

ELLE

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FIRSTBUZZ

MERCY ON US Meredith Monk's meditation on an outrage

In 1964, newly hatched from Sarah Lawrence College, a young Meredith Monk made a beeline for New York's avant-garde and never looked back. Propelled by her fascination with the voice and a passion for humanity in all its guises, she defied categorization from the get-go, juggling with equanimity the mantles of composer, singer, choreographer, and filmmaker—a heady mix that has since yielded more than a hundred blazingly original works and a slew of accolades.

Monk has always responded to both contemporary and historic events. A Roy Lichtenstein retrospective served as the backdrop to Monk's 1969 *Juice: A Theater Cantata in 3 Installments*, in which eighty-five performers transformed the swirling ramps of New York's Guggenheim Museum into a wild exploration of movement and music. Spirituality loomed large in *Quarry*, a gripping 1976 piece about the Holocaust, and in the intensely sonorous *Atlas* (1991), a signature

opera that took metaphoric cues from the writings of nineteenth-century traveler Alexandra David-Neel.

This summer, at the American Dance Festival, Monk raises her bar even higher with *Mercy*, a collaboration with installation artist Ann Hamilton. The piece contains no overt narrative; Monk describes *Mercy* as a "mosaic of gestures, music, and visuals," the inspiration for which came via television footage of a boy who was shot on Israel's West Bank. "What kind of mentality is that," she asks, "when someone who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time asks for life, and they won't let him have it? I

started thinking about human nature, the wonder and horror of it." Tiny video cameras positioned in the performers' mouths or on fingertips project images onto large screens, and play with audience perceptions of the audible and the visible. "Part of the excitement," Monk says, "is having to tolerate hanging in the unknown."—LISE FRIEDMAN



**Avant
guardians:**
Meredith Monk
(left) and
Ann Hamilton

DANCE