

Thank Abba for the music

Albert Erhnrooth on a rockumentary that has won round the Swedes



HERE was a time when it was not the done thing to admit that you liked Abba. Fans of the Swedish pop group had to listen to their recordings under their bedclothes with the volume turned down if they were to maintain any social standing – until the success of the Australian band Bjorn Again restored the group to cult status with their impersonations.

The Swedes, however, had misgivings from the start about the four singers with their jolly songs and outrageous Seventies costumes. As a result, satirising the pop icons hardly raised a laugh – Bjorn Again played to half-empty houses in Stockholm.

Now, however, Swedes are appreciating the music with all the reverence that befits such a lucrative concern in an otherwise depressed economy. Last year the Berns Salonger, the 19th-century music hall that inspired Strindberg's *The Red Room*, commissioned two TV scriptwriters to write a "rockumentary" to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the band's formation. The musical was premiered last week in Stockholm and has since played to packed audiences.

This is all the more surprising in this era of tell-all biographies, since none of Europe's gutter press could rake up a single scandal involving the group. *Abba, the True Story* promised to tell all but all it actually reveals is that there are no skeletons in the cupboard.

"Japanese Customs came nearest to getting a scoop when they caught the group red-handed in possession of a white powdery substance. It turned out to be instant soup," said Hannes Holm, one of the writers.

"Of course, Benny and Frida and Agnetha and Bjorn divorced, but then most people did in the



Abba-lookalikes on stage

1980s. They were only trend followers."

The musical takes a light-hearted look at the group, inventing some of the anecdotes and recreating the legendary songs. "It was a good way of having fun with Seventies style, but we didn't want to do a simple satire," said Holm. "Abba deserve more than a mickey-take for the music is so strong."

The authors stress that the 15 songs are not just revivals of old recordings but are mostly reinterpreted and rearranged. The rendition of *The Winner Takes it All* even improves on the original, according to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*. Only *Waterloo* gets the authentic treatment, but then the winner of the Brighton 1974 Eurovision Song Contest is engraved on most minds – if only for the absurd attire.

Holm does not deny that many of the scenes are inventions. "There were ten of us at the first production meeting and none of us had ever actually seen Abba live." Berns Salonger is hoping that the show will run until the summer, when a shorter English version will replace it as the first step towards a European tour. Suddenly the final number, *Thank You For the Music*, seems to sum up the reaction in Stockholm as the Swedes finally give Abba the credit they never enjoyed in their own country.