

## TEACHING STATEMENT

Merli V. Guerra, MFA

I come to dance education as a life-long interdisciplinary practitioner, educator, and creative researcher, dedicated to guiding students at all levels towards self-achievement. During my seven years of work as an historic interpreter in museums, I grew to recognize three key elements necessary to fully engage visitors: humor, sincerity, and commonality with visitors. Conducting tours as a two-way conversation rather than a one-way tutorial, I forged a memorable relationship with museum guests, and they with the history of the space. In the decade that followed, I founded my dance company in Boston, MA, while performing with professional companies on tour to India and Japan. Whether leading my own company or performing for others, I again found these three tools of humor, sincerity, and commonality to diffuse tension; *hear* others' needs, be they dancers or audiences; and spark interest through relatability. As my career has progressed to educating BFA dance majors, minors, and non-majors, I continue to employ these three pedagogical tools while expanding my mission to ignite genuine interest, provide wholistic learning (intellectual, emotional, and physical), and nurture individuality through interdisciplinary praxis.

As a professional performer in classical Odissi Indian dance, I am regularly hired to teach beginner-level Odissi courses at colleges and universities for undergraduate dance majors. Often, the traditional *guru-shishya* relationship comes across to young American students as divisively strict and dampens their enthusiasm to engage in this non-Western art form. To counter this cross-cultural challenge, I have developed a non-traditional teaching method for Odissi that is based on encouragement and experimentation, rather than reprimand and hierarchy. In this way, my pedagogy developed relatability as paramount to my Odissi teaching. Unlike most practitioners of the form, I began my Odissi training while an undergraduate (ballet-focused) dance major through a beginner course akin to the one I now teach. This uniquely positions me to fully understand and articulate the verbal cues and kinetic examples necessary to aid Western-trained students at this juncture of learning. This is a deeply complex art form, yet my classes are filled with sounds of laughter and determination, as a result.

My wholistic approach encompasses both physical and mental engagement. My wholistic teaching approach includes physical elements from both my Western and Eastern training, guiding students through isolation exercises for their eyebrows, fingers, chins, and eyes to awaken muscles not commonly given sole attention. I begin new projects with time devoted to personal and group reflection through freeform writing activities and group discussion—engaging students in intellectual and emotional discovery. Students are then encouraged to incorporate all of these elements into their phrase work and choreography, resulting in expanded movement vocabularies and prolific artistic findings. My inclusive approach to the physical, intellectual, and emotional components of the body and soma brings a heightened level of dancer to the classroom, while preparing students for professional work in the field.

At the core of my work, I am an interdisciplinary creative researcher and pedagogue. My professional career encompasses dance, film, installation art, writing, and graphic design—all of these tools find their way into my choreographic works, resulting in versatility as an educator. My community-engaged creative research through Luminarium additionally aids the breadth of my work, and I regularly engage my students in the creative development of these local public programs, bringing them on as performers or administrative interns. Whether teaching modern, ballet, Odissi, dance composition, dance-on-camera, or dance appreciation, I actively expose my students to interdisciplinary practices, teaching them to combine dance with elements such as design, history, nature, architecture, video projection, sound, technology, and science. Through this interdisciplinary praxis, students develop tools to further their artistic visions and express their individual voices within a constructive atmosphere.