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Kristina: A New Musical from the ABBA Guys

By RICHARD CORLISS Thursday, Sep. 24, 2009



Russell Watson and Helen Sjöholm star in Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus' Carnegie Hall concert of the new musical *Kristina* Carol Rosegg

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Some of the most rapturous melodies ever heard in Carnegie Hall poured out of that grand old barn last night. The occasion was the first English-language production of *Kristina*, a musical based on the four *Emigrants* novels by Wilhelm Moberg. Spanning two continents and the Atlantic in between, the three-hour epic has all the makings of a thrilling stage experience: noble peasants, dying children, powerful voices, the dream of a new land. Most of all, a superb score. No wonder that, at the end, cheers and a standing ovation greeted *Kristina*'s creators: two spangled Swedes, Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus — once, and always, the guys from ABBA.

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Where have Benny and Bjorn been? Well, their music has been on Broadway, eight times a week for the past eight years, and in theaters around the world. Mamma Mia!, the show based on Andersson and Ulvaeus' ABBA songbook, has been the major theatrical hit of the past decade and an international blockbuster of a movie. But those tunes are old; ABBA burst on the scene in 1974 by winning the Eurovision competition with Waterloo, and the quartet — Andersson, Ulvaeus, Agnetha Faltskog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad — lasted eight more years, breaking up in 1982. Then what? The lads did what songwriters like Irving Berlin and the Gershwins used to do after proving themselves on the pop charts: they wrote a Broadway-style musical.

(Check out TIME's review of the big-screen Mamma Mia!)

Teaming with lyricist Tim Rice (who wrote Jesus Christ Superstar and Evita with Andrew Lloyd Webber), they produced Chess as a two-disc album in 1984. The stage

version spawned three Top 10 hits — "One Night in Bangkok," "Nobody's Side" and "I Know Him So Well" — and impressed many listeners as having the richest score of the decade. Or, he added defiantly, any decade since. Andersson, who had shown a mastery of the pop idiom as composer of the music for the ABBA songs (Ulvaeus

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