

Mamma mia, there they go again



KERRY PARNELL
IN LONDON

"TO be or not to be, that is no longer the question," said ABBA's Benny Andersson, as he returned to the stage in London.

Benny was back with the band on Friday for the first time in 40 years, since they broke up in 1982.

At 75, he hadn't aged at all – as an avatar. "This is really me," he said. "I actually look this good."

Entertainment has never looked this good either, as ABBA launched a world-first multimedia concert experience where they performed all their greatest hits as avatars – or ABBAatars – of their younger selves.

It really does have to be seen to be believed. The show in the specially built ABBA Arena in London's Olympic Park, reportedly cost \$250 million, but what they've made is a money-can't-buy experience of "seeing" ABBA in concert as they were in their prime. It's the ultimate nostalgia trip and ABBA-solutely spectacular.

"We need a bit of joy," a woman seated near me said, before the digital curtain went up.

And joy is what they delivered in glittery bucketloads. As soon as the ABBAatars rose up on to the stage, clad in their Dolce & Gabbana span-gles, everyone was out of their seats,



Clockwise from main: The ABBAatars hit the stage, the incredible light show, Kylie Minogue and Paul Solomons at the premiere, and ABBA's Bjorn Ulvaeus, Agnetha Faltskog, Anni-Frid Lyngstad and Benny Andersson.

arms in the air, belting out the classics with them through the 20-song set, which also included a magnificent live band and backing singers.

The technology is mind-blowing. It took 850 digital experts from George Lucas' visual effects company, Industrial Light & Magic, making their first foray into music, along with one billion computer hours, to create the ABBAatars. Benny, Bjorn, Agnetha and Anni-Frid recorded for five weeks, in motion-capture suits.

The hi-tech immersive show is an incredible experience. The avatars are astoundingly realistic, they interact with each other and the audience, have outfit changes, run

around the stage and, most importantly, cover all the hits. They also sing tracks from the band's recent album *Voyage* – their first in 40 years. It's strangely moving, but extremely entertaining and great fun.

The 3000-strong stadium was packed for the premiere, with everyone from the King and Queen of Sweden to Kylie Minogue, Jarvis Cocker and Keira Knightley singing *Dancing Queen* with the rest of the enraptured audience.

And they almost lost their minds when the real Agnetha, 72, Bjorn, 77, Benny and Anni-Frid, 76, came on stage, for what they termed "the ultimate curtain call". The pop leg-

ends were clearly moved – standing side-by-side and taking in the applause, they hugged and cried.

"It's like coming home," Frida said. "Forty years on, most everything is different ... but the joy of working with ABBA remains."

The show runs in London for a year and, in true Swedish-style, the stylish timber-built stadium is designed to be flat-packed and shipped around the world, where it can pop-up in other cities.

With so much misery in the world, a dose of ABBA seems to be the very best antidote. After all, Mamma mia, does it show again, my, my, just how much I've missed you?

Toy story and a \$1m per week drug plot

ANTON ROSE
MADELINE CRITTENDEN

A SUBURBAN toy company doubling as a cocaine import operation had a group of Western Sydney men allegedly raking in \$1m a week from the city's lucrative drug trade.

Just how the syndicate was exposed can be revealed for the first time after one of the men key to the operation's success applied for bail in the Supreme Court this week.

Alexander Kostecoglou – known as Alex Kostas – is facing life in jail if he is convicted of serious drug charges, the culmination of a huge covert operation that allegedly caught him in the act.

The Supreme Court was told Kostas owned three businesses in construction and an online sneaker store that shared similarities with the firm, posing as a toy company, that police claim imported the cocaine.

Surveillance devices, the court heard, captured Kostas and another man at a safe-house allegedly mixing, packing and blocking the cocaine ready to hit Sydney's streets.

Police are also said to have listened in as the men bundled up \$10,000 wads of cash that added up to \$1m.

Just how "easy" it was to score the drugs was also detailed as Kostas promised in court to abide by dozens of strict bail conditions if released.

Police allege Kostas and the men were getting a kilogram a week of cocaine hidden inside a children's board game before they sent it on.

"It only requires an email to a toy store to start the (drug imports) again," Crown prosecutor Stephen Makin argued.

"The profits are huge to be made and they approach these things as a business, it's not impulsive," Kostas' barrister Philip Strickland SC told the court his client's father had a terminal illness and keeping him in custody meant he would lose valuable time with him. Kostas was arrested in February. His wife Nour Amalia Kostas and grandparents put up their homes worth a combined \$2.5m, and Mr Strickland said Kostas would wear an ankle monitor 24/7. Justice Hament Dhanji granted Kostas bail on 34 strict conditions, including that he wear an ankle monitor.



Ray Shephard.

Age no barrier to anxiety but support lacking for elderly

JULIE CROSS

WHEN Ray Shephard was diagnosed with anxiety at the age of 94 it was a shock.

He'd always thought there was something wrong with him, but didn't know what.

Now aged 96, and with the help of a counsellor who visited him in his aged-care home, he has some strategies to help him cope. They include taking part in group activities with other

residents in the morning, relaxing to the sounds of Daniel O'Donnell on his iPad in the afternoon, and writing poetry.

It's helped reduce the amount of time he feels anxious.

"I still get a bit anxious in the morning," Mr Shephard, a former farm worker, said.

"That's when I do some deep breathing and then nine times out of 10 I feel better."

Mr Shephard is one of the lucky few in aged care to get

help. In 2017 it was found that just 1 per cent of aged-care residents received mental health support, because they had to pay for it privately, and even if they could afford it, many were unable to access it.

In recent years several government funding initiatives have looked to address this, allowing local health networks to trial new models.

Mr Shephard's aged-care provider Whiddon worked with

local authorities in NSW and Queensland to trial pilot schemes across several homes.

He was one of 170 to take part. Following the sessions, the aged-care provider did a survey and found that more than six in 10 benefited and for some it was "transformative".

Whiddon's deputy chief executive Alyson Jarrett said that older people deserved equitable access and treatment to mental health support.

"We know that people living in aged care can experience higher levels of depression than those living in the community," she said.

Aged Care Crisis advocate Lynda Saltarelli said people in aged care should have the same access to mental health services as people in the community.

"They're forgotten when they go into aged care," Ms Saltarelli. "It's like they don't exist anymore."