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Review: Theatre Tulsa opens season with whimsical 'Mamma Mia!'

James D. Watts Jr.

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Chris Williams as Sam (left), Todd Malicoate as Bill, Steven Osborn as Harry, Brenna D'Onofrio as Sophie and Ashlee Osborn as Donna star in Theatre Tulsa's production of "Mamma Mia!" Courtesy/Josh New Photography
Courtesy/Josh New Photography

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Strictly speaking, “Mamma Mia!” fits the category of “jukebox musical.” Its score is made up of previously recorded songs — in this case, the impressive catalog of pop hits by Swedish group ABBA — that are presented in ways that mimic the originals.

What sets “Mamma Mia!” apart from most shows of this time is that it was the first to attempt to create a story around the songs, to make something that more or less works as theater while still appealing to the sense of nostalgia in which jukebox musicals traffic.

Theatre Tulsa opened its 97th season Aug. 9 at the Tulsa PAC with its production of “Mamma Mia!,” which incorporates 24 songs by Benny Anderssen and Bjorn Ulvaeus into a whimsy about love and family, past and present.

For those who may have missed “Mamma Mia!” during its 14 years on Broadway, its three national tours (which came to Tulsa four times) or the two movies the show has inspired, “Mamma Mia!” is about a woman named Donna (Ashlee Osborn), who lives on a Greek island, where for the past 20 years she has run the taverna that supports her and her daughter, Sophie (Brenna D’Onofrio).

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What upsets this relatively idyllic life is Sophie's impending wedding to a fellow called Sky (Peter Lee) and the fact that Sophie wants a traditional wedding, complete with her father walking her down the aisle.

It's just that, 20-odd years ago, Donna had three paramours during the summer that Sophie was conceived, and any one of them could be the father.

Sophie's solution is to invite all three — Sam (Chris Williams), an architect; Bill (Todd Malicoate), a travel writer and adventurer; and Harry (Steven Osborn), a British banker — to the wedding, convinced that she will be able to ferret out the father among them.

Also arriving are two of Donna's longtime friends, Tanya (Kristin D. Robert) and Rosie (Kristen Simpson), who in their halcyon days were a trio known as Donna and Dynamos.

Suffice it to say, comic confusion and a great many peppy songs ensue.

While "Mamma Mia!" may have a story that is wafer-thin and characters who have only slightly more depth, this is by no means an easy show.

The music of ABBA is as complex as it is catchy, and the demands of the show's staging, which director Lisa Fox handled well, means that the performers are more or less in constant motion while singing these songs.

Friday's opening night performance demonstrated a bit of that difficulty. The first two numbers that feature Donna with her Dynamos — “Chiquitita” and “Dancing Queen” — had some serious problems with harmony and phrasing.

However, just a short time later, the trio nailed the a cappella opening of “Super Trouper,” which seemed to settle everyone down.

This did not make things any easier for Williams, who has to perform two songs — “SOS” and “Knowing Me, Knowing You” — that are at the limits of his vocal range (to be honest, I've never heard an actor in this role be able to hit all the notes required in these two numbers).

The women fare much better — not too surprising, as the bulk of ABBA's songs were written for the group's female members. Ashlee Osborn's major songs come in the second half, and she gives “Slipping Through My Fingers” a wonderful poignancy and comes close to stopping the show with an impassioned “The Winner Takes It All.”

D'Onofrio is a winning Sophie, mixing innocence and impetuosity in equal measure and demonstrating powerful, assured singing in the romantically athletic duet “Lay All Your Love On Me” with Lee, the peppy “Honey, Honey” and the dream number “Under Attack.”

As is often the case with this musical, the sidekicks made every effort to steal the show, with Robert as the man-eating Tanya snapping off one-liners to great effect and sending the pool boys into paroxysms of unrequited passion in “Does Your Mother Know,” while Simpson is a hoot as she chases Malicoate around the stage in “Take a Chance on Me.”

Of the men, Steven Osborn does the best job, in the relatively restrained numbers “Thank You for the Music” and “Our Last Summer.”

Music director Machele Miller Dill assembled a fine ensemble that added necessary richness to many of the songs, and sound designer Grant Goodner made these vocals crystal clear, with a sound mix that kept the pre-recorded tracks from competing with the human voices.

“Mamma Mia!” continues with weekend performances through Sept. 1. For ticket information: 918-596-7111, tulsapac.com.

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