

Bringing Kristina to the States

By Harry Haun

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Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus

photo by Aubrey Reuben

The Americanization of *Kristina*, the smash Swedish musical by ABBA's Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, officially debuts Sept. 23 and 24 in concert form — at Carnegie Hall, if you please — with portents of a substantial Broadway gig to follow.

The question of what would happen to the show after those initial two days hung heavily in the air at the *Kristina* press conference, but the company line was coyly non-committable, and no one broke ranks to venture any kind of fearless prediction.

Louise Pitre, one of the principals, came closest to spilling the beans: "I have no idea what their plans are," she admitted, "but I'm assuming they're not doing this for nothing. Whatever, I think people who come to this concert will be blown away."

Indeed, when *Kristina* premiered Oct. 7, 1995, at the Malmo Opera and Music Theatre in Malmo, Sweden, one critic likened Andersson's musicality to that of Schubert. And, when a 90-minute concert version of that nearly four-hour score was presented — in Swedish, by the original cast — in Minneapolis a year later, *Time* magazine called it "one of the most ambitious swatches of musical theatre (39 songs!) since Gershwin's 1935 *Porgy and Bess*."

Seconding that, the chief critic for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune

likewise broke out the bells and drums, trumpeting that "I have seen the future of musical theater, and its name is *Kristina*!"

Now, almost 13 years later, the future seems to have at last arrived. This week's twin concerts mark the first time the show has been presented in English — Herbert Kretzmer, of *Les Miserables* fame, assisted lyricist Ulvaeus in the translation — and the results are being recorded for a release via Universal Music's Decca Records.

"*Kristina* never existed in English — till now," Andersson noted. "We just wanted to do this here-and-now thing. I think it's great to be able to present *Kristina* the way it should be presented. Where we go from here, we don't know. It's just something we really wanted to do. It's an event in itself. We've felt that from the beginning." To hear the composer tell it, the Carnegie lift-off of *Kristina* may be the last example of the late Shubert Theatre chairman Gerald Schoenfeld making a show happen. "We were sitting talking with Gerry over breakfast a year-and-a-half ago, and we said, 'Do you know how nice it would be to do a concert of *Kristina* here — not the show, just a concert?' he recalled. "Gerry said, 'Well, where do you want to be?' And we said, 'We think the Carnegie Hall?' 'Do you want me to call?' he said, and he lifted the phone. It took two minutes. Suddenly we were up there, with him, talking to the people at Carnegie Hall, saying 'We want to do this show here.' They said, 'Fine. Just decide on a date.'" Not that The Shubert's late kingpin, a shrewd showman, really required any

arm-twisting: *Kristina* raked in a host of Swedish Tonys and racked up close to a four-year run on its home turf, becoming Sweden's second longest-running musical.

The only other original stage musical Andersson and Ulvaeus have attempted was *Chess*, which bowed in Sweden in 1984, opened in London in 1986 and reached Broadway in 1988. It closed here after 68 performances but enjoys a cult-musical status. The show that's stitched together from their greatest hits — *Mamma Mia!* — is still heartily holding on to the Winter Garden after more than 3,280 performances. *Kristina* is sufficiently saga-sized, coming from a series of four novels by Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg ("*The Emigrants*," "*Unto a Good Land*," "*The Settlers*" and "*The Last Letter Home*") that depicted the pioneering perils and ordeals of an extended family migrating from Sweden to Minnesota in the mid-19th century. Swedish director Jan Troell turned the four books into two film epics, both starring Max von Sydow and Liv Ullmann and both Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year ("*The Emigrants*" in 1971 and "*The New Land*" in 1972).

"*After Chess*," said Ulvaeus, "we read volume after volume, looking for a musical, and this is what we settled on. Lyrically, I was intrigued by Moberg's language."

But the sweep of the emigrants' story is what fired Andersson's musical imagination. "It begins with their predicament in Sweden, what drove the people to leave their country and find a new home half way around the world," said the composer.

"*Kristina* is the most interesting person in the books. That's why it's called *Kristina*, not *The Emigrants*. It's about her and her family, not the people around them. That would take six hours. Now, it's only three. At Carnegie Hall, with just the music and no dialogue, it's two-and-a-half hours. That's a lot of music to take in at the first go."

Helen Sjöholm, the first actress to play the title character, will reprise the part at Carnegie Hall. "I have such strong feelings about this role, having played it so long in Sweden. She's very close to me, this *Kristina*. Her story of leaving her homeland and venturing into the unknown — I think anyone could relate to that situation. "As I flew in to New York the other day, I was thinking, 'Here I am, sitting in First Class with a glass of champagne in my hand, and their traveling was the exact opposite — so uncomfortable, so scary. They didn't know what to expect, and they couldn't go back.' I'm leaving in two weeks. I know I can do that. They didn't know."

And what are chances of a return visit, for perhaps a protracted stay on Broadway? "I don't know," she replied. "It depends on how the concert goes over. I think it's going to be exciting to see how Americans like us because there's a very Swedish sound to the music. It's humorous at times, but it's also very sentimental, very beautiful."

It does not faze her that Ullmann got to the role first. "Of course, I have seen the movies. They are amazing, but this is a completely different thing, so it is important that I do not compare myself with Liv Ullmann." Her big "Some Enchanted Evening," she added, is a big buffo metaphysical meditation called "You Have To Be There." Also recruited from the original Swedish production for the Carnegie Hall concert is the show's director, Lars Rudolfsson, who is poised to launch a new production of it in Finland. Theatre-wise, he pretty much covers the waterfront: "Musicals and operas, dramas and circuses — I do different things." Yes, but circuses? That's correct: "I just did *The Magic Flute* in Denmark in a circus context with horses."

He claimed he knew immediately that *Kristina* had hit written all over it. "I knew it couldn't miss when I first

heard about the combination of this material with Benny and Bjorn. Benny has his roots in Swedish folk music, and this contains a lot of that.

“I love the novels, and they were my biggest inspiration. The way that Moberg treats language — I try to emulate that on stage. He changes from fantasy to realism, and his language reflects that. He paints with language, and that inspired me to make a musical not just in one style. I change styles as a different way of telling the story.”

Internationally renowned tenor Russell Watson, who plays Sjöholm’s husband in the show, skipped the press conference, pleading a tummy-ache, but Kevin Odekk, his trouble-prone younger brother, was present to explain his character’s plot function.

“Robert is a dreamer,” he said. “While his brother is coming to America to offer a better life for his family, Robert comes for the adventure. He hears about the gold rush in California, and that’s why he’s there. It really shows two of the main reasons why America became what it is. Not only did it provide a better life than what these people came from, it also offered the adventure of coming to a new world, seeing new faces and, hopefully, forging a new life for yourself in some place brand new.”

The other major female role in the show is a former town-whore with a young daughter. Understandably (or maybe not), Andersson and Ulvaeus thought of their Tony-nominated *Mamma Mia*, Pitre, for the part and waved her down from Toronto.

“I haven’t done anything with them since I left *Mamma Mia!*, so I was really thrilled that they thought of me and asked me to do this role. Benny called and emailed me the score, and away I went learning it, and now here I am presenting it.”

This scarlet lady among the emigrants has some story, she insisted. “She is determined to come to America, build a new life for herself and make sure that her daughter is never treated as badly as she was. It’s like a ticket to a new life. She’s a strong, feisty character. At the beginning, she and Kristina are enemies, but they find a friendship and have a really nice duet together, which is beautiful. Wait till you hear the music. It’s along the lines of Chess — that kind of score, and even grander.”

A quarter-century between shows seems quite a coffee break, but Andersson and Ulvaeus have been professionally active — although, financially, they don’t have to.

“Thing is, we are constantly working,” said Andersson. “You don’t know that here, but we have a home country. We like it there and work a lot there. I have my own band. I’ve had it for nine years, so we work — but not necessarily internationally.”

And is another musical coming together in their minds? “We might do another one,” Andersson confessed cautiously. “We’ll see. We’re not getting any younger, y’know.”

Ulvaeus threw that caution to the winds. “We have something very interesting going on right now,” he admitted, “but I can’t tell you about it because it’s in its early stages.”

Hopefully, this new opus won’t have the long gestation period of its predecessors.



Helen Sjöholm, Kevin Odekkirk and Louise Pitre
photo by Aubrey Reuben