

The ABBA Effect

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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ort Theatre Company brings ‘Mamma Mia!’ to the USCB stage... and not a moment too soon.

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It was First Friday in downtown Beaufort, and the cast of *Mamma Mia!* were flash-mobbing to “Dancing Queen” in front of the big clock on Bay Street. All around them, folks were waving phones in the air, shooting pics and video, and singing along – huge, goofy smiles plastered across every face, including mine. Just an hour earlier, I’d been hunch-necked and glued to Mike’s Weather Page on Facebook, obsessively tracking Hurricane Florence, my gut a pit of anxiety. Now here I was dancing . . . jiving . . . having the time of life.

Some call it a guilty pleasure. I just call it a pleasure. If loving ABBA is wrong, I don’t want to be right.

For people of a certain age, the Swedish super-group ABBA is as all-American as apple pie. For this child of the '70s, their music conjures up memories of roller rinks and shopping malls, arcades and Top 40 countdowns . . . from an innocent time when America still felt like one big happy, kitschy family. Or so it seemed to this daughter of the suburban South who'd not yet begun to follow politics. Then came the 80s, bringing high school and MTV, and I discovered that ABBA wasn't cool. My fandom went under wraps. Then there was college, where I learned a few things about the world, and my taste in music in changed – though not necessarily in that order – and by the time I'd finished graduate school around 1990, I'd become one of those irritating people who'd sooner deconstruct – and disrespect – a good pop song than roll down her window and enjoy it.

All those iterations of me are still alive and well, duking it out in my psyche, but the one I treasure is the young girl who adored ABBA shamelessly, for the simple reason that their songs were made of beautiful melodies and fantastic harmonies and sweet words about love. It's that young girl who fell hard for *Mamma Mia!*, the movie, ten years ago and revived that passion with the recent sequel
Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again.

My seventeen-year-old daughter is even crazier about the movies than I am – if that's possible – and like almost every mother and daughter in town, we've been counting the days 'til the Beaufort Theatre Company production, which finally opens this weekend.

I spoke with director Libby Ricardo about the *Mamma Mia!* phenomenon. Seldom has a musical been so widely and deeply beloved, by people of all ages and backgrounds . . . who are all slightly embarrassed to admit it.

"You know, I made a promise to myself a few years ago that I would no longer have guilty pleasures; that I would just openly love what I love," Libby told me. "But it is so difficult to enjoy anything that unabashedly. The problem only intensifies with something that has been deemed 'fluff' like *Mamma Mia!*"

Okay, so *Hamilton* it ain't. But there's more to *Mamma Mia!* than the scoffers like to

acknowledge.

“My favorite part of this (directing) process has been finding the moments, the quiet, unassuming moments, that resonate so clearly,” says Libby, a USCB faculty member and also a new mother. “I find myself considering what happens when you love someone so completely that you willingly sacrifice parts of your identity to assume new roles. I’m speaking about Donna and Sophie. What happens when we become mothers and let our other identities fall behind? Can we still be a lover, or an artist, or a friend? We somehow both find and lose ourselves simultaneously. Elaine does such a beautiful job discovering the earnest moments. She is just a revelation in the role.”

Elaine Lake plays Donna in the upcoming production. (For you newbies, that’s the Meryl Streep role in the movie.) This stage veteran and local audience favorite tells me that *Mamma Mia!* is shaping up to be her most satisfying theatre experience yet.

“Very shortly after rehearsals for this show began, we had already laughed together and cried together,” says Elaine. “All of us. We became a family very quickly. We lift each other up, and this whole experience has been pure joy. The audience will see and feel that.”

Though they didn’t say it – exactly – I believe Libby Ricardo and Elaine Lake are both responding to what I think of as The ABBA Effect. It’s almost impossible to resist the rhythmic, harmonic, full-body emotional pull of this music. Songs like ‘The Winner Takes It All,’ ‘Chiquitita,’ ‘Take A Chance on Me,’ ‘Fernando,’ ‘SOS,’ ‘Knowing Me Knowing You,’ ‘The Name of the Game’ and so many others... They just pry open your heart and force you to feel all the feels. Euphoria has been known to set in. Catharsis, even.

And with *Mamma Mia!*, those songs are all coming at you, one after another, woven through a deliciously sentimental tale of love, both romantic and parental. Only the tragically hip or eternally cynical could survive such a double assault – on both soul and
solar plexus – unmoved. (For those people, there is always Netflix.)

My sister and I were discussing The Abba Effect at her kitchen island in Alabama, where we spent our “premature evacuation” for Florence. (Don’t get me started.) She attended a fundraiser for the Alabama Symphony a few years ago, where an ABBA tribute band called Waterloo performed with the orchestra.

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"It was uh-MAZING," she told me. "The group was awesome, did all the hits, and people of all ages were just dancing and singing like crazy... Who doesn't love ABBA!?!"

Indeed. And who doesn't *need* a little ABBA these days? When the *Mamma Mia!* movie sequel was released in late July,

The Economist

predicted that the film would capitalize on audiences' desire for escape from endless talk of politics and the chaos of the Trump presidency. Co-star Pierce Brosnan called the film "a great antidote for the times we live in." Having teary-smiled my way through that exuberant kaleidoscope of a movie twice now, I can tell you,

Mamma Mia!

heals.

Whether we're talking Florence, Trump, or our national discourse in general, I think we could all use a break from the hurricanes. The Beaufort Theatre Company invites you to take that break at USCB Center for the Arts, with *Mamma Mia!*.

Libby Ricardo sums it up perfectly. "After this storm, I need a little getaway to a Greek Island filled with amazing people singing infectious pop music we all know and secretly love."

Mamma Mia! opens September 22 at USCB Center for the Arts and runs for two weekends, at 7:30 on Friday and Saturday and 3 pm on Sunday. Tickets are on sale now at www.uscbcenterforthearts.com

Above, right: Melissa Florence, Elaine Lake and Lauren Cleland, from the cast of 'Mamma Mia' opening September 22 at USCB Center for the Arts

Margaret Evans, above left, is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read more of her [Rants & Raves here](#)

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