

# Solange De Santis

## *Mamma Mia*

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TORONTO – “They’re baaack,” whispered the little girl in the movie *Poltergeist II*. Her awed comment might serve as a theme for the current Toronto theater scene, which is seeing the resurrection of both the 1970s Swedish pop group ABBA and onetime theater mogul Garth Drabinsky.

The ABBA show, a musical called “Mamma Mia!”, is selling tickets through next spring, after a smash opening in London, and is headed for a Broadway debut in October, 2001. Drabinsky, whose Livent Inc. crashed and burned two years ago amid lawsuits and police investigations, has announced he’s bringing Athol Fugard’s play “The Island” to Toronto, after an acclaimed London run.

There’s something mystifying in each of these theatrical resuscitations, which have only their Toronto location in common. For those of us who preferred the Rolling Stones to the Beatles, ABBA represented slick, white-bread, Eurodisco performed by two dweebish guys and two perfectly contrasted women (one blonde, one brunette) in white satin jumpsuits. The group broke up nearly 20 years ago, yet every seat at Toronto’s venerable Royal Alexandra Theatre has been sold out since the show’s opening last May. Even Bjorn Ulvaeus, one of the two male members of the ABBA quartet, has said he can’t quite figure out why he was offered \$1.2 billion for a reunion tour – something the group members have resolutely refused.

As for Drabinsky, who is under indictment by the U.S. Attorney’s office in New York and the subject of a police investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, he is embarking upon the third phase of a remarkable career marked by giant successes and equally dramatic failures. He clearly intends to be a force in the theater again – despite his legal troubles, which he won’t discuss.

The ABBA story is the happier one, the tale of a remarkably successful transplant of a whole slew of hit songs into a story-musical. The 1970s have been hot for a while now – kids are wearing rib-knit sweaters and bell bottoms and “That 70s Show” is running on TV. ABBA, of course, was one of the great hit-machines of all time – at one point, their foreign currency earnings outstripped Volvo’s. Maybe the doink-doink-doink rhythms of the songs made them sound fairly similar and the lyrics weren’t exactly Gershwin (a typical sample: “I was so happy we had met/It was the age of no regret/Living for the day/Worries far away”). But Ulvaeus and songwriting partner Benny Andersson could write catchy melodies (try to get “Dancing Queen” out of your head in less than two hours) and their recordings featured meticulous production and multi-layered harmonies.

The show, written by playwright/screenwriter Catherine Johnson, contains a wholly improbable plot. A young woman named Sophie, who lives on a little Greek island with her mother, Donna, has never known her father. She finds her mother’s 25-year-old diary and learns that, way back when, Mom had flings in rather rapid succession with three guys. Convinced that one is her father, she sends them invitations to her upcoming wedding that are supposedly from Donna. Of course, Mom would have had to have jotted down their addresses in her diary and the men would have had to have stayed put for two and a-half decades. Not only that, but all three have nothing better to do than arrive, *sans* spouses or children, in Greece for the wedding of someone they do not know at the invitation of a lover they last saw when Gerald Ford was President.

Donna, who is running a taverna, was a member of a girl group and her two music pals also show up for the wedding. The complications provide enough story bones

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on which to hang 22 ABBA songs, including “Knowing Me, Knowing You,” “The Name of the Game” and “Take a Chance on Me.” The humor lies mostly at sitcom-level, but Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd cleverly chose to camp up the 70s connection in several places and the bouncy tunes carry the day. In addition, the Toronto production is fortunate enough to have Canadian musical star Louise Pitre – an affecting actress who has the only true, gorgeous singing voice in the cast -- playing Donna.

The show has settled into Toronto for an open-ended run. American audiences will see Pitre when “Mamma Mia!” tours San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington and Boston before Broadway. The States is a bit of a gamble for the London producers (Australian Richard East, Briton Judy Craymer and Ulvaeus), since ABBA was never as popular in the U.S. as in Europe. (Only “Dancing Queen” hit #1 on the American singles charts.) It all depends on whether the show can attract enough Americans like Robert and Marie Anderson, a Toronto couple in their 40s originally from Scotland who were in the audience for a recent performance. “They (ABBA) were a bit too fluffy for me (in the 70s),” said Robert Anderson, but added he was enjoying the show because it was light and funny. “I’ve always been an ABBA fan,” said Marie enthusiastically, who, a while later, joined in a clap-along as the cast belted out “Waterloo” as an encore.

Even if “Mamma Mia!” isn’t a huge hit on Broadway, ABBA has little left to prove, which can’t be said for Garth Drabinsky, who’s been down a couple of times, but apparently never out. Forced out of debt-laden Cineplex Odeon Corp. in 1990, he and partner Myron Gottlieb formed Livent. They had a huge success with “Phantom of the Opera” in Toronto and brought “Show Boat,” “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” “Barrymore” and “Ragtime” to Broadway, winning several Tony Awards, but spending tons of money on production and promotion. Two years ago, Livent brought new investors on board, including former Hollywood agent Michael Ovitz. Shortly thereafter, Drabinsky and Gottlieb were dismissed as the company said it had found serious financial irregularities.

Drabinsky and Gottlieb were indicted in New York, the Securities and Exchange Commission alleged they had committed accounting fraud and the RCMP investigation continues – in mid-September, Mounties carted off boxes of financial records from the offices of Livent’s former advertising agency. Livent’s shares became worthless and the company’s assets were sold off. None of the allegations against Drabinsky and Gottlieb have, so far, been proven in court.

Today, the two men now occupy handsome ground-floor offices in an attractive Toronto neighborhood, operating under the name MyGar. Drabinsky, looking remarkably relaxed, sits down for an interview in an office filled with career memorabilia. The Island, with a planned opening date of May, 2001, is not his only project. He is also presenting a “cultural weekend” series at a resort in the Muskoka woods north of Toronto and has said he intends to produce films. One friend in his corner is newspaper executive Conrad Black, whose National Post newspaper has hired Drabinsky as a marketing adviser.

When asked how it feels to be back, Drabinsky answers, “I never thought I left, although the reports of my demise were well-publicized.” In the 12 months since his abrupt departure from Livent, he was preoccupied with litigation, he said. Drabinsky maintains he is innocent and was forced out by Ovitz and other investors brought into Livent. “It was extremely painful both on a financial level and a personal level and I am convinced those who caused this will pay for it,” he asserted.

As for his current backers, he will only say that he has “a number of supporters who are excited that I want to produce theater.” Despite his situation, he has maintained contacts with theatrical heavyweights. “The Island” is a production of the Royal National

# Solange De Santis

Theatre of Great Britain and The Market Theatre of Johannesburg. Drabinsky noted he's had contacts with National Theatre director Trevor Nunn since 1995, when Livent presented "Sunset Boulevard" (which Nunn had directed in Britain) in Toronto.

Although he may be prone to financial blowouts and was famously rough on his staff, Drabinsky – often compared to Merrick or Ziegfeld -- sure could produce and promote shows and is a master at nurturing relationships with artists. "The Island" is a particularly interesting choice for a comeback. It's the 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary production of a landmark anti-apartheid play, developed by white playwright Fugard and black actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, in defiance of the South African racial-separation laws then in effect.

The revival, with Kani and Ntshona, received glowing reviews in London earlier this year and Drabinsky says the play "represents a thematic strain running through many of my theatrical projects ... (the) fight against intolerance and prejudice." Time has shown "The Island" to be a classic of contemporary theater; how the reputation of its Toronto producer will be weighed is an open question.

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