



“Mamma Mia!” Singing & Dancing to Sell Out Crowds

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by Pat Rogers

If there was a People’s Choice Award for Musicals, it’s likely the current production of “Mamma Mia!” at Southampton Cultural Center’s Center Stage would be registering top votes. The musical featuring popular songs by ABBA have been selling out crowds since opening on March 8, 2019. As of publication, only a few seats remain for the final four performances (Sunday’s performance is already sold out).



Ava Bianchi is “Under Attack” by her nightmare demons in “Mamma Mia!” at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

In one sense, sell out performances shouldn’t be a surprise. Director Michael Disher pointed out the musical’s popularity with audiences and its longevity on both Broadway (13 1/2 years) and its current run in London (20 years and still going). The musical also tours internationally. It gained another hold in pop culture through film from the 2008 movie starring Meryl Streep, Pierce Brosnan and Amanda Seyfried.

Like the film, the musical theater performance uses a catalog of popular ABBA hits as the backbone for the play. Songs liberally move the action (and connect scenes) from start to finish as young Sophie awaits the arrival of three of her mother’s past paramours. Her hope is to discover which one is her father in time to walk her down the aisle for the wedding she has invited each of them to attend.



“Wedding Day Blues” from “Mamma Mia!” at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Featured are Ava Bianchi and Sam Terry (seated), Jack Seabury, Rich Gardini, Julie Crowley and Alyssa Kelly. Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

As her mother reconnects with a pair of close girlfriends (and former nightclub act singers) from her past after their arrival for the wedding, the surprise appearance of three former lovers creates madcap scenes among everyone involved up until the final twist ending.



Donna and the Dynamos (from left to right: Alyssa Kelly, Mary Sabo and Julie Crowley) in "Mamma Mia!" at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

"Mama Mia!" features no fewer than 20 [ABBA](#) pop songs performed by the cast. Audiences can expect to hear "Dancing Queen," "Super Trouper," "Mama Mia!" and many more.

The songs have proved to be a big draw with people sometimes singing their favorite ABBA tune walking in the door as well as leaving the theater, Disher said. "The music is infectious and people love it," he said.

As far as musical theater is concerned, creating a play around pop music is a rarity. "Mama Mia!" itself can be seen as a testament to the popularity ABBA generated and its ability to hold sway over listeners of multiple generations.

"Pop music is rare in musical theater," Disher said. "In the seventies, ABBA was a surprise as they weren't disco at a time when disco was popular. They weren't rock either and they were still popular. They were from Sweden and became popular in the U.S. when other Swedish bands couldn't get air time.



Alyssa Kelly, Katrina Lovett, Kristin Tuber, Amanda Summers and James Kelly performing in "Mamma Mia!" at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

ABBA music aside, there is a lot to like about Center Stage's production of "Mama Mia!" The lead actress, Ava Bianchi, plays a convincing young Sophie who brings the story from the initial carefree days of waiting for her wedding to arrive (and the discovery of who her father is) through doubt, self-examination and a deeper connection with her mom and herself.

Disher cast Bianchi as Sophie after hearing her sing with Darren Ottati at the Southampton Cultural Center. Mary Sabo was cast early as Donna Sheridan as Disher was aware of her acting and vocal chops having worked with her in "Beauty & the Beast" for Center Stage.

The rest of the cast was discovered through a casting call for the large ensemble production.

Disher's direction can most readily be seen in the second act where dramatic visual tapestries are created and enhanced through choreography and lighting and dramatic dancing. Scenes alternate between intimate and high volume to relay the human story unfolding of lost and discovered loves and lives whose paths aren't fully written yet.



"Dancing Queens" from "Mamma Mia!" at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Featured are Alyssa Kelly, Mary Sabo and Julie Crowley. Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.



"Money, Money, Money...It's a rich man's world" from "Mamma Mia!" at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Featured center is Mary Sabo. From left to right: Alyssa Kelly, Katrina Lovett, Josephine Wallace, Tina Marie Realmuto, Amanda Summers, Kristin Teuber, Kristin Whiting and Julie Crowley. Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

In the Second Act, some of the music settles into ballads which increases the emotion resonance of the drama unfolding. It also makes easier to notice the quality of the songwriting that continues to move listeners over four decades later, Disher said.

"Mama Mia!" has the ability to appeal to a lot of people," Disher said. "I feel fortunate to be able to direct a play that sells out performances and is so appreciated by our community."



"Money, Money, Money...It's a rich man's world" from "Mamma Mia!" at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). From left to right: Tina Marie Realmuto, Alyssa Kelly, Mary Sabo, Amanda Summers and Kristin Teuber. Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

The romantic comedy is also a fun one to watch. There's plenty of dancing and camaraderie with the entire play capturing the fun of a weekend wedding where anything can happen and does.



Tina Marie Realmuto, Ava Bianchi and Michele Marks perform in “Mamma Mia!” at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

The Southampton Cultural Center performance features Ava Bianchi as the bride-to-be Sophie Sheridan; Mary Sabo as her mother Donna Sheridan. Potential Dads Sam Carmichael, Bill Austin and Harry Bright are played by Tom Rosante, Rich Gardini and Jack Seabury respectively. Sophie’s intended, Sky, is played by Sam Terry.

Donna’s childhood girlfriends (and former nightclub act singers), Tanya and Rosie, are played by Alyssa Kelly and Julie Crowley.



“The Winner Takes it All” from “Mamma Mia!” at the Southampton Cultural Center (SCC). Featured is Tom Rosante and Mary Sabo. Photo: Dane Dupuis. Courtesy of SCC.

Michael Disher directs, Amanda Jones musically directs and Alyssa Kelly choreographs.

General admission tickets are \$30.00. Student tickets (under 21 with ID) are \$15.00. Dinner or Bruch/Theatre packages are available. Tickets and Brunch or Dinner/Theatre packages may be purchased online at www.scc-arts.org or by calling (631) 287-4377.

BASIC FACTS: “Mama Mia!” will be performed at the Southampton Cultural Center through March 24, 2019 on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The Southampton Cultural Center is located at 25 Pond Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. www.scc-arts.org.

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