

Ooooh, 'Mamma'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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Buoyed by cabaret vet Karen Mason, a bubbly ABBA tribute hits B'way

For the moment, actresses Karen Mason and Judy Kaye are sharing a dressing room backstage at "Mamma Mia!" But Kaye is preparing to move into her own room next door, and that means one thing.

"I'm going shopping!" says Kaye, brandishing a Crate & Barrel catalog she's using to decorate the space she'll call home for the foreseeable future.

Mason looks it over and tells her, "If you find something you like, buy two." Then she laughs.

Clearly, Mason and Kaye aren't going anywhere. "Mamma Mia!" could well be the biggest new hit of the fall, a crowd-pleasing celebration of the songs of ABBA that has been a smash hit in London and repeated that success throughout the U.S. on its way to Broadway.

Anyone looking for the dour, serious musicals of the past few years should look elsewhere. "Mamma Mia!" — which has built up a blockbuster box-office advance but still seems like a scrappy underdog — is silly fun.

The story of a daughter's impending wedding and her mother's reunion with three old flames, "Mamma Mia!" provides only the flimsiest of excuses to revel in ABBA hits like "Dancing Queen," "S.O.S." and "Take a Chance on Me."

Audiences have a ball, but surely no one is having more fun than Mason herself. She plays Tanya, a woman who seizes pleasure — and one-liners — wherever she finds them.

Tanya — who would fit comfortably into the man-eating Britcom "Absolutely Fabulous" — has married and divorced wealthy men before reuniting with her high school chums.

(They all performed in a girl group once upon a time, giving Mason, Kaye and lead Louise Pitre a chance to vamp it up in

70s costumes.)

Mason stops the show with "Does Your Mother Know," a comic romp with a young admirer.

"When I saw the number [in Chicago, where Mason's family lives], I thought, 'This is what I always thought Las Vegas would be like.' I get to do this song, all the dancing boys are working really hard around me. It's my big Ann-Margret moment."

Still, the real buzz for Mason comes in the finale — a mini-concert reprising ABBA hits, complete with dazzling lights. The show often provokes the most boisterous response you're likely to hear from a Broadway audience. People leap from their seats, dance around and cheer madly for songs they only half remember.

"The first night I performed the finale in front of an audience, the rush of energy at the end of the show threw me so much, I forgot some of the choreography," admits Mason, who also had to deal with a bright-orange flared pantsuit and some serious spangled boots.

"When we're coming up through the floor or at the end of 'Dancing Queen,' that roar of sound really threw me. Everybody is up and swaying and in the aisles. It's like a rock concert."

Mind you, Mason — who gives her age as somewhere between 45 and 55 — is no stranger to applause. Born in New Orleans the middle of three kids, Mason and her older sibling would stage "Fourth of July specials" for their parents.



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"My older sister was the director and the star," remembers Mason. "As the younger sister, I was the lackey. I opened and closed the curtain for the star."

"Our most notorious number was [about] the writing of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' I was the sailor who was standing next to Francis Scott Key, and I would come up with these lines.

"And then we would serve red, white and blue cake. So that was my first taste of performing." Mason was hooked.

Her parents were none too thrilled when acting became a career, even if Mason was following in the footsteps of her mother's parents. (Grandfather was a big-band leader during the war and her grandmother was the girl singer.)

The family had moved to Chi-



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cago, and Mason — along with longtime collaborator Brian Lasser, who died of AIDS in 1992 — developed a strong following in cabaret.

Next came New York, where Mason appeared in the off-Broadway hit "And the World Goes Round," followed by roles in "Jerome Robbins' Broadway" and, most famously, "Sunset Boulevard."

An easygoing, friendly pres-

ence, Mason has a new album — "When the Sun Comes Out" — due out in mid-November. It's produced by her songwriter husband, Paul Rolnick, who lives with Mason in the Flatiron District.

As for "Mamma," her role as the droll Tanya was modeled in part after her Great Aunt Mame. Really.

"She was fabulous," says Mason. "She was unmarried and a businesswoman who was a

sassy gal. Auntie Mame was martini drinking and stiletto heeled. There are definitely Mame moments in Tanya."

Mason should be kicking up her heels, having won four MAC awards as a cabaret star and, now, originating a Broadway role.

"How often in your career do you get a chance to go into something that is a hit?" she says.