

DANCE

KATMA

The Neilson Nutshell, January 16

Until January 19

Reviewed by CHANTAL NGUYEN

★★★★

You don't queue in a subdued ticket line for *Katma*. You crowd into the Neilson Nutshell's vestibule, the ushers directing the excited crowd like bouncers. A muffled "doof doof doof" DJ beat (Jack Prest's music) leaks from behind closed doors.

These swing open and the Nutshell no longer looks like a Shakespearean theatre but a post-industrial warehouse-turned-club. Only a few high stools fringe the room's edges, so we spread out and stand, some moving to the music as downlights form little wells of brightness. The most tangible thing is that beat. Then the dancing starts.



The room is converted into a post-industrial warehouse-turned-club. WENDELL TEODORO

Katma is the creation of Sudanese dance artist and educator Azzam Mohamed, aka Shazam, and arts company PYT Fairfield where Mohamed is artist-in-residence. He never studied dance formally but trained in the places that form the beating heart of street dance: the underground and community scene.

Bringing that energy, depth and culture to Walsh Bay, the epicentre a mainstream festival, *Katma* brims over with a raw, euphoric authenticity that is infectious and culturally rich. It immediately pulls the mask off any pretentious modern art you might have recently seen.

Katma is immersive: the audience becomes part of the dance scene as Mohamed and his six dancers move around the room. The audience follow excitedly, whooping and cheering with each new improvisation. It peaks as the dancers lead the now-insatiable audience in a dance-off.

Katma is advertised as a fusion of street and club styles: breaking, hip-hop, krump, waacking, locking, house and Afro dances. On opening night it was dominated by house, emphasising freestyling and vibing, and – as in any improvised work – varying in energy and interest. All the dancers are transcendental, but keep a special eye out for Angelica Osuji and Naethiel Lumbra.

From its Western Sydney base, PYT Fairfield emphasises inclusivity. In this respect, *Katma* is remarkable. For many in the usual inner-Sydney crowd, there's little opportunity to experience the richness of the street dance scene unless you happen to know the right dance people or move in certain multicultural communities.

Katma breaks these socioeconomic barriers, exposing greater Sydney's rich, joyous multicultural fabric. If nothing else, in Raygun's cringeworthy wake, it's a reminder of Australia's authentic street dance scene. To the point where, after the show, a couple of ecstatic audience members panted: "That was amazing – even better than therapy!"



Walk into the shadows of the Neilson Nutshell this Sydney Festival and surrender to the pulse of a communal, high-octane, joy-fuelled dancefloor. This sacred space is the oft-forgotten inheritance of Queer/POC communities; those who pioneered its radical forms of resistance and freedom in clubs, on streets, and in underground sanctuaries. Propelled by a set by **Jack Prest** under tall, thin spotlights, seven of Sydney's own pioneers of inspired movement blaze: **Geny Navuzi, Angelica Osuji, Molonai Makallo, Robin Chen, Isabella Solisa, Naethiel Lumbara, and Azzam Mohamed** (who also directs). The crowd follows like a single, enveloping organism as these dancers light up all corners of the room with breaking, hip-hop, krump, waacking, locking, house and Afro dance. Anointed in sweat, they celebrate their unique styles as individuals, and are uplifted by their creativity as a collective.

The energy is infectious. By the end, the seat-less crowd is elated, tired bodies replenished. As a regular hardcore raver, I know the rapture of hurling it all to the limits on a dancefloor shared with fellow humans who respect its history and the subculture's principles of care. Whether with strangers or friends, we're all mortals defying death in being so relentlessly alive, taken together to the edge by that perfect, insistent, alien beat of electronic music. The title of this performance is a Sudanese slang word that describes the breathlessness and intensity of hard partying – and *Katma* choreographs this into a visionary ideal that honours its origins, cross-cultural power, and potential future.

January 15–19, The Neilson Nutshell at Bell Shakespeare (The Thirsty Mile), \$49+bf. Find tickets & info [over here](#). (Hot tip: when you see a show on [The Thirsty Mile](#), you can keep the party kicking on at Moonshine Bar.)



Kate Prendergast