

# Ludlow legacy leads to 'Constellation Stories' performance event

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SPRINGFIELD — The Springfield Museum's Seymour Planetarium turned 85 this year, an anniversary that, for Ludlow native Merli Guerra, a choreographer and co-founder of the Luminarium Dance Company, represents a family legacy.

"I wanted to celebrate it and honor it in some way," Guerra said.

She described her father, John Guerra, biking back and forth to the planetarium from his mother's house on Cady Street and said that his love of astronomy was what got her interested in the subject.

The Guerra family is something of Ludlow royalty, descending from Fran Guerra, of whom Merli said, "I guarantee you everyone in town will know her name. She taught every single person on the planet piano. I have been in Washington, D.C., and someone said, 'Guerra? You aren't by any weird chance related to Fran Guerra of Ludlow, Mass.?'"

To coordinate the program, Guerra met with Planetarium Manager Kevin Kopchynski, Project Manager Ryan Mahoney and Director of the Science Museum Mike Kerr, who all agreed to the project, as did Jenny Powers, the new director, who Guerra described as "equally supportive."

"I saw that (the planetarium was) turning 85, so I reached out and said, 'Would you be interested in me celebrating you through dance?' and they said, 'Oh, my gosh, we are turning 85 next year! Yeah, come on in!'"

The afternoon program was dedicated to exploring different cultures' interpretations of astronomy.

"I know for myself growing up, I was predominantly familiar with Greco-Roman mythology," Guerra said, "so when we decided to do this, it was important for us to bring in cultural representations



Turley Publications photos by Marcelo Gusmao  
**Choreographer Merli Guerra (center) pictured with her mother Suzanne (left) and father John (right).**

of the night sky from around the world."

The program with Guerra's "The Universe in my tiny hands," which covered 20th century American mythology, was followed by the first of two performances of "Celestial Stories," a choreography which adapts myths from Estonia and Asia, particularly China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. This was followed by "Taíno Solos," a moving presentation of traditional Taíno songs and dances for the sun and stars by Chali'naru Dones and her son Vinny "Tata'niki" Iraheta and finally "Celestial Gift," performed by Henoch Spinola, which depicts the journey of Africans from Cape Verde who were offered their freedom in exchange for becoming whalers.

Dones was quick to say that her segment was not a performance, but "A presentation; I'm never performing."

"There's a lot more connection to (the Taíno) people when it comes to constellations prior to Columbus," Dons said.

"We navigated the waters thousands of years before he ever did. We already did exchanges with our neighboring relatives like the Mexica, the Mayans, South and Central America, including (those on) the Southern tip of Florida."

Each of these presentations was held once in the early afternoon, then again after 2:30 p.m. In between them, Guerra screened her film, "Andromeda" in the planetarium.

"I've been dancing ever since I could walk," Guerra said about her dance history.

"Even as a toddler, I used to say that I was actually a professional dancer and that I lived in a pink house and my other family was waiting for me because I had to get back. It freaked my parents out a lot," Guerra said.

"I finally took my first dance class at Emerson Umbrella in Concord. I'll be honest with you, starting dance classes at the age of six, everyone made fun of me, saying that I was behind and I would never make it."

These criticisms were quickly proved wrong and by the time she was in high school, Guerra was associated with what she describes as a "pretty professional dance company" — Commonwealth Ballet Company in Acton.

Though dance was her passion, Guerra inherited her father's love of astronomy as well as personal interests in history and science. She attended Mount Holyoke College for the school's "amazing dance department as well as a very impressive liberal arts education."

"I discovered modern dance as well, and somewhat uniquely, I started Classical Odissi Indian Dance. What I love about that is the Mudras, it's all hand gestures and facial expressions. So I started working that into my choreography. When I graduated I was performing with them on tour in India and Japan."

Guerra said she came to realize there was a void in the Boston arts scene.

"When I came back here to the States, I felt like there was something lacking in the Boston dance community in terms of combining choreography with intricate lighting design," she said.

This is how Guerra came to form Luminarium Dance Company with Kimberleigh Holman, based out of Boston. The non-profit contemporary dance company is "regularly hailed for its unique combination of dance and illumination," according to luminariumdance.org, and "is proud to present professional annual dance productions alongside its yearly community outreach programming."

According to Guerra, "This specific program is called PLACE. It stands for 'Presenting Landmarks through Artistic Community Engagement,' and we've been doing it since 2012. I have a background in history in addition to dance, so it's important to me that I go to different historic sites and try to celebrate them and, honestly, revitalize interest in them through the arts."

Guerra's father John attended the celebration with his wife, Suzanne, but denied any credit for it. "This is all her," John said.

The program presented a great opportunity to engage with less widely-known cultures' relationship with astronomy. Between sharing Estonian and Asian myths associated with the stars, and shedding light on the journeys of African and indigenous peoples whose histories have been erased by western culture, the presentation achieved exactly what Guerra set out to do, which was to illuminate her love of history, culture, the stars and dance.

**Want to know more?**

To learn more, contact the Luminarium Dance Company at 617-477-4494, or info@luminariumdance.org.



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