

Thank you for the music

Hit show based on music of Abba comes to Portland

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Prepare for an Abba-lanche. *Mamma Mia!*, the hit Broadway musical with 22 songs by disco icons and gay faves Abba, rolls into Portland on July 1 for a two-week run.

Loosely based on the 1968 movie *Buona Sera*, Mrs. Campbell, the show tells the story of proudly independent innkeeper Donna, who has raised her daughter, Sophie, alone ever since Sophie's father left their Greek island. Now Sophie's getting married and dreams of a white wedding with her father giving her away; the only problem is she doesn't know who that father might be.

It seems Donna fell into the arms of three men in quick succession (no wonder this show is so popular with gay men), so Sophie invites all three to her wedding in hopes of discovering which is her papa.

Writer Catherine Johnson has skillfully woven Abba's songs into the story, in much the way that the musicals *Crazy for You* and *My One and Only* were designed around Gershwin tunes. Director Phyllida Lloyd and choreographer Anthony van Laast have camped it up with polyester disco costumes and an all-male chorus line in various states of undress. Throw in a man in a wedding dress, and gay audiences are eating it up around the world.

Mamma Mia! premiered 25 years to the day after Abba's triumphant 1974 victory at the famous Eurovision annual song contest (which also launched the careers of Celine Dion and Michael Flatley).

The Swedish singers made their first recording together in 1970 but didn't assume the name Abba until 1973, which is an acronym for the first initials of the four musicians—Agnetha Fältskog and Björn Ulvaeus, who married in 1971, and Benny Andersson and Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad, who married in 1978.

The group won Eurovision with its first single, "Waterloo" (beating Olivia Newton-



The Abba-inspired musical *Mamma Mia!* hits town July 1 in all its polyester glory

John, who came in a disappointing fourth). The song was a huge sensation in Europe and went on to hit No. 6 in the United States. A string of Top 10 hits followed, including everyone's club favorite "Dancing Queen," which reached No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts. Between 1974 and 1982, Abba sold more than 350 million records.

So what is it about Abba that so delights gay men? Here were two straight Scandinavian couples without any of the sex appeal, outsider status or emotional excess of the divas we

adore. Even their private lives were dull, with friendly divorces and no juicy gossip.

Yet gays feel a definite ownership. Even though their music is not *about* us, it's as if we are personally validated when they sing, "See that girl, watch that scene, dig in the dancing queen." Abba's melodies are a musical stimulant, an infectious treat that tickles our bodies and makes us feel energetic and alive.

Who can forget Toni Collette in *Muriel's Wedding* telling her new best friend, "Since I met you and moved to Sydney, my life is as

good as an Abba song"? (In fact, the poster art for that movie—a young woman in a wedding dress, her arms outstretched, her beaming face upturned with anticipation—has been cunningly imitated for the *Mamma Mia!* logo.)

What's more, gays adore Abba for the kitsch value, taking into our hearts the sappy, over-the-top arrangements and silly 1970s hairstyles and costumes. What's so wonderful about them is their unapologetic and unbridled enthusiasm. Abba sounds as if it gets as much pleasure from its music as we do.

Despite breaking up in 1982, the band continues to sell millions of albums a year internationally. In 1992 the British duo Erasure (featuring gay lead singer Andy Bell) produced the cover album *Abba-esque*, which is thought to have set in motion the current worldwide Abba explosion.

And, like Elvis, Abba has spawned "tribute" acts (most notably one called Bjorn Again) as well as fanzines and conventions that draw thousands of obsessed admirers.

In early 2000 the quartet was offered \$1 billion (yes, you read that right) for a series of 100 reunion concerts. They refused the offer. "It is a hell of a lot of money to say no to," said Benny Andersson, "but we decided it wasn't for us."

While audiences may never see Abba reunite, we can still recapture the magical spirit of their blissful music during *Mamma Mia!* You will dance, you will jive, you will have the time of your life. **J**

Portland Opera presents MAMMA MIA! from July 1 to 13 at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Tickets are \$31-\$71 from the opera box office or Ticketmaster.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a free-lance writer who used to dance to Abba at Studio 54.

Pappa pia!

James Kall plays our kind of dad

BY LISA BRADSHAW

How does a nice gay boy from outside Cleveland get all the way to Broadway? "You get on Highway 80... it's pretty easy," deadpans James Kall, who plays one of three potential biological fathers of the bride in *Mamma Mia!*

And it's this kind of attitude that makes the Toronto-based Kall a popular theater and television actor—as well as makes him love his current Broadway show. *Mamma Mia!* is "like comfort food," he laughs. "You're just going to sit back and have a good time, and you know you

probably shouldn't enjoy it as much as you are."

Kall studied theater at Northwestern University in Chicago and worked professionally there for 10 years before auditioning for the graduate program at Yale Drama School on a whim. "I knew they only took a handful of actors every year. But I



Gay actor James Kall is delighted to serve comfort food in Portland

auditioned, and I got in.... I never really envisioned going back to school, but it was a great detour; it made me a much more confident actor."

From there, it was on to New York City, where he worked in theater and commercials. "I know some actors who sort of look down their nose at commercials, but I'll tell ya... one day's work, and those checks keep rollin' in," he laughs. "Even gay men can do Budweiser commercials."

In fact, his Bud commercial a couple of years ago was voted best Super Bowl ad. "I thought, 'If they only knew!'"

His more "gay friendly" roles include appearances on *Queer as Folk* and in *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows*. "And I'm playing a gay character in *Mamma Mia!* now," he says. Wait, isn't that supposed to be a secret? "You'd have to be pretty naive to not figure it out earli-

er," he assures. "But, still, there are people who are shocked. Mainly the older matinee crowds—there's sort of a gasp of surprise when I come out at the end. But that's half the fun."

Abba's music appeals to everyone, Kall says, but especially the gay crowd. "When I was a kid in Maple Heights, Ohio, there was something so innocent and accepting about their music; it allowed you to be fun and silly. My partner—the first record he ever bought was the 45 of 'Dancing Queen.' He was a farm boy from Canada, and I thought, well there you go," he laughs. "We've had this Abba connection all these decades."

Although it might be comfort food, Kall notes *Mamma Mia!* has "a beautiful message. It's all about your family and friends and how important they should be in your life. And there's adults wearing spandex." **J**

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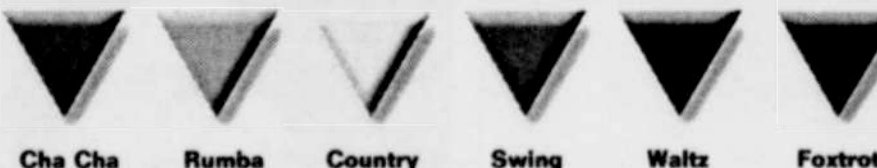
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