

# MUGEN 無限

THE BODY. THE MIND.  
THE SPIRIT.



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NAGI CONTEMPORARY DANCE CORPS  
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# MUGEN – THE BODY. THE MIND. THE SPIRIT.

## Act I

Nagi Contemporary Dance Corps (NCDC) was met with an overwhelming audience, including the public, mental health advocates, professional artists, and educators. "MUGEN: The Body. The Mind. The Spirit." was divided into three acts, commencing with an immersive and inclusive site-specific performance titled 'In Other Worlds,' choreographed by Maybelle Lek. This site-specific work utilized the unique and inclusive architecture of ART:DIS Singapore. It featured a pre-show segment in which the audience wandered through different rooms, experiencing how various performers conveyed stories through improvisations. The audiences were then guided to the main performance area in the foyer, where they witnessed the brilliance of Maybelle's inclusive choreography. She seamlessly blended contact improvisation with audience engagement, breaking the fourth wall through consented physical contact and emotional connection, bringing joy and laughter to both performers and audiences.



(Dancers responding to wall painting by ART:DIS. Photo by Gerald Lim)





(Dancer Paopanga improvising to a projection of the cockpit view of a submarine. Photo by Gerald Lim)

'In Other Worlds,' performed by Lim Lenzo, Sakda Khachonkitkosol, Paopanga Karunnaraporn, Kim Yooyoung, and Crystal Tan, led the audience into the black box theater, where they took their seats. Here, they were treated to a video segment that educated them about the history of NCDC, formerly known as Kirishima Dance Corps (KDC). The video provided insight into the company's journey from its inception in 2020 to its current position in the arts community. The video seamlessly transitioned into an interview with Creative Director Maybelle, where she discussed the arts scene and her advocacy for mental health awareness.

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"As a creative in this industry, I believe it's increasingly important to address systemic issues within the culture of performance-making, rehearsal processes, and the personal sacrifices that dancers often make in the name of their craft. This issue isn't unique to Singapore; it's a global challenge in the dance world. I genuinely believe that dance-making should be a healing and empowering experience, rather than a path to self-sacrifice. Don't get me wrong, dance remains physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding, but it should never come at the expense of one's mental health. That's why I'm an advocate for mental health in the dance industry, starting with raising awareness and addressing systemic issues."

The performance continued with the second half of the choreography, a vibrant and multisensory exploration of sounds, rhythm, lights, and Maybelle's inner voices. The performance ended with a cliffhanger, symbolizing the choreographer's uncertainty about relocating and embarking on a new chapter, leaving the audience pondering, "What's next?"



(Dancers Paopanga, Lenzo and Sakda intentionally covering their eyes. Photo by Gerald Lim)

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The performance then transitioned to a documentary video on the Water Breath Technique, a foundational aspect of Nagi Contemporary Dance Corps' training, created by founder Xenres. The video explained how this technique integrated Taiji philosophies and breath work with Western contemporary dance techniques. It further elaborated on the science behind achieving a state of harmony between mind, body, and breath, enabling practitioners to enter a flow state. This approach encouraged dance and movement as a product of mental alignment guided by science and tradition, transcending egoism and self-consciousness.

## Act II

The second half of the performance began with an introduction and interview of the second choreographer, Zoe Jumabhoy:

"My commitment to NCDC goes beyond aligning with the company's mission and values; it represents something much more profound to me. The environment created by Xenres is rooted in wellness, mindfulness, and empathy. What he and NCDC symbolize is not just a dance company; it signifies a platform for change and a positive shift within the arts community and beyond. Working with him and the company has allowed me to mentor and create in a holistic and safe environment, an experience I had not encountered before as a dancer."

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(Dancer Rei Elizabeth wraps her shirt around her face, mimicking a contorted mask. Photo by Gerald Lim)



As the light dimmed, performer Rei Elizabeth entered the space, engulfing the performance in a profound silence. Her eighteen-minute solo told a story of chaos, peace, and acceptance, inspired by the age-old conundrum of "Is the glass half full or half empty?" The dance featured slow, graceful movements laden with inner tension and struggle, punctuated by unpredictable rhythmic expressions, mirroring the mental states often experienced by individuals grappling with mental health issues.





(Dancer Rei fixates her gaze on glass of water, while executing a backbend. Photo by Kuang Jingkai)

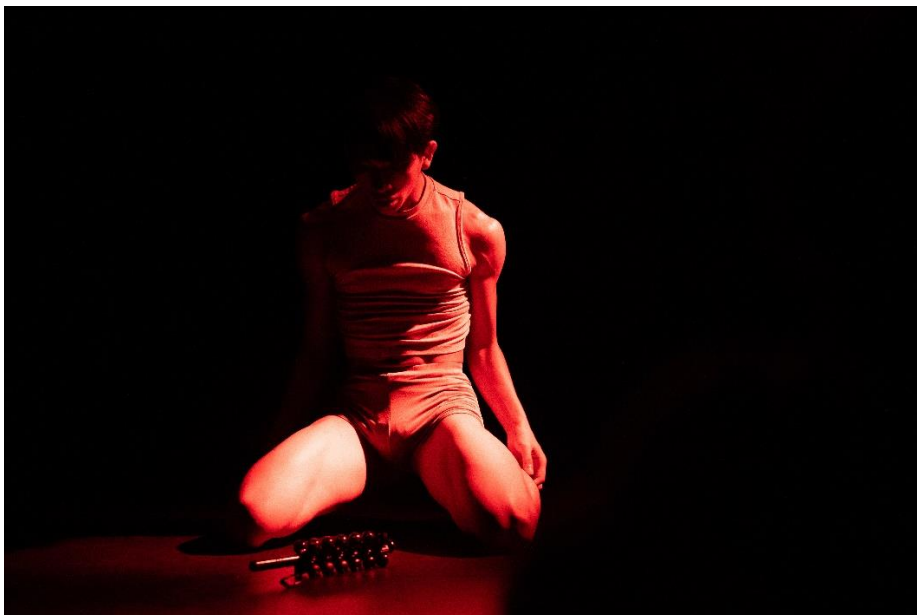
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## Act III

An interview segment with NCDC artists followed, capturing the younger generation's perspectives on building a more cohesive and holistic arts world by shifting mindsets and embracing empathy as a driving force for creating art.

"For me, art, particularly dancing, plays a significant role. It has helped me tremendously by allowing me to release pent-up emotions. I've learned the importance of self-care and mental health. Through dance, I can express my extreme emotions, whether they're intense happiness or profound sadness. It serves as a stress reliever, easing my anxiety and worries. It's like escaping reality for a while. Dance enables me to show my true self, boosting my self-awareness, self-esteem, and satisfaction." – Jhoy Anne Maverick Famudulan Chavez

The grand finale of "MUGEN – The Body. The Mind. The Spirit." commenced with Act One of "MUGEN 無限," featuring the commanding presence of performer Haziq Abdullah, portraying Shakyamuni. The performance took a twisted approach to the journey to enlightenment, as Haziq's tormented movements conveyed suffering. The act was accompanied by the haunting sounds of bells, ambient red lighting, and powerful throat singing that resonated throughout the theater, deeply affecting the audience. (Dancer Haziq kneeling in contemplation. Photo by Muhammed Tawfiq)





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Act Two drew inspiration from Wuji and YinYang, both deeply rooted in Taoism, brought to life by performers Sakda Khachonkitkosol and Crystal Tan. Their synchronized breathing and harmonious movements transported them to a primordial state of body and mind. The duet danced to an invigorating soundscape, evoking the omnipresent universe and the primordial energy within the dancers. The act concluded with the two dancers balancing and harmonizing their weight and energy, connected solely by the crown of their heads.

(Dancers Crystal and Sakda connected by their top of the crown. Photo by Gerald Lim)



Act Three commenced with the commanding presence of lead dancer Maybelle Lek. With dynamic and profound control over her body and breath, Maybelle kinetically sang her composition, accompanied by the symphony of the group's collective breath and harmony. Soloist Jhoy Anne Maverick Famudulan Chavez (Jam) joined with the imagery of a spirit butterfly, representing transient transformation through virtuosic and compelling dancing, transcending and taking flight.

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Act Three showcased the dynamism of NCDC dancers, featuring Maybelle Lek, Jam Chavez, Sakda Khachonkitkosol, Paopanga Karunnaraporn, Rei Elizabeth, and Crystal Tan. The dancers entered a state of flow, harmonizing their energies to reach peak performance, where their bodies and minds merged, all while remaining hyper-aware of their surroundings. The thirteen-minute, hyper-physical piece showcased the dancers' prowess and technicality, culminating in a powerful reference to the cosmic phenomenon "The Big Bang." (Dancers whirlpool themselves with organic and synchronized breathing. Photo by Kuang Jingkai)

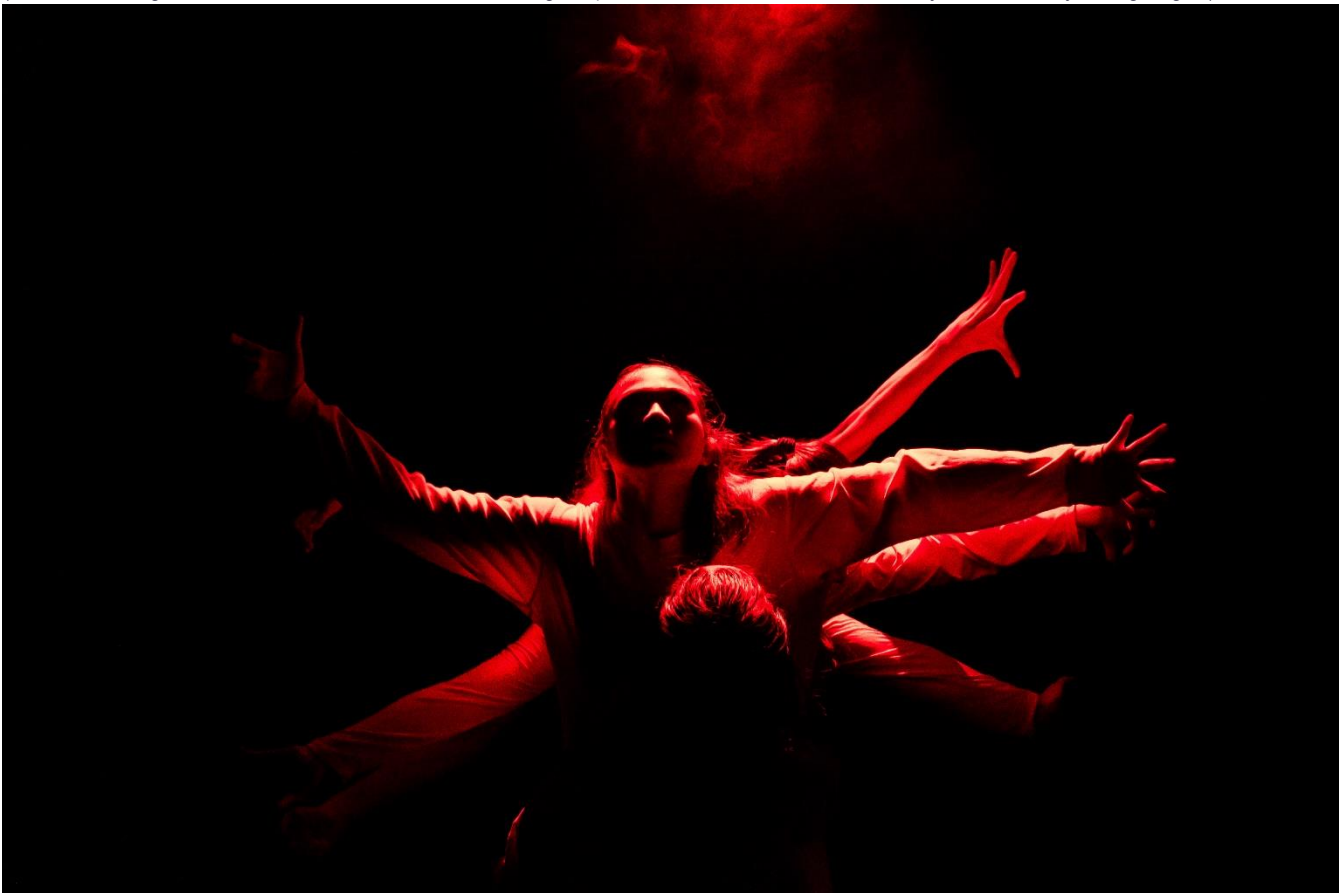


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The Final Act introduced the title of Avalokitesvara, "The one who hears the cries of the world," with lead dancer Maybelle embodying this persona. Accompanied by a resonating and reverberating score, the dancers conveyed the world's cries through suffering and torment, while Maybelle responded with empathetic apathy. This interpretation of Avalokitesvara portrayed humanity rebelling against the divine, with soloist Jam standing atop, supported by the ensemble cast, gazing down upon the personification of Avalokitesvara, Maybelle.

The epilogue of the Final Act accentuated the visual imagery of Karma and Samsara, with the ensemble transforming into their own Thousand Hand Buddha. The performance concluded with a resounding bell that sent a wave of energy through the air, marking the end of the entire show."

(Dancers forming the Thousand-Hand Buddha, overthrowing the personification of Avalokitesvara, Maybelle. Photo by Kuang Jingkai)





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A story by Jade Ow

“They rise from the ground, unnatural, twisted by unknown forces, writhing slowly. The only human persona on stage is performed by lead dancer Maybelle Lek, who watches as the movements of her fellow ensemble members gradually become more dissonant and chaotic, the music rising and speeding up in tandem...”

And suddenly, a strange and uneasy silence settles among the dancers.

MUGEN is filled with moments of emotional introspection, and it is those visual representations of the human psychological state that makes it such a fascinating experience. For director Xenres Kirishima, MUGEN is a statement on the discourse around mental health in Singapore, as much as it is an insider’s perspective on the trials and tribulations that an individual battling mental health issues must undergo. MUGEN portrays this relationship between the individual and the environment beautifully, through the boundaries of space and unseen forces.

The use of bodies in space to depict the individual and the environment is a central theme across MUGEN. In one particularly chilling scene, lead dancer Maybelle Lek is surrounded by the ensemble who swing their limbs uncontrollably, with said limbs dangling off their joints like string puppets. She tries to stop them, going from dancer to dancer, but eventually she herself is swept into a massive whirlwind and loses her own autonomy of movement. The scene culminates in her being pulled downstage, as if she was in a trance, with the ensemble groping at her body and eventually reaching to strangle her by the neck. Like tendrils that pull and push the persona forward, they immobilize and manipulate the persona, as if she were a lifeless marionette. One must wonder if this is a metaphor for how draining a mental health condition can be.

I sat down with Maybelle Lek for a quick interview during the break to learn more about their rehearsal process. “The direction I was given was to portray a goddess who must remain unmoved by the suffering around me - like a Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin) who forces herself to be apathetic, and to ignore the prayers of the mortal believers,” Maybelle recounted. A professional dancer with an MA in Contemporary Dance from the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Maybelle navigates through the choreography of MUGEN with practiced ease. In the end, where the lead dancer floats in stasis, carried by an imaginary wave of darkness, the ensemble dancers regain their humanity and watch as she loses consciousness in the abyss of mental isolation.

Weaving together portraits of vulnerability and resilience, MUGEN shines in the small performance space of the ART:DIS Black Box as it transports the audience into a new dimension where the unknowns of mental health is reimagined into physical experiences, translated into a visual language through the near-universally understood medium of dance. MUGEN neither cuts any corners with its storytelling, nor do they attempt to simplify the complexities of explaining mental health to its audience. Rather, it invites its audience to understand through various metaphors - a half-full glass and a half-empty glass, a person being pushed, pulled and pummeled in all directions - and it wins its audience over by stirring emotions that one would not even have thought of as real.

And after all, that is what MUGEN set out to accomplish: By legitimizing mental health, MUGEN creates a safe space for dialogue, understanding and eventually, acceptance.”