

A marriage of inconvenience

Setting the stage for fireworks ... Alex Lykos, who wrote and stars in *Alex And Eve: The Wedding*, with co-star Helena Stamoulis. Photo: Kate Geraghty



When the playwright Alex Lykos was young his cousins took him aside for a word of advice, Greek style. "When it comes time for you to marry," they told him, "you must marry a nice Greek Orthodox girl, OK? But if for some reason you can't possibly marry a nice Greek Orthodox girl, then it's OK to marry a Catholic. And if you can't marry a Catholic, then it's OK to marry an Anglican. But remember, whatever you do, do not marry a Muslim."

Lykos took heed until five years ago, when he started dating a young Lebanese Muslim girl whom he met, of all places, in a bar. The relationship lasted only a couple of months - "and my parents never found out" - but it gave Lykos the idea for what would become *Alex And Eve*, a cross-cultural romantic comedy in which "two strong cultures go head to head, with all the fireworks that entails".

Alex And Eve was a surprise hit, opening in 2006 at the 150-seat Sidetrack Theatre, in Marrickville, and finishing two years later in the 400-seat Factory Theatre in Enmore. Now comes the sequel, *Alex And Eve: The Wedding*, in which the lovers decide to marry, preparing for a wedding that will need to satisfy a devoutly Orthodox family and a devoutly Muslim family.

"If you are born into either of these religions you are ripe for therapy," Lykos, 35, says. "But mixing them up is potentially disastrous. There are so many issues to go over: what religion will the kids be? Where should the wedding take place? And really what it's all about is power and control."

Alex And Eve was a boisterous, take-no-prisoners comedy, with plenty of gags and no shortage of slapstick. But underpinning the one-liners was an expertly drawn cast of characters snared in a web of ethnic dilemmas that almost everyone can relate to.

"Australia has so many cultures now that the chances are you will date someone who is not from your background: most people have encountered this or know someone who has."

Certainly, Lykos was never short of material. "I know one Greek family whose son married an Italian girl. The Greek father told them that if they got married in an Orthodox church, then they could christen their first child Catholic. But once the wedding was over and the baby was born he went back on the deal and said that if it wasn't christened in an Orthodox church then he would cut them

from the will."

Then there was the couple who were married twice in one day: first with the Greek Orthodox ceremony, then with the Catholic ceremony. "I pity the guests," Lykos says.

Lykos has seven productions under his belt, but he only began writing five years ago, after spending most of his 20s grinding away on the pro-tennis circuit in the US. In 1993 he was awarded a tennis scholarship at Western Kentucky University, where he studied teaching. Lykos, who was ranked in the 300s in doubles, reached a career peak in 1997 when he played Thomas Enqvist in a warm-up tournament for the US Open.

"I worked hard, but I'm only five foot six and you need height in pro tennis these days."

He returned to Australia in 1999 and found himself at a loose end.

"I took lots of photos when I was overseas. When I got back I began to caption them all, writing details on the back. And as I wrote I found myself adding more and more details, until I realised that I was enjoying the writing, that it was quite pleasing and therapeutic."

He began by writing film scripts, and secured government funding for one of his early projects. The film never got up, but the experience provided the catalyst for his first play, *The Negotiating Table*, which explores the politicking and agendas in the Australian film industry.

In 2006 he formed the Bulldog Theatre Company "because it's theatre with bite".

Much of his work has a biographical element: his 2007 drama *Better Man* concerns the difficult reunion of two childhood friends, Jimmy, a drug dealer, and Ricky, who has spent the past five years at university on a US tennis scholarship. The *Alex And Eve* plays come from a similar space.

"It's really about frozen values," Lykos says. "My parents came here when they were very young. Back then, Greece was a very conservative place. But the problem is that they brought out those values and just put them in the freezer. The world has moved on now, but they don't see that."

Lykos believes this is more a protection mechanism than "a Greek thing", a way for migrants to insulate themselves against the psychic shock of establishing a new life in a foreign country. "Like anyone, I suppose it takes time for them to adjust to things. Like, my sister married an Italian guy, and there were dramas to begin with."

"Now," he laughs, "they think he's the best guy on the planet."

Alex And Eve: The Wedding opens at the Factory Theatre on Saturday.

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