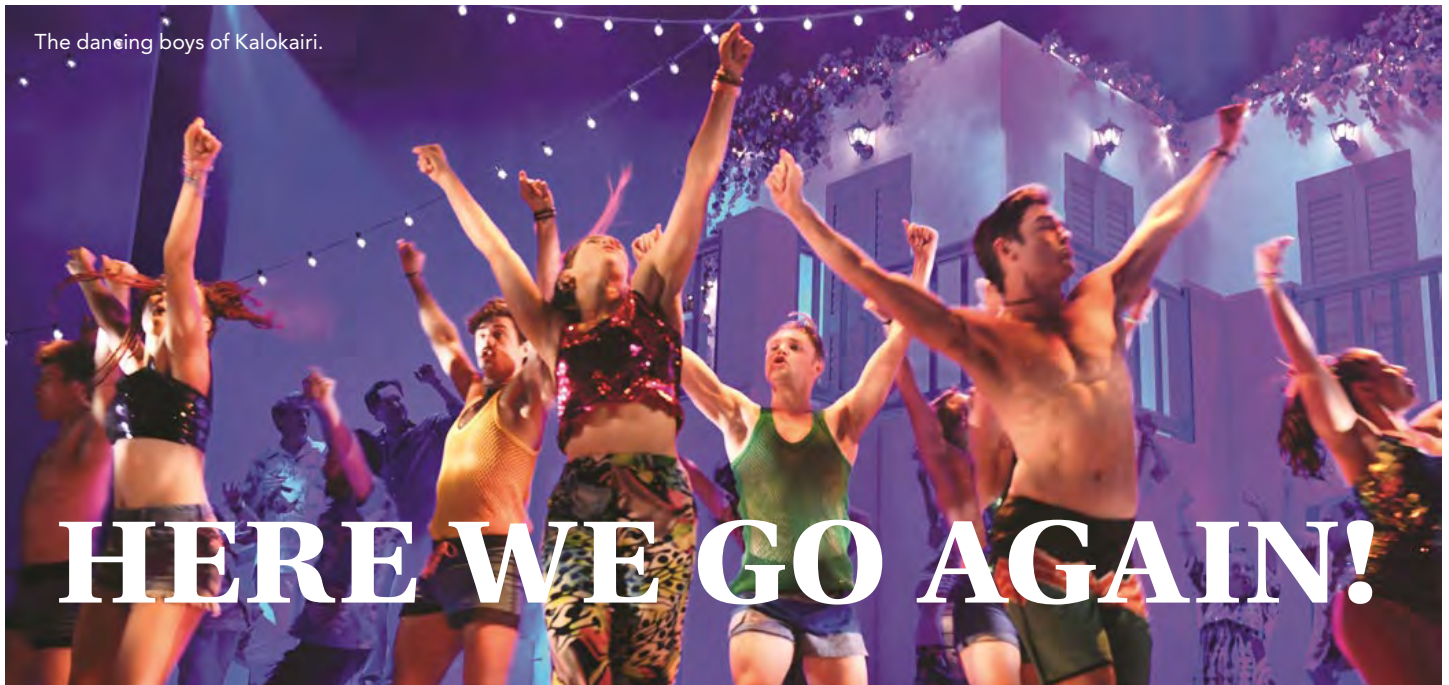




The dancing boys of Kalokairi.



PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES MORGAN

HERE WE GO AGAIN!

With the movie sequel and new music coming from ABBA themselves, the endless summer fun of *Mamma Mia!* rolls on.

IT'S 20 YEARS since *Mamma Mia!* made its debut at London's Prince Edward Theatre. Worldwide, the production has grossed over \$2 billion and been seen by 60 million people.

Originally it had critics, but its ongoing popularity suggests that even the most cynical may have been won over.

The plot is simple: young bride, Sophie, wants to discover her true father by inviting the three possible men to her island wedding. It's all a surprise to her mother Donna, who has carved out an independent and "man free" life. The resulting lighthearted-yet-poignant story comes perfectly stitched together through the songs of Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus.

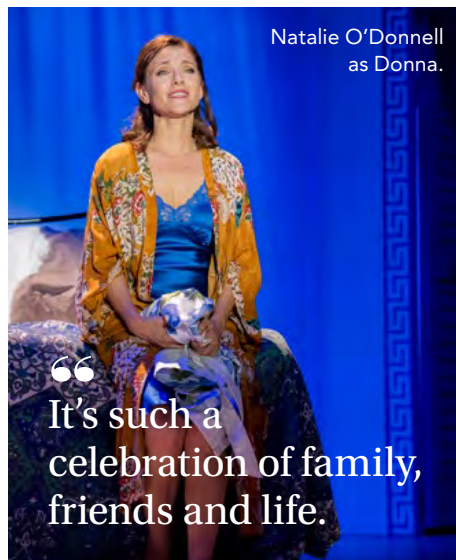
Playing mum Donna in the current Australian production is Natalie O'Donnell (*Les Misérables*), who played daughter Sophie in the original 2001 production.

"It feels incredibly special," says O'Donnell. "I have a completely different perspective of the show through Donna's eyes and everything is fresh and reimagined."

Donna is a much sought-after role, but how does one channel such a character? After all, it now has the stamp of La Streeep.

"*Mamma Mia!* has always been a moveable feast when it comes to casting," says O'Donnell. "Every actor who's played Donna has looked and sounded very different from

the next, so I've never felt that particular expectation of comparison. I knew that was a pointless trap to fall into. But I do feel an expectation of living up to the legacy of all the women who have come before me. I've tried to put that aside and explore who Donna is, and what she represents to me.



Natalie O'Donnell as Donna.

“It’s such a celebration of family, friends and life.”

"I wanted to bring to her the free soul she was in her younger days. I'm at a point in my own life where I can see how 20 years of choices and experiences have shaped who I am, and I've drawn on that a lot."

ABBA's masterpiece, *The Winner Takes It All* (owned by Agnetha Faltskog in the original version), is the pinnacle moment of *Mamma*

Mia!, and O'Donnell's version raises those same back-of-the-neck chills.

"That song was created with such heartbreak and intimate honesty," she says. "It's in the music and the lyrics, and it deals with circumstance that so many people have experienced and can relate to. I think that's why ABBA are so successful. Not only are they amazing musicians but they were writing about their lives, especially in the ballads."

Directed by Gary Young (*The Mousetrap*) with choreography by Tom Hodgson (*Matilda*), the latest production has all the colour that gives musical theatre its positive spin.

There's a special chemistry between the cast members, too, as Sarah Morrison who plays Sophie and Stephen Mahy as her fiancé Sky, are a real-life couple.

"I think *Mamma Mia!* will still be around in 50 years," says O'Donnell. "The show has an incredible effect on people. It's such a celebration of family, friends and life, and that's something that's going to stand the test of time."

One major aspect of the production of note to DNA readers – the incredibly handsome dancing boys. Bronzed, muscled and camping it up with summersaults, flippers and even mermaid tails, they occasionally steal the show. Throw in *Dancing Queen*, *Waterloo*, the title track and we can feel the beat of the tambourine, oh yeah!

MORE: *Mamma Mia!* is playing at Melbourne's Princess Theatre.
Go to mammamiathemusical.com.au