

Neos Kosmos 13 March 2011

Cafe Rebetika! on Tour

Cafe Rebetika is touring Australia until May 2011



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[JOHN-PAUL HUSSEY](#)

There are too many good shows that have one fantastic season, get great reviews, everybody raves about them...and then you never see them again. It's heartbreaking, particularly when months down the track disappointed people are still coming up to the producers with, "I really want to see

that...is it coming back on again?" One great show that has managed to avoid this typical conundrum is Cafe Rebetika which, thanks to a lot of forward planning and plain hard work, is currently enjoying a national tour. Speaking to the award winning actor Tony Nikolakopoulos, who's playing the character of Stavrakas, there was an obvious but quiet pride when he spoke about the success of the show. "Yes, it's great that we're now touring and Kultour (the touring company) who have been organising it have been really good. This week we're in Lismore and then up to the Gold Coast, then Mackay, Wagga Wagga and finishing up in Sydney Opera House." It hasn't been all plain sailing though, they had a season planned for Brisbane which was stymied by their recent floods. But whose plans weren't by that terrible calamity.

The story is set in the backdrop of the 1930s in the urban Greek slums and maps the rise of the rebetika, the Greek 'blues'. In a local hash den, musicians, anarchists, refugees, communists, prostitutes and tough cool guys known as manges gather. The characters are united by their passion for life, their love of music and their need to dance. They have become a family bonded by hardship and political turmoil, and most importantly their Rebetico music. But they are faced with the destruction of their homes and their way of life, and these bonds are severely tested.

"It's a very important time in history," said Nikolakopoulos, "about the Asian Minor Greeks who were forced to leave Turkey in the 1920s." Nikolakopoulos is referring to the mass expulsion of Greeks from Turkey in 1921 known simply as the Catastrophe. Over a million Greeks from Asia Minor were now crammed in to the Piraeus, Athens and Thessaloniki. In Greece these Asia Minor Greek refugees were ostracised by the locals and it can be argued that this particular style of rebetika music was fashioned out of this prejudice.

Back then it was banned by the local government and considered 'too lowly'. Today though, it is highly celebrated by all Greeks and considered internationally as one of the country's finest cultural exports. "The idea of the show first came about through Stephen Lloyd Helper (director/co-writer and producer), an American whose married a Greek from Melbourne," said Nikolakopoulos. "He found these records of Rebetika and thought this music is amazing and there was definitely a show in it." Helper has a background in Broadway musicals.

"We then had a development period with workshops and a public reading through the Full Tilt program at the Melbourne Art Centre," said Nikolakopoulos. After more development stages Cafe Rebetika eventually found itself performing at the Melbourne Arts Centre itself through the Mix it Up program. "What was amazing was the broad appeal it had, so many different kinds of people really loved it," said Nikolakopoulos enthusiastically.

And now it finds itself touring the country thanks to Kultour, the touring company. By the time it arrives in Sydney in May, this will be a very well run in show, and far different to its original season in Melbourne. The question is, why is this great show not returning to its original source? So the Greek Australian audience that missed it, can have the opportunity to finally see it this time round. "Yes, it's a real shame. Even when we're doing the show at the Melbourne Arts Centre, I know that there were many people who came to see it again and again."

Without having to labour the obvious point Melbourne boasts one of the largest Greek populations in the world. "Well, government funding unfortunately can't include it, maybe because the show has been done there before," said Nikolakopoulos. This is a common situation sadly. For now, due to funding policies there's not much the Cafe Rebetika team can do about it. "What we really need is for a private producer, or a business that has the vision to see its great potential, and back us." Surely in the most Greek city outside Greece, where Greeks have succeeded, some artistic souls can breath life into that very Greek term, philanthropy?

March 12: Lismore City Hall - NORPA www.norpa.org.au or 1300 066772
March 31 & April 1: The Arts Centre Gold Coast
www.theartscentregc.com.au or 07 5588 4000 April 7-10 & 12-16: The Street Theatre, Canberra, www.thestreet.org.au or 02 6247 1223 April 19: Wagga Wagga Civic Theatre www.wagga.nsw.gov.au or 02 6926 9688 April 26: Mackay Entertainment and Convention Centre www.mackaytix.com.au or 07 4961 9777 April 30: Cairns Civic Theatre www.cairnscivictheatre.com.au or 1300 855 835 May 5-8: Sydney Opera House www.sydneyoperahouse.com or 02 9250 7777