

Dance moves follow the heart

This Prahran play is a dream come true for its New York director, writes **Robin Usher**

STEPHEN Lloyd Helper has an advantage over most independent theatre makers — he has directed at New York's Lincoln Centre and worked with the acclaimed choreographer Jerome Robbins.

He also came up with the idea for *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, which celebrates the music of Leiber and Stoller and is among the 30 longest-running Broadway musicals.

So what is such a New York thoroughbred doing taking charge of *Syncopation*, a dance-infused, two-character drama at Prahran's Chapel off Chapel? It turns out he is a friend of playwright Allan Knee, whose play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan* became the basis for the award-winning Johnny Depp film, *Finding Neverland*.

"We worked together in New York when I was younger and we used to hang out after rehearsals," he says. Knee sent him the script of *Syncopation*, which is set in New York in 1912, where two people start dancing lessons to change the dreary routines of their lives.

"It reminded me of my formative years when I worked with Jerry [Robbins]," he says. "It's amazing how much can be expressed through movement on stage. I feel it's a play that I have to do and I have been wanting to put it on for a long time."

Helper came to Australia in 1984 to direct an Australian Opera production of *Fiddler on the Roof* starring Hayes Gordon after he had directed the show in New York. He met his wife on the trip and now lives in Sydney, although he says *Smokey Joe's*



Syncopation stars Steve Mouzakis and Emma Palmer. PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

Cafe was his "last big thing". His previous show was in Brisbane, where he worked with the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts on *Soul Music*, about Aboriginal identity in contemporary Australia, using songs by such artists as James Brown, Sam and Dave and Aretha Franklin.

"It was chilling," he says, "because issues we thought were consigned to the '60s and '70s are still relevant. It was like entering a time warp."

He decided to present *Syncopation* in Melbourne because it suits the Chapel off Chapel space. "I was in Melbourne last year working on *Cafe Rebetika* and I love working here. I take great care to select a venue that is right for each project."

The play stars Steve Mouzakis, who worked on *Rebetika* and Emma Palmer. "It is very demanding for the actors because the play uses only minimal resources without any moving scenery. They have to deliver

monologues, act and dance. Not even Fred Astaire was asked to take part in dialogues while dancing."

Helper hopes the play's appeal will be enhanced by the popularity of TV shows such as *Dancing with the Stars* but he also stresses its old-fashioned virtues. "It makes no apologies about speaking from the heart about matters of the heart."

The show's choreographer, Mark Hodge, has appeared in two series of *Dancing* and has

spent a lot of time making sure the actors are convincing when they begin dancing lessons early in the play.

"It was quite hard to crap at the beginning," says Palmer, who learned classical ballet from the age of four. "It is crucial to the plot to make our journey believable and we have to seem like we have never danced before."

Her character, a dressmaker, answers an ad for a woman with a desire to be a ballroom dancer placed by a meatworker (Mouzakis). As their dancing improves, so does their relationship, although not everything flows smoothly.

Palmer — who grew up in Kew and studied at Melbourne University before moving to Sydney to study at the National Institute of Dramatic Art after realising that her physique was wrong for a dancing career — was keen to win the part after she heard that Helper was having difficulty finding anyone suitable. "I made a lot of effort to meet Stephen and Mark and, finally, we had 20 minutes together," she says. Luckily, that was all she needed.

She describes her character's development as a 1912 coming-of-age story: "She starts out as a naive daddy's girl and ends in a very different place, having hurt people, including her partner, and been hurt in return."

Palmer will return to Sydney at the end of production to take what she describes as a dream job — presenting the ABC series *Play School*.

Syncopation opens at Chapel off Chapel at 8pm tomorrow until September 26. Book online or call 8290 7000.