

CAFÉ REBETIKA! BMA Magazine

Column: **Exhibitionist** | Date Published: **Tuesday, 29 March 11** |
Author: **Zoe Pleasants** |

GREEK OUT



I'm excited. In April, there is a show coming to Canberra that sounds like it has all the right ingredients. It has a talented cast, high production values, an original story and strong characters all served up with a healthy dose of history, politics and passion. And it features, by all accounts, an amazing band live on stage.

CAFÉ REBETIKA featuring the band Rebetiki. It takes the audience on a journey into the utopian rebetes subculture of 1930s Athens. It is set in a teke, or hash den, where outcasts, refugees, musicians, addicts, anarchists, communists and prostitutes come together to escape the unhappy reality of their lives and sing passionate Greek rebetika music: the soul music of survival. Don't be concerned if you haven't heard of the rebetes subculture or you can't hum a rebetika tune, I certainly hadn't and can't. You'll pick it up – that's the history bit of the show. But listening to Tony Nikolakopoulous (*Head On, Underbelly, City Homicide, East West 101*), lead actor, talk about *Café Rebetika* I am convinced of the universal appeal that something of this quality will have.

Tony plays Stavrakas, the owner of the teke. He is a manga; a charismatic, self contained man of style and substance. Sporting a clipped moustache and pointed shoes, he lives according to his own code. This is a code of "acceptance", explains Tony. "He accepts people for who they are as long as they don't hurt anybody." But sadly "Stavrakas also doesn't believe in marriage or what marriage brings to a relationship," explains Tony and when this belief clashes with the ideas of his lover, Areti (played by music theatre star Jenny Vuletic), tragedy befalls them.

Tony describes Stavrakas as “a deeply psychological and philosophical character.” He talks about the emotional effort it takes to bring him to stage each night. Tony “feels every bit of him, there is no way to fake it.”

All but two of the actors in this production are Greek. Tony describes “the passion and sense of pride the cast have in bringing this particular slice of history to the stage with so much dignity.” Tony himself was born in Australia of Greek parents but didn’t discover what he describes as his “Hellenic spirit” until his early 20s. But this spirit produced the “tears I had to hold back when playing to a sold out Melbourne Arts Centre, with 200 Greeks joining in the singing of the rebetes songs,” Tony recounts.

Tony keeps repeating the word “filmic” when describing *Café Rebetika*. He talks about “immersing the audience in this other world” and “the songs and dialogue overlapping each other.” It sounds stunning, and if I can be there on the night when 200 Canberran-Greeks sing along with the rebetes songs I think it will be really something!

Café Rebetika is playing at The Street Theatre from Thursday-Saturday April 7-16. Tickets are available from the venue’s website.