



That's all folk: The Romanoffs in action

Picture SHANEY BALCONSE

A spirit of hope in this ditty old art of the city

KRISTINE GOUGH

EVEN big cities need folk songs to tell the story of people, places or events that live in the hearts of locals.

Gipsy duo The Romanoffs turn to poker machines and cold showers to provide the inspiration for their twisted folk songs about Melbourne.

"We've got a political satire edge, but we do it in a silly way," singer Margaret Dobson said, after jiggling her way through *Those Were the Days*, a tale of an old pub that became a Tabaret.

Other Romanoff standards mourn the loss of tram conductors and revisit last year's Longford gas crisis.

The duo will shortly open a national conference in Melbourne exploring ways for local governments and arts organisations to reactivate community spirit through the arts.

Conference chairman Paul Clarkson said the forum would explore how to foster the idea of neighbour-

hood in a world where technology and globalisation blurred the boundaries of local communities.

Professor Clarkson, a former Arts Victoria director, said arts events provided a way for individuals to express themselves and help to define a community's values. Not to mention the promotional value.

"It's a really major opportunity for a community to make a statement and to be seen and heard," he said.

Being seen and heard was of particular concern to areas outside cities, Regional Arts Victoria director Peter Matthews said.

"We've been noticing for some time that regional communities feel disenfranchised," he said.

Engaging a community in arts activities can be a first step in bringing back a sense of belonging.

"It brings hope, confidence and a bit of fun," Mr Matthews said. But it also provides a way to debate more serious issues, he said.