

Mikelangelo and the Black Sea Gentleman

Written by **Katherine Ters**

Image courtesy of **Photobat**

With a distinctly Elvisesque gait, an intimidating stature and immaculately pressed powder-blue suit pants pulled up to his ribcage, Mikelangelo could well be mistaken for a Ukrainian gangster. However, this charismatic cowboy-come-cabaret star is the alter-ego of Canberra-born and bred Mikel Simic.

Simic originally learned his Croatian accent to better communicate with his father, who immigrated to Australia from the Dalmatian coast in 1958. While Simic's accent may drop in and out, his presentation of a second-generation Australian's conception of his Slavic roots is heartfelt and painfully funny.

Simic leads the well-dressed and rather anomalous musical ensemble the Black Sea Gentlemen. The troupe, who have labeled their style *Kabaret Noir*, consist of Rufino the Catalan Casanova on violin, the Great Muldavio on clarinet, Guido Libido on piano accordion and Little Ivan on Double Bass.

The music of the Black Sea Gentleman is best described, Simic says, as a "re-imagining" of Europe. "We're speaking of an old world that's lost but our performance is actually very contemporary because of the things we bring to it."

Their evocative lyrics range from stirringly dark to extremely silly. They explore bleak existential themes and revel in earthly pleasures while never taking themselves too seriously.

The Black Sea Gentleman are scattered across the Eastern Seaboard and Tasmania, and yet, when they come together, their performance is exceptionally tight. Their use of movement, light and props is evocative of early silent film and traditional forms of cabaret.

The glue that holds these gentleman together, despite the challenges of geographic disparity, Simic says, "is an understanding, both spoken and unspoken, of things we aspire to, whether that be a certain musical profundity or aspects of male grooming and deportment."

"People think of Eastern Europeans as a dour bunch, a people of shifting emotions: all intense, all terrible or all hilarious," Simic says. The Black Sea Gentleman fit this stereotype but still know how to have a good time. Even though they have a penchant for desolate A-minor melodies, they can, on occasion, enjoy a good polka, some smatterings of Bossa Nova and the primal and melodramatic sounds of the Spaghetti Western.

"No-one can deny that Morricone Western soundtracks are some of the best ever written," Simic says enthusiastically, adding that unbeknownst to most, Croatia was the unlikely location of the filming of a number of Westerns.

“The whole idea of shooting a Western in Eastern Europe is so upside down, it’s almost like a group of Australians putting on European accents and forming a group.”

While the worlds of the Spaghetti Western and Slavic folk seem oceans apart, currents they have in common are the glorification of good old-fashioned masculinity and the opportunity for all-male ensembles to stamp seductively in unison while bringing out their darkest baritones in uplifting harmonies.

Having just completed a two-week stint at Sydney’s Glen Street Theatre in Belrose, Simic and his troupe are now off on a regional tour across Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Mikelangelo will then perform solo and in a show called *Variete* in Adelaide’s Cabaret Festival running June 8 to 23.

As for future musical directions, Simic says the Black Sea Gentleman want to release a new album this year. “It will go deeper into the terrain of the Croatian Western, which is very much our own genre now. We envision a feature film to go with it, but we’re still looking for backers.”

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