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‘Mamma Mia!’ in Pleasanton: Sit back and let ABBA happen



Gino and Mika Lucas/Pacific Coast Repertory Theatre
From left, Patricia Pitpitan, Joy Sherratt and Jennifer Stark star in Pacific Coast Repertory’s production of “Mamma Mia!”

By **SAM HURWITT, CORRESPONDENT** |

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It's not surprising that productions of "Mamma Mia!" have been popping up all over the Bay Area in the last couple of years. As a jukebox musical of ABBA songs, it has built-in nostalgia appeal. People may also be familiar with the star-studded movie version and its recent sequel.

The show also has some local roots: After its 1999 premiere on London's West End, "Mamma Mia!" made its U.S. premiere at San Francisco's Orpheum Theatre in 2000 before heading off to Broadway.

Now Pacific Coast Repertory Theatre is performing "Mamma Mia!" in Pleasanton's Firehouse Arts Center. This is the company's first show since it lost its longtime role as that venue's resident theater company to Tri-Valley Repertory Theatre last year. As the company recalibrates and figures out what's next, it could use a reliable hit like "Mamma Mia!"

Set amid expats and travelers on a Greek island (without any Greek characters), the musical's book by Catherine Johnson is just silly — a wispy thread to tie together the catchy 1970s ABBA hits by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus.

Twenty-year-old Sophie (charmingly earnest and sweet-voiced Laura Diestler Park) is getting married and wants to invite her father, only she's never known who her father is. So she rummaged through her single mother's old diary and invited all three men who slept with her mom at about the right time to be her dad.

Director Scott Maraj gives the show an upbeat, stripped-down staging that oddly under-utilizes the ensemble. There's a lot of offstage backup vocals and relatively little ensemble dancing, though Gary Ferguson's loose disco-party choreography is lively enough when it happens.

Patrick Brandon's bare-bones set of unadorned off-white taverna walls proves effectively versatile in rotating pieces. Costumer Margaret daSilva provides some amusingly flashy disco jumpsuits and a whole lot of Hawaiian shirts. Miranda Waldron's colorful rock-concert lights help fill the empty stage during the overture and entr'acte of peppy ABBA medleys.

Associate artistic director Joy Sherratt is animated as Donna, Sophie's stressed-out mother overwhelmed by the sudden influx of old flames. There's Harry, the former headbanger turned sedate British banker (amusingly mild-mannered Brian Watson); Bill, the laid-back travel writer (low-key Shawn Bender) and the one she never really got over, passionate architect Sam (sympathetically brooding Noel Anthony, who played the same role in Center Repertory Company's production last September).

At least Donna has her former bandmates for support: pampered triple divorcee Tanya (blasé Patricia Pitpitan) and stalwartly single free spirit Rosie (upbeat, bespectacled Jennifer Stark). We don't get much chance to see what Sophie sees in party dude fiancé Sky (Kamren Mahaney) aside from his tendency for shirtlessness, but Melissa Momboisse and Chanel Tilghman are so exuberant as Sophie's best friends and bridesmaids that it seems like a shame that those characters have nothing to do after the first scene when they're giggling over 21-year-old hookups in Donna's diary.

What we do get is a heaping helping of 23 ABBA hits, from "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!" to "Money, Money, Money" to "Honey, Honey" and everything in between, capably delivered by the small offstage band led by musical director Brett Strader. Ultimately everything else is just a delivery system to (somewhat awkwardly) set up the songs, and we never have to wait long till another familiar number kicks in to get the party started anew.

Contact Sam Hurwitt at shurwitt@gmail.com, and follow him at [Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt).

'MAMMA MIA!'

By Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus and Catherine Johnson, presented by Pacific Coast Repertory Theatre

Through: Feb. 10

Where: Firehouse Arts Center, 4444 Railroad Ave., Pleasanton

Running time: 2 hours and 30 minutes, one intermission

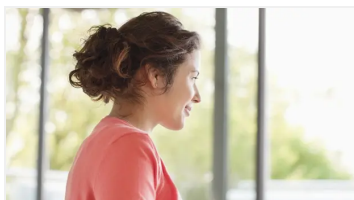
Tickets: \$25-\$44; 925-931-4848, pcrtproductions.org

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