

**Movie Review: Mamma Mia!
Streep and co-stars make Swede music**



Genres: Comedy, Musical, Romance

Running Time: 108 min

MPAA rating: PG-13 (for some sex-related comments)

Release Date: July 18, 2008

Tags: There are no tags.

By Lawrence Toppman (rates on a 4-star scale) The Charlotte Observer

Before Meryl Streep ever appeared in a movie, she gave one of the finest performances I've seen in more than four decades of playgoing. She starred off-Broadway as Hallelujah Lil, a Salvation Army lass redeeming a gangster's soul in Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's comic "Happy End."

Streep sang, danced and cracked wise with impeccable timing and irresistible stage presence, inspiring the only fan letter I've ever written. I predicted a great career for her as a musical comedy lead, and whaddya know? A mere 31 years later, I'm right!

She's the nominal star of "Mamma Mia!," leading a cast of old reliables and happy surprises through infectious music by the Swedish pop group Abba. To see her is to realize only half her talent has been tapped throughout her career, and to be reminded how few musicals (or movies of any kind) target folks in their 50s as well as those in their 20s.

The film, vividly directed by newcomer Phyllida Lloyd and cannily written by Catherine Johnson, begins and ends quietly. It doesn't start with an "introduce the heroine" number or close with the usual "gang's all here" finale.

In fact (skip this paragraph if you don't like spoilers), it's different from traditional musicals, end to end. The three older guys don't pair off with the three older women in the way we expect. And only after the film ends do we realize that the central question will never get answered.

A riddle powers the plot from the opening scene: Who impregnated Streep's character 21 years ago, unwittingly fathering her only child?

Sophie (Amanda Seyfried) has read her mom's 1980s diary and invited the three likeliest candidates to her wedding on a Greek island, believing she'll instantly recognize her dad among Bill (Stellan Skarsgård), Harry (Colin Firth) and Sam (Pierce Brosnan).

Donna (Streep) has no idea they're coming and has invited backup singers from her long-ago band, Donna and the Dynamos (Julie Walters and Christine Baranski). Meanwhile, Sky (Dominic Cooper) wonders why his fiancée seems confused and excited and loving all at once.

The farce-like hijinks settle down, and genuine emotions creep in: Streep's bitter rendition of "The Winner Takes It All" shows us a woman who has reluctantly accepted lifelong solitude but still hates Sam for leaving her alone decades before. The songs, all wisely used, can also be funny: The wry Baranski gently lets down a young hardbody with "Does Your Mother Know?" and gives the number a different spin from Abba's.

The weak points in the film are the men's vocals: They're good sports and solid actors but poor singers. (Brosnan is plug-your-ears abysmal.) Baranski, a musical veteran, comes off well, and Seyfried's gentle soprano is endearing.

The chorus backs the soloists powerfully, and they are as fresh as the rest of the film: fat and fit, homely and handsome, young gods and old codgers – in short, people you might really see in Greece. Reality in a musical? That alone makes it worth your open-eared attention.

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