

SOLD OUT CROWDS & STANDING OVATIONS

By Barbara Yoresh

former correspondent for the Treasure Coast Newspapers

Can something of decades past still have enough relevance and impact to stir one's soul and literally knock your socks off? A resounding “yes!” – as demonstrated by the cast of Jon Putzke’s Theatre-Go-Round (TGR) Dinner Theatre now, in their 12th season, ensconced in the gorgeous Crystal Room at the Costa d’Este beachside resort and premiering the songs of one of pop music’s most enduring acts.

With the rather unpronounceable names of Agnetha Faltskog, Anni-Frid Lyngstad, Bjorn Alvaeus and (whew, easy) Benny Andersson, it was far easier to call the singing quartet ABBA, an acronym for their collective first names.

And so it was that the Swedish-based pop music group - whose earliest iterations go back 50 years – became worldwide legends with their uniquely tuneful and singable songs. And though the quartet who paired up and married (and subsequently divorced) decided to take a performing break in 1982 from which they never returned; the magic of their music and endurance of their sound remains as strong today as when the songs lit up the record charts in the 1970s.

Having inspired the theatrical musical “Mamma Mia” which premiered in 1999 in London and two subsequent “Mamma Mia” movies – which all became global hits – it is entirely fitting and timely that Putzke would conceive a show of ABBA’s best music. And perhaps it is something of an ultimate “no brainer” that the TGR cast is comprised of two female and two male singers in perfect replication of the original quartet.

“The Best of ABBA; Thank You for the Music!” debuted March 24 to a sold-out crowd. And while talented and veteran TGR performers Beth McKenzie-Shestak, Greg Harris, Caitlin Harris and Brendan Wenger have grown familiar and beloved to regular TGR patrons, they upped their game in the treatment of this music and earned a well-deserved standing ovation at evening’s end.

While standing ovations may be common in conventional theatre venues, they are rarely seen given in a dinner theatre environment. It was just that kind of performance.

In fact, two weeks prior to opening, the entire first run of the new show was a sell-out, thereby demanding an extended run. And that is hardly something Putzke is unfamiliar with having had previous “by-popular-demand” success with shows including “Riverboats and Ragtime”, “Forever in Blue Jeans” and “Between the Moon and New York City.”

As Putzke noted, the successful ABBA musical “Mamma Mia” and the resulting movie versions prompted “a huge resurgence in their music. ABBA was a phenomenon that just happened.”

“This show couldn’t have been a more perfect choice for our cast with its four-part harmony,” Putzke said.

It was wife Marg, who strongly urged Putzke to do the show following the popularity of the “Mamma Mia” movies and the obvious timelessness of ABBA’s music.

Though TGR performers were born after ABBA took its seemingly final hiatus 37 years ago, they quickly took to the music during rehearsals.

“All four got very enthusiastic and had fun doing it,” Putzke said and also noted that the cast had the show solidly learned and choreographed in surprisingly short order.

As if the sparkling Crystal Room venue were not gorgeous enough, its visual impact paled in comparison to the eye-popping colorful and glittering costumes fashioned by Marg Putzke who now also serves as the most delightfully charming hostess for arriving TGR patrons. Marg’s costuming – she once did a stint as costume designer for cruise ship entertainers – has always been perfectly themed to each show. She, too, deserved a standing ovation for the brilliantly colored and spangled outfits which were worthy of a Las Vegas stage.

Presenting a 16-song performance of ABBA’s most popular and a few lesser-known hits, the TGR quartet wowed the audience who hooted and roared their approval, thereby further inspiring them to new heights of entertainment.

Who dreamed that Wenger could be so preciously “flirtatious” with women “of an age?!” Who knew that Greg Harris could offer up splits of champagne to those in the audience who correctly guessed trivia questions about ABBA and then would help them drink it up?! Who knew that the music would be presented so wonderfully that even one of the waiters would end up dancing with Wenger and Harris?!

And the Shestak and Caitlin Harris duo with breathtaking soprano voices onstage and off amid the crowd – they never sounded better and they’ve never sounded less than grand.

This show and its performers, costuming and tech support was simply perfect in its scintillating visuals and awesome sound. But there was still more.

At what seemed to be the end of the evening, there was an encore of two songs which have become ABBA’s most signature and beloved. “Mamma Mia’ got the crowd on its feet and singing along. But the final song – and ABBA’s biggest hit – “Dancing Queen” inspired the audience to its own previously unseen heights of enjoyment.

And I must confess that amid the glory of those sights and sounds, this almost 70-year-old became emotional to see my contemporary ladies reliving the memory of their own “Dancing Queen – only seventeen” years and once again seeing themselves dancing under disco balls of years past.

Go see this truly awesome show.