

Manges behaving badly

A Greek blues music called **rebetika** is the inspiration for a new play about **men who sang and danced to survive.**

Katherine Kizilos reports.

THE 1930s was the worst of times for the port city of Piraeus near Athens. Thousands of Greek refugees from Turkey crowded the quarter after the ill-fated Greek invasion of Asia Minor and the burning of Smyrna in 1922. Communism thrived in the poor neighbourhoods, though its adherents were outlawed and oppressed. Is it any wonder these misfits, who had little faith in the future or the state, gathered together to smoke hashish and sing the blues (known there as rebetika)?

Director and co-writer Stephen Helper had the idea of constructing Cafe Rebetika, a play with songs, after listening to his father-in-law's collection of rebetika records. Three years ago, actor Tony Nikolakopoulos was among a group of actors and musicians who joined him for a workshop exploring the idea. In Cafe Rebetika, he plays Stavrakas, the owner of the cafe and hash den where the action takes place.

Stavrakas is a manga, the name for the type of man who danced and sang rebetika and who embodied the spirit of that world. Manges (the plural form) were known for their stylish looks — clipped moustaches, pointed shoes, jackets draped over one shoulder to conceal a knife. They railed against authority, rejected family life (although in many rebetika songs appeals are made to a suffering man's mother) and lived according to their own code in which a jail sentence could be seen as a badge of honour.

When Fascist sympathiser Ioannis Metaxas became the prime minister of Greece in 1936, he outlawed rebetika and punished subversive manges by shaving half of their moustaches and cutting the points of their shoes. Metaxas understood that to take away the style of these men was to reduce their power.

Nikolakopoulos describes the character he plays in Cafe Rebetika as a philosophical "and somewhat spiritual" manga — outwardly tough, but with a "soft side that he doesn't like to show". He has played many Mafia roles so he understands the status these characters have, he says, though he doesn't want to place undue emphasis on the criminal side of manga life.

Nikolakopoulos is 43, and grew up in Melbourne. "When I was a kid there were a lot of manges around," he says. He recalls the sense of presence they carried with them, and "the danger —



Tony Nikolakopoulos as Stavrakas with Laura Lattuada as Areti in the Arts Centre's Cafe Rebetika. Photo: John Tsiavis

they are quite charismatic when they need to be".

The quintessential manga dance is the zeibekiko, which was traditionally danced solo by men under the influence of alcohol or hashish. The dance is free-form and the moves are slow and almost meditative, Nikolakopoulos says, though more modern versions have added showy kicks and turns.

He believes that in its original form the dance was not a way of showing off but a man's way of expressing his emotional state, be it sorrow or joy. He once saw a man perform the zeibekiko with a circle of whisky burning around

him; he can't recall whether the man was about to go to jail or had just been released, but is certain the wheel of fire was his way of telling the world "this dance is for me".

Respectable women had no way of joining this world, though a love story is at the heart of Cafe Rebetika. The dialogue is in English and the songs — original and traditional — are in Greek, with surtitles provided. Nikolakopoulos says that during a preview, older Greeks in the audience began to sing some of the old tunes and were hushed by their children.

He predicts the show, which makes

its world premiere at the Arts Centre, will have nostalgic appeal for older Greeks, but hopes it will speak to a wider audience as well.

Although rebetika grew out of a culture of displacement and alienation, the music also expresses the resilience of a people who refused to be ground down by their circumstances. "They didn't have any sense of tomorrow," Nikolakopoulos says. "They lived for the now, because that is all we have got."

Such an attitude makes sense for refugees whose lives have suddenly been stripped away by events outside their control, he says, but he wonders too if the ethos is connected to the Greek idea of kefi — the reckless sense of enjoyment that can engulf revellers, and can not be planned for or anticipated.

Nikolakopoulos, who grew a moustache for the role, says the 60-year-old Polish woman who shaped it for him told him she knew about manges. They were "all the bad men".

Nikolakopoulos laughs. They were outcasts certainly, and considered anarchists in their day, but bad? "Crime wasn't the focus. It was about survival with pride, dignity and integrity — things society and the government were trying to crush."

Cafe Rebetika is at the Fairfax Studio, Arts Centre, until May 9. Free talks will be held next Tuesday following the 8pm show; and on Saturday May 2 and 9 following the 4pm show.

Article from The Age

Tony Nikolakopoulos: an Actor's actor

Tony Nikolakopoulos is taking on new theatrical challenges in Cafe Rebetika. Tony Nikolakopoulos is an actor who has done it the hard way. He never changed his name and consistently fought against typecasting to establish a significant career in television, film and theatre. "I chose to keep an obviously Greek name like Nikolakopoulos, but you can change your name but that's just living a lie."

Well, this time he is playing a quintessential Greek character in Steven Helper's new music theatre Cafe Rebetika that opens at the Arts Centre in late April. Cafe Rebetika is about the life, the music and loves of a group of rebetes, Asia Minor refugee fringe dwellers living in the slums of Piraeus after the great population exchange with Turkey in 1921. The rebetes' unique lifestyle and their music, rebetika, (Greek Blues) is the gel for the narrative of Steven Helper's new musical theatre.

Nikolakopoulos has appeared in a plethora of theatre productions such as the Malthouse Theatre's The Spook, Ranters Theatre Co: Roulette, State Theatre Co: Courtyard of Miracles, and his television and film credits include Pacific, Underbelly, Stingers, Head On, and Tom White. He recently won a Melbourne International Film Festival award for his performance in the short film 296 Smith St. Regardless of his impressive resume, he does not think that in Australia we have overcome hang ups about cross-racial casting as in the United States.

When quizzed on how it is to work with a non-Greek lover of rebetika like American ex-patriot Steven Helper, Nikolakopoulos says; "Steven is a music lover, he heard the emotional pain in the music, and once he found out about the background of the rebetika he became passionate

about it and that passion has driven him mad, but it is going."

Nikolakopoulos plays Stavrakas, the owner of a teke (a hash den) where Yiorgos the dope smoker, Grigoris the worker and Katerina the prostitute, all come to escape the poverty of their lives through the intense music of rebetika (Greek Blues). The epic love story of Stavrakas and Areti, a singer and refugee from Smyrna is at the centre of this work but she is murdered by a jealous rival, Nikos, and sets off a terrible set of events.

Nikolakopoulos was always keen to play a theatre version of Zorba and this is the closest he has got to it, "I expressed to Steven about my interests in staging Zorba the Greek and we looked at that. I was fascinated with that character, that existential element of it - where no one owns anything, and we tried to marry some of those elements into the character"

Stavrakas is also a maga; "The maga" says Nikolakopoulos, "is a bit like James Dean, that has one element of the maga," one who is not encumbered by mainstream values, adding "some have compared them to the old style mafia, where they take care of their own."

The characters, like the real rebetes and mages of the 1920s - 1940s, were perceived as possessing a lack of morality by a new emerging bourgeoisie class in Greece who saw the rebetes as criminals and drug-fiends.

Nikolakopoulos says, "The mages were accepting of gays, hash smokers and junkies and women in their community were freer than the women in mainstream Athenian society."

Article from Neos Kosmos