

Travels with Mamma

A behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to transport the wildly successful musical *Mamma Mia!* across the country

by Sheryl Flatow

Iust four short months after *Mamma Mia!* opened on Broadway, the second—yes, the second—national tour of the international phenomenon was launched in February of 2002. All these years later, that tour is still playing to packed houses, as audiences around the country continue to dance and jive and have the time of their lives at the musical inspired by the songs of the Swedish pop group ABBA.

selfes in a plane or bus on Mondays, their one day off. (There is also a two-person advance team.) “The Equity contract mandates that we give actors on tour a certain number of days off every four weeks,” says Rina Saltzman, company manager of the Broadway production and a general manager of the tour. “We schedule what the contract refers to as ‘Golden Days,’ for weeks when they don’t have too far to go to the next city. That way they can have Monday off and travel on Tuesday.”

The logistics of conveying cast and crew is far less complex than coordinating load-in and load-out. The show generally begins to come down within an hour after the final curtain on Sunday. “We usually have 40 people doing the load-out,” says Saltzman. “Four carpenters, three electricians, two prop people and two sound people travel with the show, and the rest of the crew responsible for the move are local.” *Mamma Mia!* also travels with two wardrobe supervisors and a hair supervisor, who augment their departments in each city. The load-out and load-in of the 162 costumes are taken care of by the wardrobe department.

“The show loads out in about four hours,” says Saltzman. “This is a far different set from the one we had on the first national tour, because that production only moved three or four times a year. That set was quite similar to the one on Broadway. It had a raked stage, which we don’t have on this tour. That’s the biggest difference. This tour also has a different electric package and a little less automation. It’s been scaled down to move more efficiently. The basic parts of this set are the same as Broadway—it has the same walls, and they move the same way. I don’t think most people would notice a difference between the two productions.”

It takes nine trucks to transport *Mamma Mia!* and a crew of 28 to load in the show over



Keep on truckin': A Touring Green logo adorns one of the nine Clark Transfer vehicles that bring *Mamma Mia!* to a town near you

The tour routinely moves to a new city each week, and transporting the show requires as much direction, choreography, timing, precision and teamwork behind the scenes as it does onstage. Sets, costumes and electronic equipment are loaded out shortly after the curtain comes down on Sunday night and must be in place at the next venue well before the curtain goes up on Tuesday evening. Travel arrangements must be made for 59 people—a cast of 33, nine musicians, two company managers and a staff of 15—who sometimes find them-

Travels with Mamma

two days. Two trucks travel in advance with a duplicate deck (or floor), legs and borders—the sea-blue scenery that surrounds the stage—which are moved into the theatre between 8 A.M. and 4 P.M. on Monday. After a two-hour break, load-in continues from 6 to 10. “By that time the other seven trucks have arrived,” says Saltzman, “and the crew begins loading in what we call the show-to-

musical. *Mamma Mia!* is taking part in the Touring Green initiative established in 2008 by Clark Transfer, a trucking company that has moved countless shows, ballet companies and orchestras around the country since 1949. Participants in the Touring Green initiative contribute a penny and a half (\$0.015) per mile traveled by each truck, with the money going to *NativeEnergy*, a



Members of the company of the 2008 national tour of *Mamma Mia!* on one of the musical's deceptively simple looking yet complex sets

JUAN MARCUS

show. They resume at 8 the next morning and continue until they're done. The set is deceptively simple; there's a lot of complicated machinery attached to it. We're also a huge sound show, and that takes time to set up. There are four sound booths backstage because there's a lot of background singing on *Mamma Mia!*, to make the sound as rich and full and as ABBA-like as possible. There are also complicated lighting fixtures that need to be hung. Hopefully the work is completed by 4 o'clock, because that's when the actors are due onstage for a sound check. Each house sounds different, to the actors and to the audience. Certain houses allow for a bounce back in sound and have to adjust for that. So the sound check is very important.”

The colossal success of the *Mamma Mia!* tour has enabled the production to make an ongoing contribution to help offset carbon emissions that result when transporting the

leading international provider of high quality carbon offsets, which, in turn, distributes the payment to various green projects.

“*Mamma Mia!* is in a unique position,” says Saltzman. “Not every show on the road can afford to do this. But we have a wonderful track record, and we have plans for this tour to go on and on. So why not give something back? We looked at how much energy we were using over the course of any given year, and found that in 2007 each truck traveled 28,000 miles. There's no way to reduce our gas consumption. That's an enormous use of energy, and we're only talking about transportation. Our cast and crew have also become very aware and conscious of their usage of paper products and water bottles and how much we waste on the road. We're trying to change that. We're grateful that Clark has given us the opportunity to contribute in this way. The decision to participate was a no-brainer.”