

Dancing queens



The music of ABBA fills up Chico Theater Company

Channeling the disco spirit (from left):
Judi Stricklan, Leah Christie and Christi Harrington.
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Pop music fans of the world are divided into two camps, it seems: those who love the music of the 1970s and '80s Swedish hit makers ABBA and those who wouldn't mind it a bit if they never heard "Dancing Queen" again.

That split no doubt also applies to *Mamma Mia!*, the mega-hit musical built on ABBA's songs that enjoyed a 14-year run on Broadway and, according to the website of the musical's brainchild and original producer, Judy Craymer, has been seen by more than 60 million people worldwide.

by
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Review:
Mamma Mia! shows
Thursday-Saturday,
7:30 p.m. and
Sunday, 2 p.m.,
through Feb. 24.
Tickets: \$16-\$22

You can add additional numbers to that figure, thanks to the production of *Mamma Mia!* now being presented by Chico Theater Company at its Eaton Road playhouse. On Saturday (Jan. 28), when I attended, the theater was packed.

More than a few reviewers of other productions of *Mamma Mia!* have noted that the play doesn't bear close scrutiny. One critic's assessment that it's "hokey, implausible and silly" is shared by many others. And yet it offers a dizzying kind of fun that fans find irresistible. As one writer advises, "Audiences should come prepared to check their cynicism at the door and become dancing queens, boogying giddily into the night."

I didn't see anyone actually dancing while the audience was filing out of the theater, but they were certainly a happy bunch.

For all its success on Broadway and in other major cities, *Mamma Mia!* is solid community theater fare. A jukebox musical with two dozen songs from ABBA's heyday—from "Honey, Honey" (1972) to "Thank You for the Music" (1983)—it rarely slows down. If one tune features a vocalist who struggles with pitch, the

next will be sung by someone like Leah Christie, the powerhouse performer who plays Donna Sheridan, the "mamma" of the title. The stage lights up every time she's on it.

The plot requires some suspension of disbelief. Cobbled together by British playwright Catherine Johnson to accommodate all those ABBA songs, it's predicated on the notion that some 20 years ago Donna had a series of three brief affairs on the Greek island where she now operates a small resort. One of them is the father of her 20-year-old daughter, Sophie (nicely played by Talia Rempel), who is to be married in a day or so. But which one? That's the driving mystery of the play.

All her life Sophie has yearned to know who her father is, and when she finds her mother's diary and learns about the three men, she secretly invites them to the wedding, hoping to find out which is her dad. Shenanigans and sentiment follow.

The three men (played by Bill Petree, Michael Walker and Tom O'Connor) are joined by two women (Christi Harrington and Judi Stricklan) who, years ago, were members of Donna's rock band, Donna and the Dynamos.

Overall, these key players—guided by Music Director Tamara Allspaugh—do justice to ABBA's songs, and fans of the pop group will greatly enjoy them. Those who don't jump for joy when they hear "Waterloo," well, they probably should stay home.

The production's choreography is a mixed bag. There sometimes are as many as 22 people on the stage, not all of them skilled dancers. Then again, this is community theater, and they make up in enthusiasm and joyful spirit what they lack in training.

An especially impressive aspect of this production is the set, designed by the play's director, CTC founder and head honcho Marc C. Edson. It revolves, thereby creating as many as three or four different sets, some inside, some outside, allowing for quick transitions between songs.

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