

LIVING

CINEMA Meeting Dr Twilight 5
DEAR PATRICIA No romance with my wife 6
RELATIONSHIPS Damien Lewis' African queen 7
OUT THERE French without the fears 7
PERSONAL NOTICES For all you need 8

REVIEW 9-13

ENCOUNTER Judy Craymer: winner takes it all 9
BOOKS Joseph O'Connor's song of Synge's muse 10
TRAVEL Joanna Kiernan in Harry Potterland 13
THE EDGE All the top gossip 14

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REVIEW

What happened to Synge's muse? Joseph O'Connor's new novel, Page 10



Winner takes it all

In creating *Mamma Mia!* and taking it from the stage to the big screen, Judy Craymer has quietly been championing strong women, from the personal sacrifices she made in bringing the musical to life to battling against Hollywood to keep her all-female team in control of the film and see the lead role played by Meryl Streep. **Emily Hourican** talks to the producer Pierce Brosnan described as formidable, and discovers a modest woman behind it all

IF YOU'VE never seen *Mamma Mia!*, you must be either a world-class comedian or an elderly man completely devoid of female relatives. If you missed the stage show, chances are you were dragged to the film – initially kicking and screaming, soon whooping and singing along – or, failing that, you have almost certainly been subjected to the DVD. Because there is no excuse. *Mamma Mia!* is cross-generational, cross-gender, cross-over fun.

It should be appalling – kitsch, dated, cringe-worthy – but instead it is, in the words of one American critic, “like doing karaoke on ecstasy”. The woman behind every bit of this phenomenon had to battle all these objections, and then some, in the 15 years it took her to get the first production up and running. “ABBA wasn’t in vogue at the time, there was a kind of gay, disco naughtiness to it. People would say that to me, ‘Why are you doing this? It’s not cool.’ But the songs were really theatrical,” says Judy Craymer, who has gone from being a producer with a dream that bordered on an obsession, to pretty much the top of her field.

We’re sitting in the chic, rather anodyne offices of Littlestar, the production company Judy set up and of which she owns a 50 per cent share. She is telling the story of her determination and triumph, a story that could all have turned out so differently.

Does she ever ponder the alternative endings? “It is daunting to think how differently it might have worked out,” she agrees. “So I don’t go there.” Now 52 (“50-plus is a good kind of age, really”), Judy

looks a good decade younger. She’s wearing a nude chiffon shirt and cropped jeans with platform sandals. Her trademark blonde bob is beautifully cut and coloured. Pierce Brosnan, who played Sam in the *Mamma Mia!* film, described her thus: “There is an air of *Absolutely Fabulous* about Judy, but she is formidable.”

And, indeed, there is something of the head girl to Judy Craymer. Cool and collected, she is matter-of-fact and restrained in what she says, but with a deep, throaty chuckle that escapes regularly. At one point during our conversation, she compares herself to Brown Owl (that’s the girl who gets to be in charge of a Brownie unit), which at once demonstrates her solidly middle-class upbringing – her father was a lawyer and the family lived in north London and this head-girl quality, no-nonsense, highly capable, attractive.

Just the kind of woman, I imagine, whose younger assistants are always getting crushes on her. She refers to herself as “one”, which has the effect of making her seem modest rather than boastful or megalomaniac.

So, first the facts, the ‘happy ending’ to the *Mamma Mia!* story: the film took £67.95m at the UK box office, it is the all-time highest-grossing musical film in 33 countries, and the stage show has grossed over \$2bn worldwide. Not bad for a show that could so easily not have been made.

Judy studied stage management and music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and went on to stage-manage *Cats*, which opened in the West End in 1992. She became assistant to theatre producer Tim Rice, and through

him met Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvæus of ABBA, who were writing the music for Rice’s *Chess*. “I had liked ABBA a lot, but it was when I met Benny and Björn that I really became interested in the songs. I would listen to them night and day after that...”

It was Judy’s brilliance to take a rather different approach to the concept of musicals. “I had realised that sometimes the music was great, and the story wasn’t. So I was coming at it differently – if you have existing music and you can find a story...” It’s an approach that has, understandably, become way more common since the success of *Mamma Mia!* (rumour has it that half the bosses of major music companies were to be seen thumping tables and demanding, “Where’s our *Mamma Mia!*?”), but, at the time, this was still a novel and complex idea, involving quite different legal rights to those required for putting on original material, or a simple tribute show.

Judy switched to working in film and TV production, but her newfound interest in ABBA would not go away, continuing to churn away in the background as she pondered ways and means of getting her idea to work. “The song *Winner Takes It All* was the big obsession, the big excitement, the big inspiration. I just think it’s a great break-up song, a great roller-coaster of emotions and it fascinated me. I was, I think, getting my head inside the character that became Donna. I always wanted to sing it to boyfriends,” she laughs. “Does she kiss like I used to kiss? It’s the song that says everything.”

It was a decade later, during the mid-Nineties, that a business plan began to come together, and

THANK YOU FOR THE MUSICAL: Judy Craymer gave up everything to make a success of the stage show ‘Mamma Mia!’, above left, and is now working on a fictional story set around the music of the Spice Girls

Björn and Benny, with whom she had stayed in touch, finally said yes. By that time, Judy had sold her flat to pay off the overdraft incurred in working out her dream. She then quit her job and committed completely to the project.

Was there ever a moment when she nearly gave it all up? “No. There wasn’t really a choice. I gave everything up and put my own money into it. And I didn’t have any money, I didn’t have any savings or anything, so I gave everything up.” Didn’t that scare her? After all, she was then in her late-30s, just the time when everyone else is busily settling down and amassing assets? “Yes. But I hadn’t lived any other way, really. In a way, now it would probably scare me more,” she says candidly. “I did believe in it, but, also, I didn’t have any dependents. I don’t think I could have done it if I had.”

Friends may have been sceptical about the street value of ABBA songs, but her parents were supportive. “My dad had no idea quite what it was, but he always thought that I wouldn’t be following something just for the sake of a dream. My mother was less optimistic. I heard afterwards that she was running round to the neighbours saying, ‘You must buy tickets for the show, I’m really worried that nobody’s going to go!’ Both her parents have since died, but lived long enough to see the show become a huge success – her mother saw it 18 times.

Once Benny and Björn granted her the rights, in partnership with themselves, momentum gathered fast, and Judy put a writer, Catherine Johnson, and director, Phyllida Lloyd, in place.

Together, they make up a similar trio to the three women at the heart of *Mamma Mia!*, with Judy as the glamorous Tanya, Polygram, ABBA’s record producer, put up half the £3m needed to put on the show, and a Swedish bank came with the rest.

At that stage, Judy’s ambitions were modest enough. “Just for it to have worked for a couple of years

would have got one off the hook. That was what I was envisaging – play at the West End for a couple of years, and then be thinking of another project.”

Within weeks of opening at the Prince Edward Theatre, Hollywood, never slow to spot a winner, were on the line to discuss a film version. Judy said no. She had no intention of handing control over. It was only after five years running in London, and once the show had opened to packed audiences on Broadway, that she felt ready. “Hollywood wanted it, we wanted to do it, so we reached an agreement.” The agreement involved Judy, Phyllida and Catherine staying on as producer, director and writer, despite the fact that none of them had made a film before, which must be the result of some of the hardest bargaining Universal, the studio involved, had yet seen. At one point, Spielberg was mooted as director, but Judy held firm. “I knew it was right to keep the team together; we understood the audience better than anyone. If the film had gone wrong, and there were shows still opening, it would have had a knock-on effect.” In all negotiations, Judy held the trump card – the film rights – and played it brilliantly.

Having three middle-aged women make the film was one thing, but Universal was just as concerned about middle-aged women in the film, wanting to lower Donna’s age by a decade or so, to within the more normal scope for Hollywood glamour. Nicole Kidman, Kim Basinger, even Kylie Minogue were suggested, but Judy had yet another trump card up her sleeve. “I had seen Meryl Streep in *Mother Courage*, in the open air in Central Park, where she sang, and I remember going, ‘God, she is Donna.’”

Happily, Meryl was of exactly the same opinion. When her agent rang, while she was out driving her daughter, the first thing she shouted was “I am *Mamma Mia!*”. Life, of course, has changed considerably. Craymer’s net worth is

estimated at £75m, and she has homes in New York and Knightsbridge, with a gym in both (“one’s reached an age where keeping fit is important”), but with greater freedom comes, paradoxically, greater responsibility. “Financially things have changed, but, after 12 years or so, I’m used to that. You have more freedom, but you also have more people dependent on you. You can’t be such a free spirit, which I don’t mind. I love what I do, I’m grateful for that in every possible way.”

Also, she understands the vagaries of human nature, and the kind of anticipatory fall her success may have set her up for. “Having achieved that success, people are possibly more critical. Expectations have risen in proportion.” Right now, Judy is working on *Viva Forever*, a musical inspired by the Spice Girls and featuring their music, again with a fictional story. More strong women. “The Spice Girls inspire me with who they are and what they’ve achieved, and what they are as women.”

All these women, along with the determination to not exclude an age group usually invisible to Hollywood – is Judy, I wonder, a feminist? “I’ve never really talked about it because I’m a soft feminist in a sense. I love girly stuff, girly chats” – and, indeed, we talk for a long time about the best kind of spray tan, and Streep’s fabulous dungarees – “but I think women are very good at collaborating and achieving things when they want to. But you can’t have everything. I don’t have children, and I must have a choice somewhere. But yes, definitely. I think it is a responsibility.”

However, she’s quick to add, “but I wouldn’t have raised the money if I hadn’t beguiled a few men along the way!”

Mamma Mia! International Tour opens at the Marquee, Cork, July 20, for two weeks. Tickets from Ticketmaster and usual outlets.
www.mamma-mia.com

