

## THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL REASONS CONTRIBUTING TO THE WIDESPREAD EFFECTS OF THE ABBA SONG-BASED MUSICAL *MAMMA MIA*

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**Abstract.** The ABBA music-based musical *Mamma Mia* has been being performed on the world's multiple theater stages since the 1990s. It has appealed to myriad audiences ranging in ages and genders regardless the cultural and language differences. It has gained both art and financial success worldwide. What account for the huge effects of this musical on audiences are, namely, the touching story plot about love and friendship with mentions of the contemporary social issues related to feminism or generation gaps; stimulation for nostalgia about the beautiful past enabling to relieve the present pains, identify personal values, connect generations and community; and harmonious combination of stage performance (including music/singing, dancing, lighting, costumes, and stage setting). This essay focuses on all these aspects to give an explanation of how cultural materials of the past are re-created in the present as well as to indicate individual concerns and needs of contemporary life.

**Keywords:** ABBA, *Mamma Mia*, musical, nostalgia, choreography, vocal/vocality.

### 1. Introduction

*Mamma Mia* the musical has become a global hit and has performances in 190 cities on three continents. This raises the question of why this show is so appealing to the audience. A part of the explanation for this question is about its finest pop songs ever written and performed by the supergroup ABBA from Sweden during the 70s and 80s. Apart from this, *Mamma Mia* is viewed as an ultimate “feel-good tale of love conquering all”. Even for anyone who shows no interest in theaters, musicals, or ABBA group, this show still can conquer them all anyway (Lee, 2009) [1]. In this essay, the widespread effects of the staged *Mamma Mia* are analyzed in an even more detailed way to give a full answer to the above-mentioned question. In brief, three main factors are making the worldwide success of the stage version of *Mamma Mia*, are the soundness of the script (in congruency with Lee (2009) [1] stimulation of nostalgia, and splendid stage performance with all genres of art such as music and vocality (in agreement with Lee (2009) [1], choreography, lighting, stage setting, and costume design. They all make *Mamma*

Mia the musical as the global stage smash which then turned out to be a hit film with no less success (Travers, 2018) [2]. But no proof is strong enough as the sign of success when all viewers stand up from their seats in the theater and involve themselves in mindless singing and dancing, joining with the performers in the grand finale of the show (Lewis, 2022) [3]. Even more, this success is also illustrated by its huge worldwide gross, according to Forbes, which exceeded \$2 billion in 2015 alone, while separately the trade group Broadway League, grossed more than \$600 million (Beech, 2018) [4]. Mamma Mia the musical has a high percentage of audience rotation all around the world (Lee, 2009) [1]. Therefore, the grossing will probably continue to escalate for the illustration of its success.

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Brief History of the ABBA Pop Band

ABBA is viewed as one of the most successful pop bands in music history. Being formed in 1972 in Sweden, it consisted of four members whose first names were taken to abbreviate the name of the group, which are Agnetha Faltskog, Bjorn Ulvaeus, Benny Anderson, and Anni-Frid Lystad. The group became the first from Sweden to win the Eurovision award in 1974 with its hit *Waterloo*. During ten years of stardom and success, ABBA was recognized as one of the favorite groups in music fans' hearts around the world (Campbell, 2023) [5].

#### 2.1.1. ABBA Group Members and Their Current Exploits.

Being born in the 1950s Agnetha Faltskog is the youngest group member. She got married to the group fellow (Bjorn) and stayed with the group until its break-up between 1982-1983. Back then she went for her solo career and released one solo album. In 1983 she played a leading role in the Swedish movie named *Raskenstam*. During 17 years of hiatus (1983-2004) Faltskog sought solace and stayed away from the spotlight of the media. When the ABBA-based movie *Mamma Mia* was released in 2018, she agreed to step out for the first official group photo after 22 years of break-up. Summer of 2017 marked the reunion of ABBA bandmates for the record of two new songs *I Still Have Faith in You* and *Don't Shut Me Down*. Faltskog, who used to take the bus to commute to the show because of her fear of flight, now still lives quite a private life in Ekerö, Sweden (Campbell, 2023) [5].

Bjorn Ulvaeus was successful even before the formation of the ABBA group due to his role in another Swedish folk band Hootenanny Singers, which was so popular in the Scandinavian region. During his time in Hootenanny Singers, Ulvaeus met Benny Anderson, who then became another key member of the future ABBA band. Marrying Agnetha Faltskog in 1971 they formed one of two couples of the legendary ABBA. They together had two children and then divorced in 1979. Regarding the upcoming Eurovision Song Contest in Liverpool in 2023, Ulvaeus believed it unites Europe to stand for Ukraine. He stated that behind the shallow and fun show, it seems to be, Eurovision has a deeper meaning underneath, it is the unification of the whole of Europe. He also expressed his interest in participating in the edition of the 2023 Eurovision organized in Liverpool, England. Ulvaeus now owns Pophouse, a private entertainment company, which has a strong influence on the immersive ABBA: Voyage concert experience (Campbell, 2023) [5].

Before joining ABBA Benny Andersson played for one of the famous Swedish pop groups in the 1960s, Hep Stars, as a keyboardist. Having written many songs for the Swedish music contest (Melodifestivalen, similar to Eurovision) in 1969, Andersson met Anni-Frid Lyngstad (the other ABBA female singer) at the event and then married her. After the ABBA break-up, he co-wrote the stage musical *Chess* with Ulvaeus. He also joined his hand to compose additional music for *Mamma Mia* released in 2008. Andersson created Benny Anderssons Orkester (BAO), a folk group featuring some Swedish famous folk musicians, and released five studio albums up to now. He has successively appeared on Swedish television with his band (Campbell, 2023) [5].

Despite being a member of the Swedish superband, Anni-Frid Lyngstad's place of birth is Norway. She made her first solo album (*Frida*) in 1971, before joining ABBA, which was produced by her co-star and husband-to-be Andersson. In her 1992 marriage to Prince Reuss of Plauen, with a sovereign title Lyngstad holds the official title of Princess Anni-Frid Reuss, Dowager Countess of Plauen. As an environmentalist, Lyngstad often does charity work. From 2027, she has been in a relationship with Henry Smith, 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount Hambleden, a peer from Britain, who himself is a descendant of the founders of British stationary group WHSmith (Campbell, 2023) [5].

ABBA has never announced their break-up officially, but their last public concert was in December 1982 on The Late, Late Break Show (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

### **2.1.2. ABBA Iconic Hit Songs.**

*Waterloo* is the song with which ABBA won the victory at the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest in Brighton. After this success, the route to world fame was open for the group. *Waterloo* song uses the battle failure of Napoleon in 1815 defeated by the Duke of Wellington as a metaphor to describe the woman who surrendered herself to a relationship, similar to Napoleon's situation. *Waterloo* amazingly launched ABBA's international career. The group manager traveled around the world to make sure that the song's vinyl copies were sent to the major radio stations if ABBA won the contest. And it worked, the song hit the top in some countries even in the UK (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

In 1976 *Mamma Mia* removed Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* and took over the top. When recording the group was taking a new direction and a different way to arrange the music. It was also the first time that ABBA used their techniques, in which the profile and face-on shots were used to make the video for *Mamma Mia* (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

ABBA's *Dancing Queen* is the song that guarantees to make even the shyest dancers take their steps to dance. Bjorn was so surprised when the song exerted its effects like a dance floor filler. He thought the song was still too slow for really good dance music. However, its energy just put people in a good mood for dance when the music was on. *Dancing Queen* was played on the group's first major tour to Europe and Australia. The tour was explosive and the band was encircled by hundreds of fans on every step they went. Agnetha, therefore, later confessed that this fan overexcitement even worsened her fear of crowds. In 2015, *Dancing Queen* was honored at the Grammy Hall of Fame (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

*Gimme Gimme Gimme* was recorded in 1979 for the promotion of their North American and European, included in their 6<sup>th</sup> album *Voulez-Vous*. ABBA was not a disco band, but they still did it with their style and interpretation. *Gimme Gimme Gimme* was another prominent dance song of the group, and nowadays people still ask DJs to include

it into their sets. A famous American singer Madonna reportedly asked permission from ABBA to use this song in her single *Hung Up*. They split the copyright half and half. So, ABBA is believed to earn millions from *Hung Up*, Madonna's worldwide smash hit (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

Being viewed as an emotional rollercoaster, the lyrics of *The Winner Takes It All* were written by Bjorn after he divorced Agnetha in 1979. After the divorce, Agnetha needed therapy and Bjorn had a new love right after. Bjorn said there was no matter of winners and losers in their divorce as they both lost. But he also admitted that it was true to some extent, it then explained why the song was so emotional. *The Winner Takes It All* was meant for Agnetha so she put 150% of her effort into interpreting it. After its release in 1980, the song was voted as Britain's favorite ABBA song and the country's favorite break-up song. The performance of this song is also Agnetha's favorite one at all times, and whenever she is in a bad mood she often listens to it (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

Bjorn wrote the lyrics for *When All Is Said and Done* after Benny and Frida decided to leave the band. He hoped for approval from the couple before the band stayed together to work on it. One month after they left, the song was recorded in March 1981. Anni Frid said that the song had all her pain and sorrow, it was all about her. And it hit Anni Frid so hard that she found it difficult to sing. *When All Is Said and Done* marked the beginning of the end. Any question about that time would get no specific answer from ABBA. They would give only a general answer that they worked together as they always did and there was no big problem at that time. However, it depends on whom the question was given to. For men, it was easier for them to keep on working, but it was not the same for women (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

*One of Us* was the first single after the divorces of the two couples. It is also viewed as another break-up anthem that describes how a woman tried to revive a relationship after it ended. There were shades of split in a part of the lyrics. The signs of the imminent demise are also seen on the cover of ABBA single, on which they were standing in a distances. The art director said that they no longer felt themselves as one group, but four individuals instead. The cover was so telling, but ABBA members did not mean it at that time and only noticed it afterward (Wynarczyk, 2021) [6].

## 2.2. Catherine Johnson and Mamma Mia, the Musical in Brief

Catherine Johnson is the scriptwriter, who was in charge of transforming ABBA's greatest songs into *Mamma Mia*, the musical. She started to write by reading the lyrics of ABBA songs. She then learned that most of them are about relationships and have much deeper meanings than she would have realized before. Johnson's story of a single mother (Donna) is fashioned into a warm and happy musical. Donna was living on a Greek island with her daughter (Sophie). Before her wedding Sophie secretly invited three of her mother's ex-lovers, any one of whom could be her biological father, to take her down the aisle. And *Mamma Mia!* They all three arrive on the island for the wedding (Stevens, 2003) [7].

Johnson nicely weaved more than 20 ABBA songs including *The Winner Takes It All*, *Dancing Queen* and *Take a Chance on Me* into *Mamma Mia* play, making it unbelievably successful across countries around the world. As soon as the play was released, Johnson knew what she did was something special to the audiences. She could

not expect such a great response from the audience despite some of the criticisms that made her feel hurt (Stevens, 2003) [7].

One of the significances of the show is that the duo of a composer (Benny Anderson) and a lyricist (Bjorn Ulvaeus) in association with the female stage team (producer, director, and writer) have made the show exclusively for women, by women and about women. On the stage, the actresses shine bright in three great roles (Stevens, 2003) [7]. Possibly, the reason behind this lies in their voices. The female voices are the source of inspiration, which draws the greatest fascination including the deepest ambivalence. As the women's voices show signs of sexual otherness, and also sexual and cultural power (Dunn et al, 1997) [40] it may link to the huge success expanded to the whole world of Mamma Mia the musical, in which female vocalists are the major part of the cast. The movie versions of Mamma Mia were made with the screenplay written by Catherine Johnson, which hit the highest-grossing British movie of all time (Gardner, 2009) [8].

## **2.3. The Main Reasons Behind the Widespread Effects of Mamma Mia the Musical**

Before going into the analysis of the target matter, it is stated that among the chosen reasons there is no claim that any of those is more important than the others. They all seem to be on the same scale of anthropological importance and if there exists any comparison among them, this is regarded only as a subjectivity. These are viewed in brief as follows: sound script of the musical, nostalgia for the old time (specifically the 70s and 80s), and outstanding stage performance.

### **2.3.1. Sound Script of Mamma Mia the Musical**

Mamma Mia is a story about a heroin named Donna Sheridan who lived the free love dream. Three of her boyfriends left her pregnant without knowing who the father of her child was. She gave birth to a daughter Sophie, who later got married but wanted to know who her true father was to walk her down the aisle (Caplan, 2012) [28]. By reading her mother's diary Sophie discovered that her father would be anyone among these three men in the diary. She decided to invite all three men to the wedding on the Greek island, where her mother ran a taverna (Brantley, 2001) [20]. That they all came for the wedding made the climax of the story. Most of the story's jokes and tensions, besides a few predictable subplots but the little additional story, are not about the characters or the story, but about how the story is set up going in line with ABBA songs (Murray, 2001) [29].

Mamma Mia is a story about the issues of contemporary life such as love, friendship, generation gaps, and feminism, which is told beautifully interwoven with ABBA songs. This story is likened to a fairytale or love story in which the love between a mother and a daughter (Donna and Sophie), between two lovers (Sophie and Sky), and between a woman and man (Donna and her three ex-lovers) are depicted (Knight, 2020) [30]. Also, in this story the audience can witness a female friendship among three ladies (Donna, Rosie, and Tanya), who never change in spite of their ages, giving the young people hope that even the time passes by, they will still stay the same people as they were, and no change around would change this. This friendship is viewed as a joy of the musical (Wroe, 2023) [21]. Besides, the mother-daughter relationship between Donna and Sophie is a tight bond that is put at the heart of the musical. Their relationship is rocky sometimes (like in any other family) as they plug themselves into this ready-made family, but this is

also what strengthens their small family. The whole musical mirrors the daughter's wedding with the related events, high tensions, and strong emotions between them because the mother (Donna) is sensitive and vulnerable but the daughter (Sophie) is passionate and clear-minded, and she questions everything (Knight, 2020) [30]. Additionally, the message of feminism is clearly seen in this musical. This is a vivid feminist celebration of the single motherhood (Mendelson, 2018) [31]. Donna, though viewed by Knight (2020) [30] as a sensitive and vulnerable woman, still holds a strong and independent personality. She has a free and clear mind as she lives her life following her heart and desires and raises up a smart and capable child without a man beside her. Meanwhile, her daughter (Sophie) sets a more conventional frame of dreams and expectations. She secretly sent wedding invitation letters to all her three possible fathers even though she grew up, again, without them (Brody, 2018) [32]. Sophie knows what she wants, or at least she does think so until she reaches what she wants to know about by continuing to question it (Knight, 2020) [30]. The feminist message also comes from the supporting roles of Donna's friends (Rosie and Tanya) with their light flair and self-resistance (Hardy, 2022) [13]. When concerning the question of feminism, from which there is still such a huge inspiration leading to controversy, and even a negative response from the general public (Offen, 1998) [41]. This is an explanation for the large expansion of the *Mamma Mia* effect as it regards a social matter worldwide. People everywhere keep going to the theater for the show because *Mamma Mia* tells their story, evokes their concerns and reflects the contemporary issues (namely feminism).

It can be pointed out that the given themes in *Mamma Mia* the musical are people's concerns in their social life. Feminism and women's friendship have been viewed even in the academic context with Suzanna Rose's and Laurie Roades's work as a significant (feminism and women's friendships, Suzanna Rose and Laurie Roades, University of Missouri, St. Louis, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 1987, 11, 243-254, printed in the United States of America) [33]. Although the results of their work are not the focus of this essay, it is mentioned as a support to confirm the widespread effect of the staged *Mamma Mia*. The theme of love is another focus of *Mamma Mia* the musical as the feeling of love is referred to as chemicals forming all the magic that lovers experience. For why love is so important in life. As explained by scientists, love causes a person's body to release feel-good hormones and neurochemicals that promote certain positive reactions. When being in love, the levels of dopamine, adrenaline and norepinephrine become high. That explains why the notion of love is chemically attached to human life and any kind of love (love for children, relatives, or friends) is the premise for people to do things even beyond their capabilities like saving the planet or humanity (Vedanta, 2014) [34]. Lastly, the generation gap, which is seen in the musical through the mother-daughter relationship, is not confined only to a certain family or nation. This matter is considered global, it is shared in China, Europe, and America (Brahm, 2019) [35]. Unlike fifty years ago when people spoke up loud about the generation gap, nowadays it has become invisible but yet as challenging as climate change, public debt, pensions, or the labor force (Ferry, 2016) [36].

*Mamma Mia* carries sound content with contemporary matters by telling an appealing story full of moist-eyed sincerity. And this story is so sincere that it goes beyond camp (Brantley, 2001) [20]. From the start to the end, the story is viewed campy (Seaward,

2022) [37], which finishes so beautifully with a madcap wedding that would even make Shakespeare proud (Tongue, 2018) [10].

### **2.3.2. The Nostalgia for the Old Time.**

Mamma Mia is a musical written based on ABBA (a Swedish quartet, formed in 1972 and is one of the most successful pop bands in the world music) (Campbell, 2023) [5] songs. Their songs have been loved and sung along by the generations of the 70s and 80s. Being born and growing up in its heyday, an ABBA fan has found its music upbeat and danceable. So, she now goes for its show at any time it comes to town in New Jersey. And the music has brought the fan back to her unforgettable childhood with ABBA music. It is shared by another woman from New York that the happiness of listening to the ABBA songs has pushed her to sing aloud, swing her body to dance and enjoy the music to the fullest. The ABBA music has also pulled them back to the past when the other fans were in their parent's house in Seattle. They turned off the light, put on their mother's long nightgowns, swung the flashlights and danced as if they were the band. One of the fans even remembered her childhood in India when the girls were not allowed to party out, so her father decided to set a party for his daughter and the other tween friends with ABBA music. Many of these girls joining that party have become lawyers and doctors now but still remember deeply the ABBA dancing party at that time. The music of ABBA has made the listeners stay tuned with it regardless of different political systems, language barriers or different preferences for music genres. One living his childhood during the Communist period in Poland said that he encountered the West by the ABBA music aired on Polish television and he found no dissonance. It was believed by him as a happy time. Even more, a woman recalled her youth modeling in Japan, where people with limited English knew well the lyrics of every single ABBA song. ABBA music was played nonstop in every studio in Japan during her stay there. Another fifty men from Columbia with tropical rhythms and influences shared that ABBA has brought them back to their carefree adolescence and vibrated their senses like never before (Stanford, 2021) [9].

The ABBA songs spread down further to Australia, and until now top politicians and music executives still keep talking about ABBA's tour to Australia in 1977. They stated that ABBA music, specifically played in Mamma Mia, is not only about the musical but also about themselves. In more detail, ABBA is viewed as their entire childhood with its music played in their parents' cars, at Eurovision parties and confetti, or dancing floor at every wedding reception (Tongue, 2018) [10]. Again, ABBA is likely to return people back to their youth or innocent times (Bunoan, 2018) [11] and give them time to heal themselves (Elias, 2020) [12]. Apart from the music, Mamma Mia the musical also relives the audience's youth with theatrical costumes worn for boogie on the stage (Hardy, 2022) [13]. This detail seems to be minor but it is an explanation for the strong effect of Mamma Mia play worldwide.

While Mamma Mia offers the audiences an experience to go back to the past, it also indicates a contemporary social phenomenon. While people are inclined to their old times with a strong sentiment, mostly the positive one, it would also mean that they are facing their own challenges in modern life. By looking back to the past years of life, even if they were the hard ones, people hope to seek something to relieve their hardship at the present (Elias, 2020) [12]. Several studies claimed the same point with different illustrations and even made it into a more comprehensive picture with extended findings. So, it is

reasonable to view nostalgia (coined by Merriam Webster as “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning or return to or of some part period or irrecoverable condition” (Austin, 2022) [14] in relation to Mamma Mia-based nostalgia in any case possible. As claimed by Batcho (2017) [15], nostalgia often occurs during transition periods such as turning into adulthood or aging into retirement alongside dislocation or alienation caused by military conflict, moving to a new place, or technological advancements. ABBA fans have turned their ages from 20 to 70 (Stanford, 2021) [9] compatible with the nostalgia-driven age. Nostalgia is triggered by many elements such as meals, smells, or social meetings (Austin, 2022) [14], but music seems to be the quickest way to induce it (Tierney, 2013) [16]. Based on this statement it is explained why Mamma Mia the musical has had such a strong effect on its audiences.

Besides, nostalgia is a universal feeling, having no relation with cultural differences and it may occur with a small child from seven years old forward (Tierney, 2013) [16]. Turning to Mamma Mia the musical, it covers 22 ABBA greatest hits, has gone on to perform in 20 languages all around the world, starting from London in the 1990s, and is being welcomed by multiple generations (Spirou, 2023) [17]. Since it is being loved by a wide range of generations, Mamma Mia helps to connect the generations. A mother and a daughter (in New Jersey) may not have the same taste for music but they both love ABBA songs. In many cases, young people miss their family members who passed away but still hold a strong connection with them through ABBA music. For example, a late grandmother in Chile made her granddaughter an ABBA fan like her. Or a girl, being taken by her late grandmother to see Mamma Mia on Broadway, moved to live in her grandmother’s house in Massachusetts to take care of her during the last months of her life. They together had a blast, driving the car on the highway with the open windows and listening to the ABBA songs. Another Puerto Rican man always felt safe and protected while listening to the ABBA song *Chiquitita* on a long-playing record given to him by his father. Or, again, a father in India set up an ABBA party for his daughter and other peer girls at home as the girls were not let go out for the party at that time (Stanford, 2021) [9]. All of the given cases prove that nostalgia, triggered by Mamma Mia the musical, brings people from different generations closer and this bond seems hard to be built up by other social approaches.

In addition to the above, people may nostalgize by comparing the present with the old time and it is believed to have some drawbacks. In the case of the old and sick people, referring to the past when they were younger and healthier would remind them of their poor physical condition at the moment and they see no bright future ahead (Tierney, 2013) [16]. So, it can be said that nostalgia might be bittersweet (but sweetness is stronger than bitterness) (Routledge, 2021) [18]. From another angle of view, nostalgia can be categorized into two types, one of these promotes resilience and personal development but the other leads to an obsession of escaping the present (Batcho, 2017) [15]. In some of the situations, people nostalgize because of sadness, loneliness, meaninglessness, uncertainty, or boredom (Routledge, 2021) [18]. Probably for these statements nostalgia was considered in the past as a negative tendency. But nowadays this view has been refuted. Nostalgia is now believed to liberate people from their own adversity by promoting their personal identity as well as development (Batcho, 2017) [15] and promoting social connections (Campbell, 2023) [19].

Applying all of the above to *Mamma Mia* the musical, the nostalgia audiences experience while watching it reminds them of the world where each one of them is the star of his or her own music video, the one he or she can create at any mini karaoke sound stages in theme parks (Brantley, 2001) [20]. At the opening night, they were singing (aloud with pride or under their breath if with no vocal talent), undertaking chair-dancing with enthusiasm. They were themselves and engaged in singing and dancing as if they were in stadium rock rather than musical theater and forgot about any limitation preventing them from being in the way they were (Tongue, 2018) [10]. Furthermore, *Mamma Mia* nostalgia makes people believe that their youth has never gone away, they do not change as time goes by, and they are still the same people as they were even if they are getting old or things change around (Wrode, 2023) [21]. While clapping happily to the ABBA music in the theater, people recognized that they have been listening to ABBA for the whole of their life, and ABBA melodies are available everywhere in their life, in an elevator, supermarket or dentist's office. *Mamma Mia* manipulates audiences but the audiences themselves do feel that they belong to this manipulative process (Brantley, 2001) [20]. All of these factors indicate that the nostalgia for *Mamma Mia* helps people to define, recover and develop themselves with clear minds in the contemporary lifetime channel.

Apart from that *Mamma Mia* the musical contributes to pushing people closer each to other forming a social network among them. That *Mamma Mia* is performed across the world in 20 languages (Spirou, 2023) [17] implies that it brings people together. People go to the theater, enjoy the music, sing aloud, and dance with a fist pump, floaty gestures, and near-collective cases of head nodding for *Mamma Mia* (Tongue, 2018) [10]. The performers are shaped with many different body types that make the audience feel easy as they think they may be one of those on the stage. A beguiling illusion is created that they want to jump onto the stage and fit right into the music and dance (Brantley, 2001) [20]. Therefore, it seems like there is no barrier between the stage and seat rows for the audience in the theater. It is estimated that 60 million people have seen *Mamma Mia* in 20 language versions in the world, including the Mandarin version as the first ever produced Western musical in China (Encalada, 2017) [22]. As the stage version was inspired, the movie versions were made with *Mamma Mia 1* and *Mamma Mia 2, Here We Go Again* with Meryl Streep starring in the leading role of Donna. An understandably high number of people (over 65 million) have seen the movies (Spirou, 2023) [17]. Furthermore, as inspired by the two movie versions, a Shire Residence boutique hotel, so-called Hush, an immersive Greek-themed restaurant was opened. This is a must-visit for those *Mamma Mia* movie fans where they can enjoy the Greek taste of foods and sing along (Farrington, 2023) [23]. Besides, the *Mamma Mia* dining experience was brought to London in 2019 after being offered in Stockholm in 2016. It was an interactive dining experience with the setup of the taverna on the island of Skopelos, where *Mamma Mia 1* was shot. The Mediterranean cuisine was served, and the ABBA songs were performed. The movie atmosphere was created with actors and musicians playing out the story of the musical and singing to the soundtrack (Pedrosa, 2018) [24]. To please its fans, a huge Hostess cupcake was opened at the Winter Garden Theater in New York which is called *Mamma Mia* (Brantley, 2001) [20]. In addition to that, the Croatian island named Vis, the filming location of *Mamma Mia 2*, has been recommended as a destination *Mamma Mia* fans need to reach on their visit. On this island, the Italian essence with limestone

walkways overhung with balconies steps leading up to the hills behind is evident. Vis is seen as Greece designed by the Dutch; it is romantic but also practical and efficient at the same time. It is definitely worth visiting (Turner, 2018) [25]. Even more, *Mamma Mia*'s multiple stages, as well as its movie versions, including gay designer Owe Sandstrom's fabulous garish costumes and consummately crafted songs, has made itself the bull-eye of the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer) musical universe (Walters, 2021) [26].

Originally from *Mamma Mia* the musical, it has inspired the productions of *Mamma Mia* the movies and further led to social gatherings among those who love *Mamma Mia*. So, for this chain effect, *Mamma Mia* fans have an opportunity to meet up with each other not only in the theater but also somewhere else outside it. Then, it is reasonable to state that the nostalgia for *Mamma Mia* helps to reunite people from different corners of the world, making them a strong community, offline and probably online as well.

With many examples taken for granted (both within and beyond this context), it is undeniable that the solid account for the widespread *Mamma Mia* staged version is rooted in the nostalgia for the 70s and 80s of the previous century. Alongside this nostalgia and the sound script written by British playwright Catherine Johnson, who is considered by critics as a genius (Barnes, 2001) [27], there is still another factor making the worldwide effect of *Mamma Mia* the musical, which is related to the cast performance and setting on the stage.

### 2.3.3. Outstanding Stage Performance.

The most visible effect, brought by *Mamma Mia* the musical making it spread out worldwide, is probably the great stage performance including music, singing, lighting, dancing, setting, and costumes. To begin with the music, the musical is set to the ABBA songs. 22 songs from the Swedish Eurovision-winning pop band were chosen compatible with all scenes. The lyrics reflect the storyline beautifully. It seems that those songs composed more than twenty years ago, are tailor-made for the show (Lewis, 2022) [3]. In the story, Rosie and Bill go for a naughty and romantic love well-fit to *Take a Chance on Me* (Hardy, 2022) [13]. The three friends (Donna, Rosie, and Tanya) consoled each other with *Chiquitita*, rued about their financial situations with *Money Money Money*, and felt anxious for a brighter future with *I Have A Dream*. And their oddly defiant feminist anthem was announced with *The Winner Takes It All* (Bunoan, 2018) [11].

When Donna let her bitter confrontation go with *The Winner Takes It All*, it was so natural, so true as if the music sprang out from the plot with jolting and self-conscious literal-mindedness. Besides, *Mamma Mia* best describes how furious Donna behaved in work clothes, holding a drill in her hand, striking a pose of shock, and freezing everyone around (Brantley, 2001) [20]. Also, another touching moment when Donna and Sophie realize that their lives are going to change is emotionally reflected in *Slipping Through My Fingers* (Knight, 2020) [30]. So, it is undoubtedly true that the ABBA songs and the story in *Mamma Mia* the musical are a perfect combination, they are organically attached making the musical have such a strong effect all over the world. And this success is attributed to script writer Catherine Johnson, who beautifully weaved the iconic ABBA songs into *Mamma Mia*'s story (Caplan, 2012) [28]. Additionally, the sound design is judged as excellent with a crystal clearness in every line and the brightness and clarity rung by the band (Tongue, 2018) [10]. Therefore, this can be seen as a double, or even

multiple, success of the musical with ABBA music and script, furthermore, and other artistic features.

The vocal and acting talents of the performers are another selling point of *Mamma Mia* the musical. But the casts are chosen for the performers' singing voice rather than for their acting skills (Caplan, 2012) [28] and many of them have voices of considerable power (Brantley, 2001) [20]. This musical is performed in over 440 cities in 50 countries worldwide (Nan, 2018) [38], but there should be an immediate noticeability that anycast is vocally gifted and the sound of the band is excellent and crisp. When the cast comes back on the stage in 70's ABBA disco version for the encore of *Dancing Queen*, *Waterloo*, and *Mamma Mia*, they make a perfect throwback party at which everybody stands up on foot to boogie in the confetti falls (Bunoan, 2018) [11]. It is interesting to note that vocality, like any other features such as identity, is fluid and built up continually. Even the most iconic singers basically do not keep a static voice for long. They experience different styles, genres, cultural settings, histories, and identities. They perform not only with multiple vocalities but also with multivocality-creating and recreating identity through the singing process with different voices (Meizel, 2020) [42]. That *Mamma Mia* casts worldwide keep their stable vocalities in multiple shows through long years to deliver a consistent performance on any stage, in any language, and under any directors' supervision is rewarding.

Being a musical the staged *Mamma Mia* has attracted its audiences with choreography. In the musical acrobatics and athletic rigor are choreographically made to keep the party atmosphere available in the theater context (Tongue, 2018) [10]. But this choreography is at the same time accident-free and it can be practiced at home in the backyard (Brantley, 2001) [20]. Even some of the songs sung in the musical are oddly static, but when the choreography does get going, the stage becomes exciting (Caplan, 2012) [28]. A fantasy sequence in scuba gear is included in this choreography without making it studied, even though it is. It makes an impression that this synchronized exuberance is totally spontaneous (Brantley, 2001) [20]. The dance performed with flippers on and accompanied by the song *Lay On Your Love On Me* is sensational in the full sharp and slightly quirky choreography (Johal, 2019) [39]. In other words, the staged *Mamma Mia* is beautifully choreographed with dances, kicks, and spins which all make every inch of the stage purely entertaining (Elias, 2020) [12].

Lighting is another factor contributing to the success of the production. Mood-punctuating lighting changes the time of the day (from the night with dark blue sky to the morning with bright sunrise), depending on the songs but not in the daytime (Tongue, 2018) [10]. The lighting really propels the music beat and sets the wedding scene making it an outstanding feature of the show (Spirou, 2023) [17]. Again, although it is a musical, it can also be considered as a light show which makes the audiences feel that they are not in the musical theater but at the stadium rock (Tongue, 2018) [10].

The costume design is not excluded in the success of *Mamma Mia* the musical explaining its widespread effect. The costumes worn by the performers on the stage are flamboyant reminding of a beautiful Greek island even with a simple set (Wroe, 2023) [21]. The body-hugging leotards and glittery platform heels make the show like a camp from the beginning to the sequinned studded end (Seaward, 2022) [37]. In other words, the costumes designed for the show are stunning and bright, and make it easy for the

performers to move beautifully on the stage. And the highlight is the ABBA outfits in the finale, which are worth beholding (Johal, 2019) [39]. So, the effect of the bold costumes brought by *Mamma Mia* play is to offer the audiences a chance to go back to their ebullient youth in the 70s and 80s (Hardy, 2022) [13].

Furthermore, the well-set stage is worth mentioning to make a complete success of the show. The design of staging is a vital component that would bring unbelievable effect. During a couple of hours of the show, *Mamma Mia* would make people feel like they are staying on the spot of the European summer while it is freezing out there outside the theater (Spirou, 2023) [17]. The set is simple and flexible, which is appropriately rendered in the scene of a blue and white painted island, it is where the escapist can soothe themselves with a fresh and bug-free atmosphere (Brantley, 2001) [20]. Apart from this, the scene on the stage is set full of reminiscing and romance which also fits perfectly the ABBA songs. It is simple yet striking, congruent with excellent and crisp band sound and great vocal capabilities of the cast (Bunoan, 2018) [11].

However, there are also some negative feedback from the critics about *Mamma Mia* the musical. Its story is thought to be silly and occasionally in trouble with young Sophie's story before her wedding. The performer's vocal capabilities and the director's experience are viewed still limited to a certain extent. But these all do not disappoint the fans as they go to the theater purely for the sake of music and any non-musical elements in between do not cause much of their concerns (Murray, 2001) [29]. On the whole, this musical is warmly welcomed almost everywhere regardless of territorial borders and cultural or political barriers. Its performance success brings along financial success with more than USD 600 million grossed alone at Broadway after 14 year run, according to the source provided by the trade group Broadway League (Beech, 2018) [4].

### 3. Conclusion

Since the first time *Mamma Mia* the musical hit the stage in London, a considerably high number of theatergoers (over 65 million people) have seen the show all around the world (Spirou, 2023) [17]. It is also noted that Britain is a country where musical performance has been leveled up to the most lucrative earning platforms for high-class performers, meanwhile, this form of music demonstration was regarded as inferior to music. This country also means to encourage and train its own native performing talent to meet its high demand for a variety of music genres (Wright, 2012) [43]. Turning to *Mamma Mia* the musical, this show is loved by everyone from five to 95 (Knight, 2020) [30] as it is made an adaptation to the ABBA (people's favorite pop band from Sweden in the 70s and 80s) music (Encalada, 2017) [22]. But this staged version still manages people to smile no matter whether they like ABBA or not (Bunoan, 2018) [11]. To explain the widespread effect brought by *Mamma Mia* the musical, there are three main factors included. The first to be mentioned is its appealing script. The story told in *Mamma Mia* refers to many contemporary matters such as family conflict or generation gap, feminism, love, and friendship. The next reason for *Mamma Mia*'s worldwide expansion is about nostalgia. The hits sung by ABBA have brought people back to the young years of their lives with vivid memories. Nostalgia triggered by *Mamma Mia* includes nearly all features of the general nostalgia, which are age (any age from 7), stimulants (food, smell, meeting, etc. but music is probably the most sensible one), cultural differences (not

identified), types (positive and negative), and effects (present painfulness relief, “self” re-definition, generation gap reduction and community link set-up). Last but not least, *Mamma Mia*’s spread-out effect lies in its spectacular stage performance, in which music (with the compatibility of the story to the ABBA songs), cast vocality, lighting, choreography, stage set, and costume design come together in perfect harmony. It all indicates that *Mamma Mia* the musical gives an account of the re-creation of the past cultural features and the reflection of the contemporary concerns. The story of *Mamma Mia* can be in two versions, the musical and movie(s), but the former one (as well as the target of this essay) is the source of inspiration for the production of the latter (Spirou, 2023) [17]. And it is uneasy to put them both on the scale of comparison to learn whether any between two outweighs the other. They both seem to be equally- ranked by audiences but only in two ways of demonstration. Therefore, this point is also a suggestion for any further research if the interest in it is available. Anyway, the comparison between the two beauties is likely unnecessary.

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