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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, the Eurovision Song Contest is being held in Baku with all its usual deadly seriousness and an incongruous dose of Caspian glamour.

The Eurovision logo is everywhere. One of the popular souvenirs is a flag with Azerbaijan's flag on one side and Eurovision's on the other with this year's cheesy slogan: "Light your fire!" Somehow, I don't think Jim Morrison would have approved.

The venue is a gray crenellated edifice called the Crystal Hall. It's a long walk from the city center, and built out on a long pier as well, so there's no chance of the hoi-polloi mingling with the "stars." Especially as a ticket for the final costs upward of 160 euros ($200).
The journalists get a bus laid on to take them from the start of the pier to the press center — it's that far away — but the organizers cunningly mollify them with free chicken drumsticks and pakhlava. Rights, what human rights? Plus there are free books about carpets.

Compared with Moscow's bleak Olympic stadium, the Crystal Hall is an extremely plush venue and the most-

favored contestants, including those from Britain, France and Azerbaijan, are luxuriating in suites at the Hilton. With high ticket prices and an army of beige-

blazered security, the event feels like some kind of cocktail gala for the elite. And possibly it is the last orgy before someone wonders whether Eurovision could possibly be one of the victims of cutbacks.

The journalists are a mixed bunch, some of them with such unnatural devotion to Eurovision that they greet each other like long-lost friends. The press center has the rather bland and earnest atmosphere of an international conference, but with the odd person wearing a fake Jedward quiff in honor of the quirky Irish twins or wrapped in a Georgian flag.

The Russian babushki are unquestionably the stars of the show, with journalists literally trying to climb into their cubicle when they were giving an interview to the BBC. Slightly aloof from the crowds as befits their status, they are staying at a mansion belonging to Emin, the construction crooner son-in-law of President Ilham Aliyev, who, surprise surprise, is the interval act in the final.

I rather like Euro Neuro, the Montenegro entry sung by a man called Rambo Amadeus, presumably not his real name. He gruffly intones his love of "biciklizam, liberalizam, turizam, nudism, optizam." Although, you've got to be careful how you express those sentiments in certain Eurovision countries, where they could mix them up with other izams.

Unlike the other entries, it also takes in the harsh realities of the European economic crisis and contains a plea: "Give me chance to refinance." Oh and he rides a donkey in the video, which clinches it really.

So far the betting is on the Swedish singer, Loreen, even if her song is unlistenable. She has met with local rights activists and may even make some kind of political statement on Thursday evening, which would blow the whole show out of the water. On the other hand, Russia's heartwarming Buranovskiye Babushki were the favorite act among journalists in the first semifinal — according to a pressroom vote — and they look to be in with a chance. I just hope Russia doesn't use Olimpiisky again.

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