

# Steppes lift morale

Jill Fraser previews a tour by a famous ensemble that embodies Russia's heart and soul

**D**ANCER Irena Balkina takes exception to the suggestion that her performances and those of her colleagues in The Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble must seem comparatively trivial when the company is on tour in war zones.

Proud of the contribution she believes their art makes to the morale of the Russian troops she insists: "We make the soldiers happy. When we go to places like Chechnya we carry happiness with us in our dancing and singing. Our job is to make the soldiers smile. You can see in their eyes that they long for something like this."

Frustrated trying to communicate her feelings and thoughts via an interpreter, she stumbles over an explanation of Russian dancing.

Finally giving up on an attempted description of their technique, she exclaims: "The most difficult thing for any artist is demonstrating the Russian heart and soul."

The 30-year old soloist and her husband, Aleksandr Balkin (the "a" at the end of a surname signifies a female), met through the dance ensemble. Balkin executes the stunning side-split leaps, traditionally featured in Russian dancing.

"He has many injuries. He enjoys a massage when he gets home," Balkina says, giggling coyly.

Balkina dances the lead in a gypsy piece and along with a group of the company's top female dancers performs a rarely seen Cossack number, which has been choreographed especially for women.

"You need lots of energy," she says with a laugh.

Balkin and Balkina, who began their careers in dance and only joined the army to become members of the dance ensemble, still find the regimentation and discipline of the military hard to take at times.

"Army hierarchy is difficult," Balkina says.

"But the worst thing is living in tents when we go to battlefronts."



FLYING high . . . dancer and singer Aleksandr Balkin with members of the Russian Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble.

When the famous Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble travelled to Chechnya in 1999, the country was under martial law.

"We had to place blankets over our windows because snipers were only two metres away. The helicopter that brought us in was shot down two days later," she says.

Oleg Kuhta, a tenor with the Red Army Choir, took the opposite career path to Balkin and Balkina. He began in the military but ended as an artist.

Serving as a sergeant in an elite regiment in the Russian Army in Chechnya in 1996, he was shot in the stomach and sustained severe injury.

He talks emotionally about how the extent of his injuries, coupled with subsequent shell shock, ended his military career but led him to cultivate his voice and accept an invitation from his stepfather, Major Victor Eliseev, director-general of the combined choir and dance ensemble, to join the choir.

Admitting that it was "fate", Kuhta chuckles. "These days my weapon is my singing, not a gun," he says.

With pop to classics in their repertoire, The Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble's tour program promises a mix of Russian folk songs, comedy routines and classical pieces such as Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

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## The Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble

- November 26: The Great Hall, Cairns Convention Centre
- November 27: Civic Theatre, Townsville
- November 28: Mackay Entertainment Centre
- November 30: Pilean Theatre, Rockhampton
- December 3: OPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane
- December 4: Broiogs Theatre, Maryborough
- December 5: Caloundra Cultural Centre
- December 7: Gold Coast Arts Centre