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## Greek twist on subterranean homesick blues



Cafe Rebetika!

### **Peek into a little-known subculture from times gone by with Cafe Rebetika!**

When *Café Rebetika!* debuted in Melbourne in 2009, audience members unexpectedly joined in.

“Older-generation Greeks came along and they couldn’t help but sing along with the songs,” says actor Tony Nikolakopoulos, who will reprise his central role of Stavrakas when the play opens at the Opera House on May 5. “You could see their adult children telling them to be quiet, you know, ‘Shush, don’t sing’, but they couldn’t help themselves.”

*Café Rebetika!* unfolds in a basement hash den in the Greek port city of Piraeus in the mid-1930s. It’s a hang-out for Greek refugees from the Turkish city of Smyrna, burned to the ground in an event known as the Great Catastrophe of 1922.

Homeland Greeks have shunned the refugees, leading to the development of a defiant underclass with its own subculture. They develop a musical style known as rebetika - or the Greek blues – in which they sing about their joys and their woes.

Melbourne four-piece band Rebetiki played a crucial role in helping writer-director Stephen Lloyd Helper – renowned for Broadway productions of *Fiddler on the Roof* and his own *Smokey Joe's Café* - develop the work. In *Café Rebetika!*, they perform rebetika songs – on guitar, Pontos lyra, bouzouki and a miniature bouzouki known as baglama – with lyrics translated through English surtitles.

Nikolakopoulos plays a man who lives and dies by his own moral code – which is all very well until he falls in love with a strong-willed singer who wants him to commit to marriage. After losing his first wife Stavrakas can't agree, she marries another man, and then all hell breaks loose.

Although Melbourne-born Nikolakopoulos is of Greek background (he played Alex Dimitriades's dad in *Head On* and has starred in the *Wog Boy* series and *Underbelly*), he only learned of this little-known episode in Greek history and the rebetika sub-culture it spawned when he became part of Helper's project.

The play, he says, appeals not only to Greek audiences. "I see this as a story about love, betrayal, displacement, assimilation – it's about trying to cope with life and the hardships placed in front of you," he says.

*Café Rebetika!* also gives Nikolakopoulos – and the rest of the cast - the chance to belt out a few songs. "By no means am I trying to come across as a trained singer," he says. "There is that rawness about it that makes it quite refreshing – it's not a polished musical as such. It's just the passion of telling a story."

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