

# MERLI V. GUERRA

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AWARD-WINNING CHOREOGRAPHER • INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST • JOURNALIST • GRAPHIC DESIGNER

## BIOGRAPHY

**Merli V. Guerra is an award-winning choreographer and interdisciplinary artist.** She is a professional dancer with a background in ballet, modern, and classical Indian dance, and Co-Founder and Artistic Director of Luminarium Dance Company—an award-winning contemporary dance company based in Boston, MA, that is regularly hailed for its unique combination of dance and light. Guerra has performed lead roles with notable companies on international tours to India (2007, 2012) and Japan (2009), while her choreographic works, screendance films, and interactive art installations have been presented by more than 80 events across the country (in California, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and abroad in Canada, Germany, and Italy. Her work extends beyond the traditional stage; her site-specific *Night at the Tower* project was honored as one of just three projects (out of 5,000+ across the state in 2014) to receive the Massachusetts Cultural Council's prestigious 2015 Gold Star Award. Beyond choreography, Guerra is a graphic designer and freelance arts journalist, having spent five years as Art Director of *Art New England* magazine, followed by her recent work at Princeton University Press. As a writer, she is Senior Contributor to *The Arts Fuse* (curating its weekly "top pick" dance events across New England), and a ballet and contemporary dance critic for the Toronto-based *Fjord Review*, and Vancouver-based *Dance International* magazine. Guerra frequently acts as a guest choreographer, artist, panelist, teacher, and advocate for the arts, including a special invitation from the Massachusetts Cultural Council in 2016 to present her choreography and speak on a panel at the Massachusetts State House, urging legislators to further support the arts. After relocating to Central New Jersey in 2017, Guerra was elected to serve on the Board of Dance New Jersey (a state-wide nonprofit resource) as a thought leader for new public programming. She now continues her work in Boston in addition to her recent work in the Mid-Atlantic, and is an MFA in Dance candidate at Rutgers University.

## SELECT WORK EXPERIENCE

### **Co-Founder, Artistic Director, and Choreographer, Luminarium Dance Company – Boston MA / Central NJ (2010 – Present)**

Creates new choreography for company performances and outside commissions. Has produced 19 major productions and had choreographic works, films, and site-specific installations presented by 80+ events across the country (CA, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, NYC, PA, RI, VT), and abroad in Canada, Germany, and Italy. Directs productions; manages budgets. Teaches Intermediate/Advanced level modern dance master classes combining modern, ballet, and classical Odissi Indian dance. Proposes and implements projects; writes grants; and organizes fundraisers. Leads annual educational outreach programming. Received independent 501(c)(3) non-profit status in 2012.

### **Board Member, Dance New Jersey – State of New Jersey (2018 – Present)**

Elected to serve on the Board of Dance New Jersey (a nonprofit resource for the state's expansive dance scene) as a thought leader for new public programming and fundraising events.

### **Senior Contributor / Writer, The Arts Fuse, Fjord Review, Dance International – Boston MA / New York City / New Jersey / Philadelphia PA (2015 – Present)**

Critic and feature story writer for Northeast arts events and dance productions, including Boston, NYC, and Philadelphia. Guest moderator for post-performance panels.

### **Director, Cultural Community Outreach Project – Commonwealth of Massachusetts (2012 – Present)**

Innovates and leads unique annual projects integrating history, choreography, and the arts to celebrate a town's heritage and cultural landmarks; custom-tailored to each community; free and accessible for all ages. Past projects include: site-specific choreography; interactive art installations; a film series; and a self-published storybook.

### **Co-Chair, Arlington Cultural Council – Arlington MA (2015 – 2016)**

Appointed by Town of Arlington's Board of Selectmen and elected Co-Chair in January 2016. Planned and led monthly council meetings. Directed council's application review of proposed projects, establishing criteria for selection and funding eligibility. Mentored grant applicants prior to application process and guided selected projects through fiscal year. Projects included: educational programs, concerts, public art, festivals, and lectures in schools, libraries, elder care facilities, town halls, and parks.

### **Grant Adjudicator, Dance Review Panel – Cambridge Arts Council, Cambridge MA (2015)**

Reviewed 2016 grant cycle applications; led team discussions of proposals; and determined projects for funding.

### **Grant Adjudicator, Dance, Theatre & Multidisciplinary Arts Review Panel – Somerville Arts Council, Somerville MA (2014)**

Reviewed 2015 grant cycle applications and determined projects for funding.

### **Board Member, Center for Arts at Armory – Somerville MA (2013 – 2014)**

Reprioritized the center's mission and institutional needs. Brainstormed new community arts programming; weighed in on budgetary and facility issues to keep the center thriving.

## SELECT TEACHING EXPERIENCE

### **Modern Dance Teacher, Luminarium Dance Company – Boston MA (2010 – Present)**

Teaches Intermediate/Advanced level modern dance master classes combining modern, ballet, and classical Odissi Indian dance.

### **Part-Time Lecturer, Rutgers University – New Brunswick NJ (2019)**

Teaching a semester-long rotation course in classical Indian dance (in the Odissi style) for college students at the beginner level.

### **Odissi Teacher, Rider University – Lawrenceville NJ (2018, 2019)**

Taught master classes in classical Indian dance (in the Odissi style) for college students at the beginner level as part of the World Dance & Improvisation course.

### **Odissi Teacher, Rutgers Preparatory School – Somerset NJ (2018)**

Taught grades 9-12 classical Indian dance (in the Odissi style) for the International Dances & Choreography class. Set work on the students for the school's annual Diwali festival.

### **Odissi Teacher, Endicott College – Beverly MA (2014, 2015)**

Taught master classes in classical Indian dance (in the Odissi style) for college students at the beginner level as part of the World Dance Cultures course.

### **Creative Ballet, Dance, & Theatre Teacher, Cambridge Performance Project – Cambridge MA (2010 – 2011)**

Innovated and taught creative programming in dance and theatre for underserved communities within the Cambridge, MA, public school systems. Led programs for ages 2-12.

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## CHOREOGRAPHY

### Recent Self-Produced Performances:

- HIVELAND – Multicultural Arts Center, Cambridge MA (2018)
- Kinetic Craft – Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton MA (2017)
- Portal: Stories from the Edge – Boston University Dance Theater, Boston MA (2016)
- 300 Years – Longfellow's Wayside Inn, Sudbury MA (2016)
- ChoreoFest – Julie Ince Thompson Theatre, Dance Complex, Cambridge MA (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)
- Spektrel – Multicultural Arts Center, Cambridge MA (2015)
- The Sleeprunner – Multicultural Arts Center, Cambridge MA (2014)
- Night at the Tower – Arlington Reservoir, Arlington MA (2014)

### Recent Invitational Commissions & Performances:

- Guest Choreographer – Rider University, Lawrenceville NJ (2019)
- Friends of Clermont Commission – Clermont Historic Site, Germantown NY (2018)
- Outlet Dance Project Commission – Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton NJ (2017)
- The Rosoff Awards Commission – The State Room, Boston MA (2017)
- Ars Nexa Tempora Commission – Boston New Music Initiative, Somerville MA (2017)
- Wiscasset Art Walk Commission – Wiscasset ME (2014, 2015, 2016)
- Outside the Box Festival – Boston MA (2016)
- TEDxCambridge Commission – Boston Opera House, Boston MA (2016)
- Southern Vermont Dance Festival – Latchis Theatre, Brattleboro VT (2015)
- Guest Choreographer – Emerson College, Boston MA (2015)

## SELECT PUBLIC ARTS PROGRAMS

### Kinetic Craft, Fuller Craft Museum – Brockton MA (2017)

During this weeklong residency at the Fuller Craft Museum, Guerra hired local dancers to perform from 10am-5pm, daily, throughout the museum. She constructed a series of "breathing installations"—a concept first developed by Guerra back in 2011 with her *Untitled Breathing Installation #1* at the Boston Center for the Arts' *Movement at the Mills*. For her *Kinetic Craft* residency, Guerra built and curated a total of five installations highlighting the five crafting elements: Textiles, Ceramics, Wood, Glass, and Metal. The event attracted a new demographic to the museum, perusing at their leisure as dancers from each installation performed and interacted with those passing by. *Kinetic Craft* also included Guerra's *Metal Installation*: a 10x10' wind chime that viewers set in motion using every part of their bodies—from heads to toes.

### ChoreoFest, Julie Ince Thompson Theatre, Dance Complex – Cambridge MA (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)

Guerra's Luminarium Dance Company pioneers this unique annual festival, in which five dance companies join Luminarium in locking themselves inside the famous Dance Complex overnight to create new work for a performance the following afternoon. Viewers are encouraged to watch the process unfold via live stream online throughout the 24-hour period. More than 250 dancers accompanying 24 companies and choreographers have participated in this event.

### 300 Years, Longfellow's Wayside Inn – Sudbury MA (2016)

This event celebrated the 300th anniversary of Longfellow's Wayside Inn in Sudbury with outdoor performances on the grounds. Guerra created three new works honoring the inn, its history, and the land, as well as a new experimental film integrating slow motion dance with flour in honor of the Wayside's famous grist mill. She also commissioned local singer/songwriter Mali Sastri of the renowned band Jaggery to create a new piece for voice and cello for the event.

### Amherst Storybook Project, Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art – Amherst MA (2015)

Guerra paid homage to the Amherst region's literary roots through the creation of a new storybook for children that was created through community donated artwork and poetry. The book and corresponding dance performance debuted during November 2015 at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

### Especially for Me, The Discovery Museums – Acton MA (2015)

A free evening for families with visually impaired children, *Especially for Me* offered visitors an opportunity to interact with museum exhibits hands-on, including a specially commissioned version of Luminarium Dance Company's *DANCE+Technology* class. Guerra and co-director Kimberleigh A. Holman verbally guided students along a series of movement exercises through a light sensor installation created by collaborator Ed Bokhour. Participants could hear when their peers twirled, jumped, or simply lifted an arm as each movement triggered an array of musical chords and melodies.

### Night at the Tower, Arlington Reservoir Water Tower – Arlington MA (2014)

Guerra turned Arlington's historic water tower at Park Circle into an enormous 60-foot-tall screen, showcasing art from the community, music, and dance, to highlight this local landmark. The project was well received, with more than 300 in attendance, and was chosen as one of just three (out of 5,000+ programs throughout the state in 2014) to receive the Massachusetts Cultural Council's prestigious 2015 Gold Star Award for its artistic excellence and impact on the community.

### Threading Motion Project, New England Quilt Museum – Lowell MA (2013)

Using projected images of quilts, Guerra created a series of short films combining the art of quilting with dance. The film series was shown at the gallery during its *Silk* exhibition, with a live performance during its opening. The films were soon requested by the San Jose Quilt Museum in California to be shown in an exhibition later that same year.

### Celebration of Preservation Project, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House – Concord MA (2012)

A site-specific piece for the Centennial Celebration at Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, entitled the Celebration of Preservation Project. Over the course of several months, Guerra gathered voice recordings from the museum's many tourists (both local and abroad). These recordings were then turned into a soundscore for an outdoor piece, which was presented once on the hour outdoors on the lawn.

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## PERFORMANCE WORK

### Luminarium Dance Company, Co-Founder, Artistic Director & Choreographer – USA (2010 – Present)

Performed in and produced 19 major productions in the past nine years.

Performed in and presented work at more than 80 events across the country.

### Nataraj Dancers, under Guru Ranjanaa Devi – USA & Japan (2007 – Present)

Performed with the company on its Japan Tour, Summer 2009:

シルクロードの古典舞踊 (*Classic Dances Along the Silk Road*)

American performances include:

Songs of the River

Offerings

Diwali Festival of Lights

The Ramayana

Mudra: The Gesture Speaks

### Deborah Abel Dance Company, Lead Company Member – USA & India (2011 – 2014)

Performed in Deborah Abel's *Calling to You*. *Calling to You* was presented in Boston at the Tsai Center in March 2012 and again in January 2014, and was taken on tour across India by invitation of the Indian government in December 2012, performing in the following prestigious venues:

Deep Smriti Auditorium, Jaipur

Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi

Rukmini Arangam Theater at Kalashetra Foundation, Chennai

## SELECT AWARDS & HONORS

### Panelist, Screendance – Women in Dance Leadership Conference, Philadelphia PA (2019)

Guerra's screendance films *The One I Keep* and *What seems so is transition* have been selected for screening at the 2019 Women in Dance Leadership Conference in Philadelphia (October 2019) with an invitation to speak on the screendance panel.

### Award Recipient, Mary Lyon Award – Mount Holyoke College Alumnae Association (2019)

Given to young alumnae (15 years or less since graduation) who "demonstrate exceptional promise and sustained achievement in their life, profession, and community, and whose work embodies the humane values which Mary Lyon exemplified in her life and inspired in others." Awarded by the Alumnae External Achievement Awards Committee.

### Award Finalist – Festival Cinematica: Immagine in Movimento, Ancona, Italy (2019)

Guerra's film *Synchronic* is one of 14 award finalists in this year's upcoming screendance festival in April 2019.

### Grant Recipient, Local Cultural Councils – Massachusetts Cultural Council (2012 – 2019)

15-time grant recipient for the creation of new work throughout Massachusetts, with a focus on projects that bring dance and the arts to underserved communities.

### Featured Artist – WomenCinemakers, Berlin, Germany (2018)

Guerra is featured in a special edition of periodical *WomenCinemakers* highlighting artistic films by noteworthy female artists hailing from Tokyo, Amsterdam, and Athens, among others.

### Choreographer, TEDxCambridge – Boston Opera House (2016)

Commissioned by TEDxCambridge to choreograph the opening act for its Spring 2016 TEDx Talks. Held for 2,600 viewers—the largest TED event in history, worldwide.

### Panelist, Local Cultural Council 2016 Statewide Assembly – Massachusetts State House (2016)

Invited by the Massachusetts Cultural Council to speak on a panel urging prominent state legislators to continue funding the arts, alongside distinguished arts colleagues Ben Taylor (musician), Scarlet Keys (Associate Professor, Berklee College of Music), and keynote speaker Sally Taylor (musician and founder of Consenses).

### Award Recipient, Gold Star Award – Massachusetts Cultural Council (2015)

Innovated and championed *Night at the Tower* (Arlington MA)—Guerra's largest Cultural Community Outreach Project to date—which was chosen as one of just three projects (out of 5,000+ across the state in 2014) to receive the Massachusetts Cultural Council's coveted Gold Star Award.

### Panelist, Breaking Barriers: (Re-Defining) Entrepreneurship Conference – Mount Holyoke College (2014)

One of four alumnae invited to speak on the *Innovation in Art & Design* entrepreneurship panel. Keynote speaker: Alicia Stewart, Senior Producer of CNN's *In America*.

### Grant Recipient – The Bob Jolly Charitable Trust (2014)

Received for the development of new work that provided "access to, appreciation of, education about, and exposure to the work of the Greater Boston theater community."

### "Unsung Hero" – Improper Bostonian (2013)

Praised as an "unsung hero" in the Boston arts scene in the Spring 2013 issue of *Improper Bostonian* magazine.

## EDUCATION

MFA in Dance Candidate (Class of 2021); Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University.

BA, Dance and Studio Art (Graphic Design and Film); Mount Holyoke College; Phi Beta Kappa, Magna Cum Laude.