



VPLUS:
'Mamma Mia!'
 turns 10 and
 takes in billions.
Begins after
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 WE WANTED MOVIE STARS."

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ABBA'S 'MAMMA' MEANS BUSINESS

It's the show that gives jukebox musicals a good name

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 OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY. WE HOPE
 TO CREATE PURE PLEASURE. WE'RE
 NOT SPLITTING THE ATOM.'**

—HELMER PHYLLIDA LLOYD



Marc Susser-Lacrou/WireImage.com

By DAVID BENEDICT, ADAM DAWTREY
 and CHRIS JONES

Looking at the global phenomenon that is "Mamma Mia!" it's hard to believe, but, prior to its 1999 opening on at London's Prince Edwards Theater, the show wasn't regarded as a sure-fire hit.

The landscape for tuners back then was rather different. London theater commentators were much more excited by the prospect of "The Lion King," which arrived later that same year. And although compilation shows utilizing a band's ready-made greatest hits did exist, they tended toward having little plot, less imagination and virtually no budget, and they were relatively few and far between. And only much later were they termed "jukebox musicals."

Even a back-catalog as musically strong and well-loved as that of Abba was no guarantee. It has largely been forgotten, but the sublimely named compilation "Abbacadabra" premiered Dec. 8, 1983, at London's 550-seat Lyric Hammersmith theater and, after resoundingly indifferent notices, closed eight weeks later.

Which isn't to say the outlook for Mamma Mia! was ever gloomy. Ten days before its preem, the box office advance looked toward £2 million (about \$3.2 million

then), a seriously impressive sum in those days when ticket prices were considerably lower. That's largely because Abba had, on and off, been a phenomenon throughout Europe for decades.

"Mamma Mia!" was carefully developed through workshops over 18 months. Catherine Johnson was the third writer to work on a book for the show, and she delivered a minimum of seven drafts.

"We're trying not to take ourselves too seriously," helmer Phyllida Lloyd said at the time, "but the ballads in particular are like little theatrical tales. We want to create an extraordinarily festive, witty, ironic, surprising bed for these wonderful songs and to make a story that releases them in a sometimes surprising way. We hope to create pure pleasure. We're not splitting the atom."

Cut to 10 years later.

Now that "Mamma Mia! The Movie" has grossed \$588 million, it's hard to recall why anyone questioned whether this stage smash would work on the bigscreen.

But doubt some did. Hit musicals have a checkered record of screen transfers. For all its popularity, "Mamma Mia!" was never regarded as the acme of sophistication. And its British creative team — Lloyd, Johnson and producer Judy Craymer — had never made a movie before.

No wonder Universal kept the budget tight, at \$60 million, offset by an \$8 million tax credit. The studio got burned by "The Producers," whose stage director, Susan Stroman, failed to reinvent her show for the cinema. It was determined to avoid the same mistake again.

Fortunately, Craymer was equally resolute. "No way was it going to be the stage show," she says. "We wanted movie

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stars.”

Craymer spent several years deflecting all interest from Hollywood while she rolled out the stage show in seven languages across 19 countries. It was only after the original London production reached its fifth birthday that she felt the timing was right for a movie version.

Film as biz plan for legit

“I looked at it as a business plan — what would be the biggest marketing exercise one could possibly do for the 10th anniversary?” she says. “It’s worked very well. All the shows have lifted, and there’s a new teeny fanbase.”

She was determined to make the movie herself, with Johnson and Lloyd. She teamed up with Gary Goetzmann at Playtone to help guide her. Universal, where Playtone has a first-look deal, presented itself as the natural partner.

Craymer found two key allies within the studio: Donna Langley, the studio’s English-born production proxy and No. 1 Abba fan; and David Kosse, president of the international distribution arm in London.

“It was serendipitous for me that Kosse was suddenly there in London for Universal,” Craymer says. “Film musicals weren’t that popular, and ‘The Producers’ hadn’t exactly beaten a path for us. It was David who was very onto the fact that ‘Mamma Mia!’ had such a big presence internationally.”

Thanks to astute marketing, that paid off with a \$444 million overseas gross, including a record-busting \$132 million in the U.K. alone. With its frugal budget, “Mamma Mia!” has become U’s most profitable movie since “The Mummy.”

“It always felt as though there was an upside, particularly in the international market,” Langley says. “The question was whether it would translate for the U.S. There was debate about whether people liked musicals, whether they liked Abba, and how to bring the conception outside of the proscenium.”



UNSTOPPABLE: Director Phyllida Lloyd, producer Judy Craymer and book writer Catherine Johnson (top right) spawned the tuner that plays from Broadway to Singapore and is now the highest-grossing movie musical ever.

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Langley made sure the rookie creative trio was surrounded by a topnotch crew. "It was a calculated risk. The payoff was that they could understand and capture the 'Mamma Mia' spirit in a way that other people wouldn't have been able to."

"The 'Mamma Mia!' factor" is that everyone in the audience feels they could get up there and join in," explains exec producer Mark Huffam.

But that's a devilishly hard trick to replicate in the cinema. They achieved it through loose and unpretentious choreography, a certain karaoke quality to the singing ("They are pop songs, not recitatives," Craymer says) and a general atmosphere of what she calls "intentional goofiness." That informality disguised a lot of hard work. The "Voulez Vous" setpiece alone took three days and 90 setups.

"We always told the studio this is going to be the opposite of your normal, slick Broadway musical," Craymer explains.

"I convinced myself we were making a Bollywood movie. That helped me sleep at night," Langley says with a laugh. "Bollywood movies have a wonderful, celebratory, melodramatic feel to them."

Ten weeks on the 007 soundstage in Pinewood was followed by four weeks on location in Greece to open up the story for the cinema. Some songs were changed, and the relationship between Donna (Meryl Streep) and Sam (Pierce Brosnan) was elaborated.

But Craymer insisted on keeping the stage show's stomping finale, in which the cast dons glittery spandex and camps along to "Waterloo." "It's very much a theater conceit, but I knew people who loved the stage show would be disappointed if it was left out."

Langley recalls the first test-screening in Santa Monica. "Women coming out were just giddy. It was like a fairground ride: They just wanted to get straight back on."

Repeat viewing is, of course, the key to the extraordinarily long legs of the "Mamma Mia!" franchise. "Years ago, you would only do a film if the show was coming to the end of its life. But in fact this wasn't the end of a life; they do sit symbiotically together," Craymer says.

And what about a sequel? "There's a real desire to at least explore the possibility," Langley answers. "Integrity is probably a funny word to use in conjunction with 'Mamma Mia!,' but I would want to create something as authentic and true to the brand as the first one was."

Craymer agrees but isn't in any rush. "We haven't got specific plans. We would have to go through a serious creative process," she says. "After all, the first creative process took 10 years."

Tour trappings

While the movie "Mamma Mia!" has enjoyed supertrouper success, it won't be catching up with the live show anytime soon. The stage musical has grossed a stunning \$2 billion in its various global venues, both resident and touring. More than 32 million people have seen the show in more than 200 cities.

The recession has taken a big bite out of the road, but "Mamma Mia!" is holding up better than most, surely because its familiar brand and its escapist, party atmosphere are a good tonic for anyone whose 401(k) is looking like it could use some money, money, money.

And even though the long-lived U.S. tour is now reaching smaller, split-week markets like Paducah, Ky. (where Abba songs remain a subversive act); Davenport, Iowa; and frigid Duluth, Minn., the tuner remains a huge grosser, routinely pulling down in excess of \$1 million per week and peppering its hinterland stands with return visits to major markets. Presenters view the show as a hugely desirable encore option in big markets like Chicago, where it did capacity business in 2008 on its fifth visit. In April, the U.S. tour will play another stand at the Pantages Theater in Los Angeles.

As its booking agents have frequently noted over the years, "Mamma Mia!" is one of the very few tuners that tend to do bigger business on a third or



For the past decade, "Mamma Mia!" has brought in a hefty percentage of the total road gross. Between 2002 to 2005 or so, for example, 75% or more of the weekly U.S. road grosses came from just three shows: "The Producers," "The Lion King" and "Mamma Mia!" At that point, if one included the Las Vegas company, there were four U.S. versions of "Mamma Mia!" And as presenters admitted at the time, "Mamma Mia!" helped sell a lot of season tickets to other shows.

Many people forget that "Mamma Mia!" pursued an unusual road strategy in the U.S., conducting an extensive, brand-

building North American tour well in advance of its Broadway engagement — a boffo Chi stand in the summer of 2001 was the final push before the Broadway opening.

By generating such audience awareness in advance of the Main Stem bow during the 2001-02 season, the show insulated itself against any possible critical backlash and ensured the strong Broadway viability that continues to this day.

And so it has gone — from Toronto to Tucson and Broadway to Bloomington. Talk about the girl with golden hair.

BROADWAY TUNERS ONSCREEN

Film (date)	Domestic	Overseas	World B.O.*
Mamma Mia! ('08)	144	453	597
Grease ('78)†	188	206	394
Chicago ('02)	171	137	308
Sound of Music ('65)	159	123	282
Hairspray ('07)	119	84	203
Dreamgirls ('06)	103	51	154
Phantom of the Opera ('04)	51	103	154
Sweeney Todd ('07)	53	100	153
Evita ('96)	50	91	141
My Fair Lady ('64)	72	n/a	72

"Mamma Mia!"

*in millions of \$ †includes reissue

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