

a light in the dark



words by Jennifer Fergesen | Iceland



Filipino multimedia artist
and Cirque du Soleil performer
Ehrlich Ocampo
finds inspiration in Iceland

Less than a week before Filipino dancer and multimedia artist Ehrlich Ocampo's final performance in Skagaströnd, a village in northern Iceland that hosts the Nes Artist Residency, the season's first snowstorm blasted through town like an air raid.

By 28 October, the evening of the event, every surface in the village was glazed white. The audience had to kick through snow drifts up to their knees to reach the Nes

studio, a decommissioned fish factory with a black box-style theatre in its former freezer. Then the music started, and it was as though all the color and warmth that had seeped out of Skagaströnd came to settle in that room.

The performance, a collaboration with the Icelandic video artist Almar Freyr, transformed the freezer into a walk-in kaleidoscope. As Ehrlich danced, projectors replicated his image like a series of shadows, swirling into prismatic color behind him. He manipulated his signature leviwand (a dancing prop like a majorette's baton, illuminated and suspended from a string) as if it were a kendo sword, or canoe oars, or the pipes of the god Pan. The shifting lights recalled the auroras that sweep above Skagaströnd on clear nights.

But the best part, said Ehrlich, was the audience. Many were children from the local elementary school, where he had given a leviwand demonstration earlier in the day. They had dragged their parents to the studio for an encore and another chance to play with his props. He was performing for them, he told me.

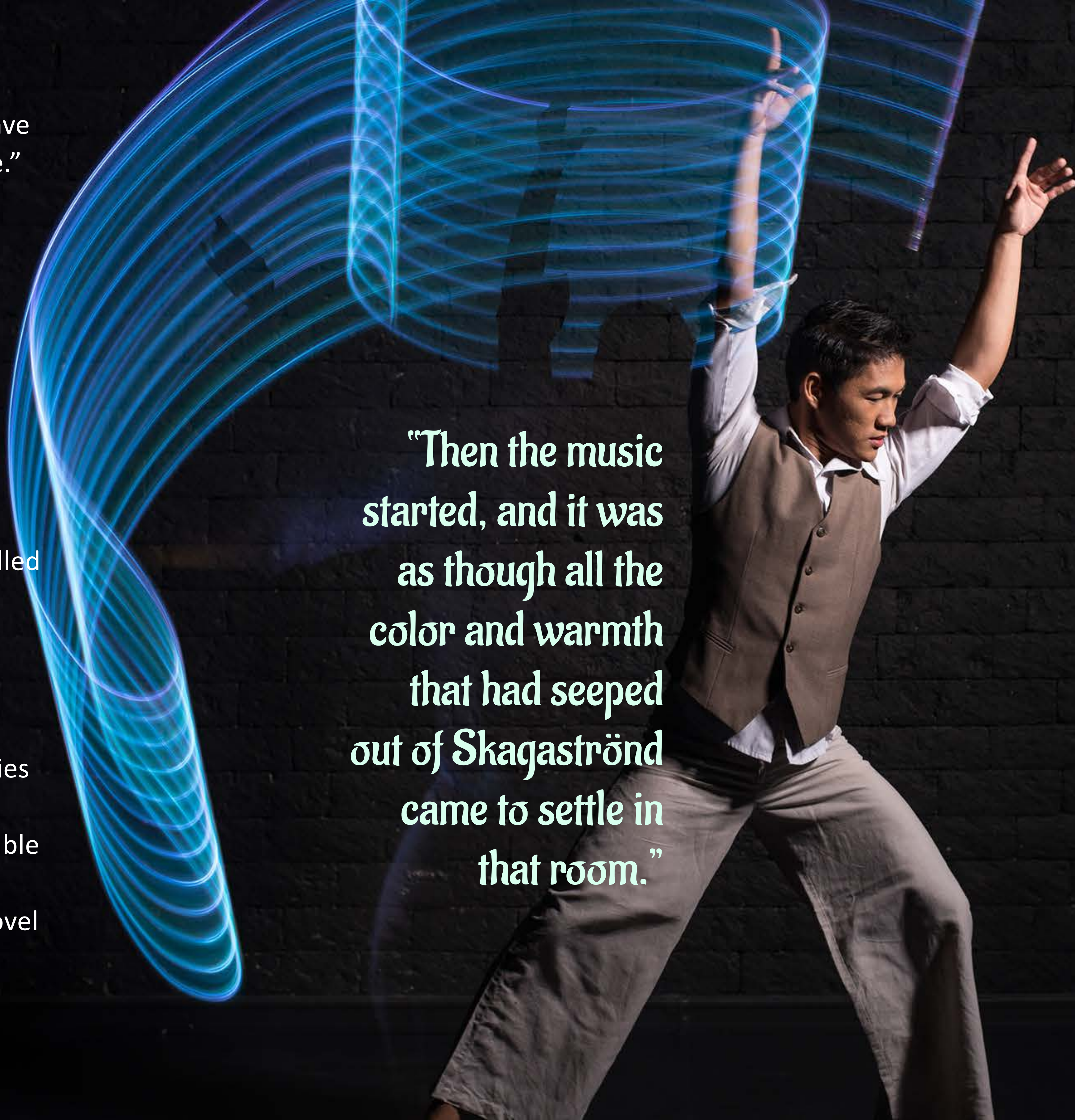
"The kids still have 60, 70 years ahead of them," he said. "I'm going to affect them



somehow, and that will change the effect they have on others. It may not even be a conscious change.” He explained this as “the ripple effect.”

The Manila native left plenty of ripples during his time at Nes Artist Residency, where he chose to rest after his first six-month contract sailing the Mediterranean with Cirque du Soleil at Sea (a branch of the Montreal-based circus troupe that tours with MSC Cruises). Cirque noticed his innovative use of the leviwand and gave him his own bit in the island-themed show Syma. In the show, he plays a beguiling, clownish character called “The Strange One” who wields a leviwand with a magician’s illusory grace.

Like many visitors of artistic bent, Ehrlich found inspiration in Iceland. In a single month at the residency, Ehrlich took and exhibited a photo series called “Magkaugnay,” choreographed three live performances and plugged away at the innumerable other projects that rattle around his active mind. These include a semi-autobiographical fantasy novel and an interactive piece that involved weaving a dream catcher live, then inviting viewers to cut



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its strings with a provided pair of scissors, à la Marina Abramović's Rhythm 0.

"I guess Iceland was calling me," Ehrlich said. It called him even in the Philippines, where he danced with the renowned Salinggawi Troupe at the University of Santo Tomas and listened to Icelandic musicians like Sigur Rós and Björk on repeat. He saw something familiar in the sparse Icelandic landscapes that others describe as alien. "It looks like my family's land in Nueva Ecija," he said. "There, I have time, space and energy to ponder."

Time, space and energy were what Ehrlich needed after the herculean efforts that landed him at Cirque du Soleil, perhaps the world's most prestigious circus troupe, after years of bouncing between gigs in Manila and Malaysia. "Cirque du Soleil has been one of my dreams, but that

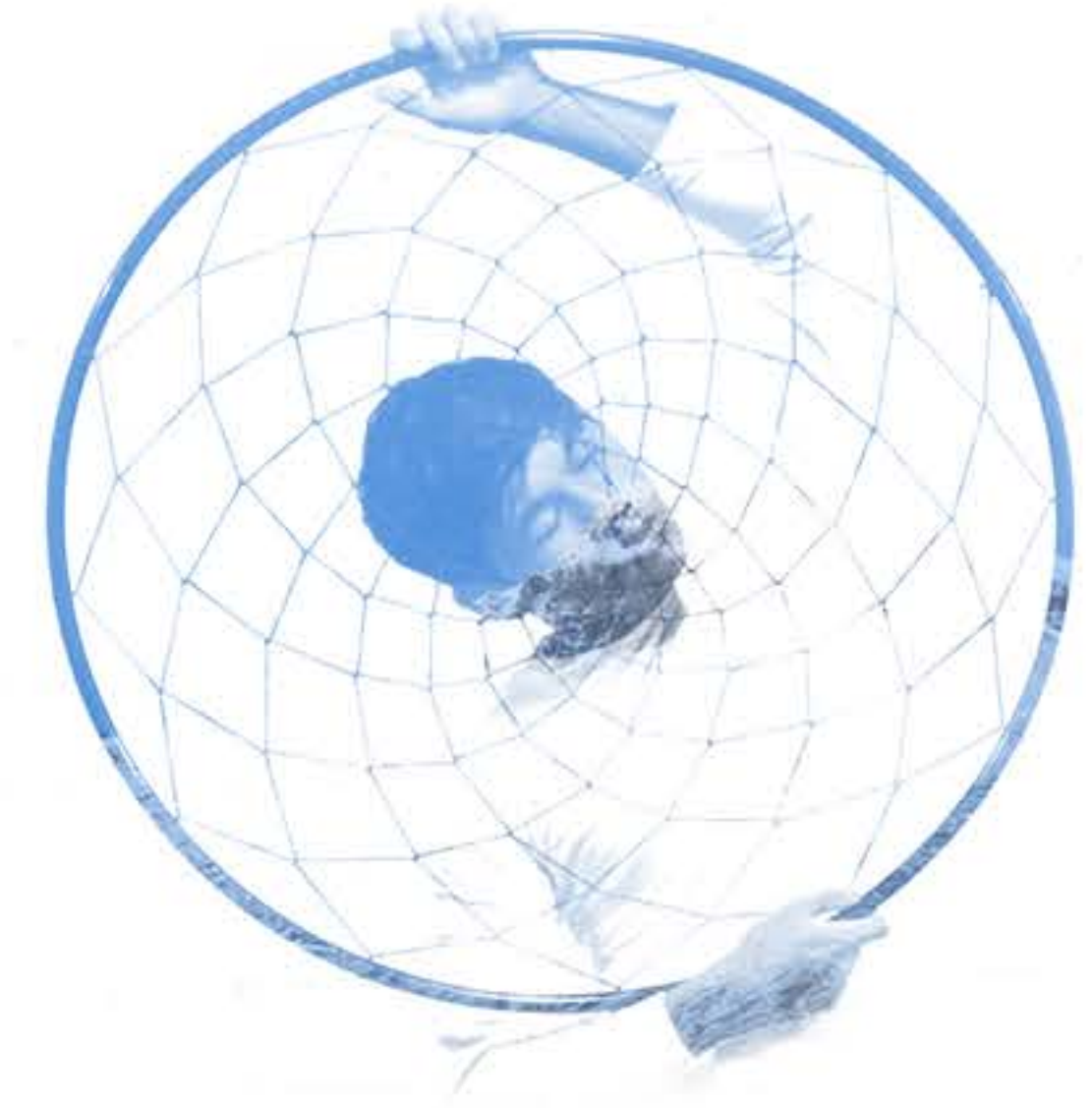
doesn't mean I'm stopping dreaming," he said.

For now, Ehrlich is focusing on helping other young people achieve their dreams. His performances for the children of Skagaströnd are only one ripple in his pool of influence. He also makes popular leviwand video tutorials that are free to view online and teaches circus skills to girls at Cameleon Association Philippines, an organisation that aims to rehabilitate victims of sexual violence.

His own immediate ambitions are simple. "I'm coming back to Iceland in the summer, when there's no snow," he said. "I'd love to dance outside."



IMAGES FROM EHRLICH'S PROJECT
"MAGKAUGNAY," PRODUCED IN ICELAND



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