is full in Robert Margo's Tuesday morning economics class. The department chair, with a horseshoe of downy white hair and theatrical eyebrows, paces methodically at the front of the classroom as he discusses the Solow-Swan growth model, a standard model of economic growth.

Margo tosses out a question about the constancy of population growth, largely to see how many of his students are still with him. Silence. It's around 9:30, and several of the students taking *Race and the Development of the American Economy: A Global Perspective* are leaning heavily on caffeinated beverages.

"Someone raise their hand in the usual student model so I can call on them," Margo says.

WEB EXTRA
Watch videos of Robert Margo playing and discussing the nuances of early classical instruments like the lute and mandolin at bu.edu/bostonia.

This is the Margo that most colleagues and students know. But there's another side to the eminent College of Arts & Sciences economics professor, one that wakes up early in the morning and stays up late at night to pluck away on his collection of early musical instruments, including at least a dozen classic guitars, Renaissance and baroque lutes, classical mandolins, mandolas, a waldzither, and a Russian domra. He's performed in local orchestras and duets and arranged scores for classical musical instruments of the works of Steely Dan and the Beatles.

"I steal time whenever I can," Margo says. "I find it's really important to have balance in life as you get older."

Although he keeps economics and music largely separate, he sees both his vocation and his avocation as forms of art.

Margo specializes in the economic history of the United States, focusing on the ways that education, race, and the labor market have intertwined. He believes there is a beginning, a middle, and an ever-evolving end to this story, not unlike a musical score.

On a Tuesday night last fall, Margo drove an hour south to a blue-collar section of Providence, R.I., where he hauled instrument cases into a red building bearing the sign "Church of the Mediator. All Are Welcome." Inside, two dozen musicians were tuning mandolins, mandolas, a mandocello, classical guitars, and a double bass, sending a just-shy-of-harmonious cacophony to the vaulted ceiling.

Dressed in black, Margo took a seat in the center of the first row, one of several mandola players in the Providence Mandolin Orchestra (PMO). The group was practicing an Argentinian tango called “Oblivion,” written by Astor Piazzolla and arranged by Margo, for a performance in Baltimore, Md.

Music director Mark Davis instructed the group to take it from measure 68. With a flick of his baton, the amorphous hum in the room became a sweet, beckoning tune.

The group moved to other pieces, *Neponset Valley Suite*, composed by PMO member Owen Hartford, a former School of Education instructor of educational media and photography, and *Sinfonia a pizzico* by Victor Kioulaphides. Margo switched instruments, pulling his new waldzither from its case. Around him, musicians leaned in to get a closer look. He later joked that like many players, he suffers from MAS: mandolin acquisition syndrome.

The first instrument Margo ever picked up, back in the third grade, was a guitar. He stuck with it, playing jazz guitar as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan and then as a Harvard grad student.

A decade ago, while teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, he began studying classical guitar. He later moved to

Nashville, “guitar heaven,” to teach at Vanderbilt University. There he picked up the mandolin, a natural choice in a city where bluegrass reigns. The instrument also appealed to the history buff in him. “In the early 20th century,” he says, “it was the most popular instrument in the United States by far.”

Margo stumbled upon a community of mandolin players in Nashville (he once played with Chet Atkins), and found a second community when he

arrived at BU in 2005. Part of the University’s appeal for him was Mugar Memorial Library’s extensive music collection, which he says rivals Harvard’s. It doesn’t hurt either that the city hosts the biennial Boston Early Music Festival.

Every week Margo treks to Providence to practice with the orchestra, which gives at least four major annual concerts, and he performs regularly with the Boston Classical Guitar Society. He also plays occasional duets around Boston with classical singer Wendy Silverberg, a Cambridge elementary school music teacher, whom he met at a “band camp for grown-ups.”

When Margo is not playing music, he’s arranging it. He has transformed works from the Beatles, Steely Dan, and Crosby, Stills & Nash into scores for the PMO. When audience members hear “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” in a concert hall, they look confused. “Then,” he says, “they realize, oh my god, they’re playing this on a mandolin.”

Wait until they hear Radiohead, the next group whose music he’d like to arrange for early music instruments.

Margo says he has never strummed his mandolin or lute for his students. He has, however, included an extra-credit question about early music on his exams. “Normally,” he says, “no one gets it right.”

Margo jokes that like many players, he suffers from MAS: mandolin acquisition syndrome.

The Pugilist Poet

❖ A TRANSLATOR OF PERSIAN VERSE FINDS RAPTURE IN THE RING

BY SUSAN SELIGSON

AMONG SASSAN TABATABAI’S many talents, including those as a poet, a teacher, and a translator and scholar of medieval Persian literature, is the ability to time three minutes in his head accurately within a nanosecond. Call it a gift or a curse, this is what happens when a man gets hooked on boxing.

Since he was in graduate school at BU, Tabatabai (CAS’88, GRS’94, ’15, UNI’00), a College of Arts & Sciences department of modern languages and comparative literature lecturer in Persian and a humanities instructor in the Core Curriculum, has thrown himself into sparring, coaching, and recently, refereeing. Although these days his time in



Sassan Tabatabai’s poetry has been described as works of “delicate mourning, exile, and love.”

the ring is devoted mainly to coaching, as a fighter he was dubbed “the Professor.” He was pummeled, as he puts it, in his first fight, and later found out why: “I saw my opponent from that night in a boxing magazine ranked as a top 10 professional fighter in all of New England,” says Tabatabai, who picked himself up and went on to win his second and third fights. He stopped competing altogether after the death from cancer of his first trainer and mentor, Mikhael Grigoryan, who had been the boxing coach of the Olympic team in the former Soviet Union.

A licensed coach with the U.S. Amateur Boxing Federation, Tabatabai was drawn to boxing because it offers a workout that’s never boring.

Born in Tehran, Iran, Tabatabai has lived in the United States since 1980. He is the author of *Father of Persian Verse: Rudaki and His Poetry*. Fellow poet Rosanna Warren, BU’s Emma Ann MacLachlan Metcalf Professor of the Humanities and a CAS professor of English and romance studies, has described his verse as works of

“delicate mourning, exile, and love” — “sensuous, rueful, and clear.”

For much of the past year, Tabatabai, poetry editor of the *Republic of Letters*, a literary journal cofounded by Saul Bellow (Hon.’04), has been deep into the painstaking, often emotional work of translating the memoirs of his grandfather, Assadollah Tayefeh Mohajer, who served in the Iranian army until the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Coaxing a narrative out of 300 or so pages of Persian script handwritten on paper from legal pads to Post-it notes, Tabatabai gathered the material as the foundation for his editorial studies thesis at BU’s Editorial Institute for what will be his second doctorate; he has degrees in political science, international relations, and Persian literature and history. Boxing and coaching are liberating antidotes to this exacting pursuit, he says.

Tabatabai works out and coaches at the Ring, a boxing club on Commonwealth Avenue, next door to the Paradise Rock Club. It is a congenial place, a cheerful expanse of rings and work-

out space pulsing with hip-hop music and the din of men and women panting and grunting as they spar, jump rope, or battle a punching bag, taking alternate left and right hooks at spiffing speed. His T-shirt growing increasingly damp as he goes through his warm-up moves, from footwork to shadowboxing, 45-year-old Tabatabai explains breathlessly that he’s slowing down—age, work, and life intrude. “Now that I’m older it takes longer to loosen up the legs,” he says. “I used to work out three days a week, but now I get here whenever I can.”

Boxing is many things to Tabatabai, but it has never been about venting anger. “You learn what kind of person you are,” he says. “It’s just physical capability against physical capability.”

And although he is generally an upbeat person, boxing has something else going for it. It makes him happy. “Nothing fixes my mood like time in the ring.” ■

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of the two sides of Sassan Tabatabai, working out at the Ring and teaching in the classroom, at bu.edu/bostonia.

