

Red shoes to shuffle

The Russians are coming – in friendship, says
CATHERINE LAMBERT

THERE is a sound coming from the old KOB Moscow headquarters.

It is not the sound of the numerous ghosts that are said to haunt this austere building where torture, interrogation and killing were commonplace. Nor is it the sound of suspicion and subterfuge.

Today, the soul of Russia thunders through this multi-storey building warming the marble walls and even more chilling basement chambers.

Dancers of the Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble are rehearsing for the mournful melody of *Karmina Burana*, which cries through the whole building, overwhelming the less invigorating, though much more paradoxical, *I Still Call Australia Home*.

They are preparing for a two-month tour of Australia, and having just returned from 10 days in Chechnya, the directors are in full military mode, commanding the troops into artistic perfection.

Ensemble leader Maj-Gen Victor Eliseev, a child of the Communist era, is reticent on this occasion, the first time an Australian journalist has been admitted into the Russian Federation's Department of Internal Affairs, preferring to reserve all passion for his choir.

"It should be noticed that it's probably a unique enterprise to get together all the best Russian voices," Maj-Gen Eliseev said. "When 70 voices like this combine, you can feel the strength."

These are not just average voices. Their combined effect is pure vocal majesty, singing as one with such unity the choir is renowned as one of the world's best.

Maj-Gen Eliseev, 54, describes the unique Russian sound as wide, deep, emotional and profound.

"The bass, and especially bass profound, singers are prolific in Russia, because we are built that way and we feel that way," he said.

The choir members, ranging in age from 18-54, are all hand-picked from the army and have a musical education as well as having been working soldiers, with many displaying layers of medals on their uniforms.

They undergo an intense auditioning process to be admitted to the ensemble.

"We are, first of all, professional musicians and dancers, but because our company was founded as the military, all our people have to obey the laws of the army," Maj-Gen Eliseev said.

They are certainly unlike most artists, who thrive on creative freedom.

For these gifted musicians, discipline, dedication and tireless work feed their creativity, as well as their complete trust in Maj-Gen Eliseev. The dancers, singers and

musicians who comprise the 200-member ensemble practise four hours a day, and often longer, if Maj-Gen Eliseev is not satisfied. There is no room for error.

Commanding the technical demands of a unified choral sound is often very difficult, especially when learning songs in a foreign language, but Maj-Gen Eliseev wants more than musicianship.

"You can make a military person do whatever you would like them to, but you can't make them learn the feelings," he said. "If there is too much of a military atmosphere, the choir is just a group of technicians, not musicians."

"I want them to feel the music in their souls and that is when it becomes music."

From the thousands of songs in the choir's repertoire - jazz standards, pop songs and a few Aussie tunes, alarmingly including classic headbanger *Long Way to the Top* - Russian folk, military and patriotic songs are its speciality.

Since Perestroika, Russian Orthodox music has also been allowed, with the vibrancy of Cossack folk dancing breaking up the weight of the choir.

"We like to show the versatility of the company, but the basis of the company are the military and folk songs," Maj-Gen Eliseev said. "Every war gives Russia new songs."

The Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble plays Her Majesty's Theatre on October 23. Bookings: BASS.



Go on and jump: Elena Abashkina and Denis Nikiforov from the Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble.