

# Gimme gimme gimme a ticket...

**Bryan Boyd finds out how Judy Craymer turned the songs from Abba's back catalogue into the most popular musical in the world**

Theatre producer Judy Craymer grew up listening to and loving punk rock music. When she first met Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Anderson from Abba though, she was in awe: "Wow, I've just met the men who wrote *Dancing Queen*," she remembers. Craymer is the producer of the global entertainment phenomenon that is *Mamma Mia!* - currently the most popular musical in the world - which opens in Dublin on September 9th.

The show arrives with its own advance built-in publicity: *Mamma Mia!* has already been seen by more than 18 million people; there are currently 11 different productions selling out every night somewhere around the world; it has already grossed over \$1 billion at the box-office; it is on its way to become the most successful musical.

It all began with Craymer listening to Abba songs for hours on end. "I know for a fact that I drove my neighbours mad," she says sitting in her Soho office the morning after another full house show at the nearby Prince Of Wales theatre. "But since working with Bjorn and Benny on the production of *Chess* which they co-wrote, I always had this idea of using existing Abba songs within the format of a new, original musical. I played the songs over and over looking for a story. I would stop the tape, rewind it, take notes and move on. It was difficult but not as difficult as trying to persuade Bjorn and Benny to give me the permission to use the songs."

As the second biggest selling band of all time (behind The Beatles) Abba have sold 350 million records. From the moment they stepped on to the Eurovision stage in 1974 and sang *My, my...* to their demise eight years later - with a few inter-band marriages and divorces thrown in - all four members of the band thought that was that. They were the most surprised to discover that years later, films such as

*Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* would introduce their songs to a whole new audience and that when a greatest hits album, *Abba Gold*, was released in 1993, it would become one of the biggest selling records of all time (to this day it still sells 3,500 copies a day).

"I was just so convinced of the strength of their songs and how well they would suit the musical format," says Craymer. "I think everyone has at one time danced to an Abba song but not that many people have listened to the lyrics. It was only really examining the songs, particularly a track like *The Winner Takes It All*, that I realised there was a real story there."

From working with Bjorn and Benny, Craymer knew they didn't want a musical written about the band and the relationships therein - that was private territory - but putting the songs into a different context might just persuade them.

"When I first put the idea to them it was quite clear they didn't want to revisit their past. I spent years arguing my case with them and I think the huge success of the *Abba Gold* record gave them the confidence to release these songs for a musical. There were two big moments: one was when Benny went to see *Grease* and saw how upbeat and fun a musical could be; the second was when we agreed that whatever show we put on, it wouldn't

even mention Abba - it would just use their songs to move along the plot. That was important because then it wouldn't just be a night of Abba's greatest hits, there would actually be an original story."

Craymer drafted in playwright Catherine Johnson to write the show. "We realised that the story simply had to be as infectious as the music and provide a strong feel-good factor," she says, "so we came up a Greek island setting".

On the island, a young woman called Sophie is about to get married. She has been brought up by her single mother, Donna, but discovers that any one of three men from her mother's past could be her father. Sophie invites all three to the island, determined to find out who her father is. The themes of lost parents, a search for identity and the generation gap of young love and old romances being rekindled jolly the show along at every turn.

"It's not Pinter," says Craymer, "it's not theatre, it's a musical but I do think the storyline really holds up and doesn't just exist as an excuse for the songs." The trick here is that all the early Abba songs (in all their innocence and naivety) are given to the daughter while the later songs (mature, reflective) are given to the mother. It's all very seamless and there's never a sense that a song has been shoehorned into the narrative.

Craymer even had to drop one of the band's most famous songs, *Waterloo*, from the show, simply because there was nowhere for it to go in the storyline.

"Despite the fact that we are dealing with adult themes, the show remains resolutely up-beat," she says. "Before *Mamma Mia!* came along the West End musical was a very heavy, dark and gothic affair - with shows such as *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon* - this though is a celebratory affair".

Certainly, *Mamma Mia!* brings the term "crowd-pleasing" to a different level. "You can really see that in the amount of people who return again and again to the show," says Craymer. "I think with all the elements we have in the show there's something there for everyone. It doesn't alienate anyone. Certainly, one of the most common responses from people is that they went to see the show for the Ab-



A scene from *Mamma Mia!* and producer Judy Craymer (above right). 'We realised that the story simply had to be as infectious as the music'

ba songs and then went back again for the story."

For all its success, *Mamma Mia!* had a shaky start. Craymer reports a lot of "apathy" towards the idea when she was first looking for investors. "They were hardly beating down our door to fund the show. What turned it around for us was that I was able to convince the head of Universal Records (who have the Abba back catalogue on their books) to come on board.

But that was only after I had performed the entire show for him in his office all by myself! We also had no theatre until four weeks before tickets were due to go on sale. At the very first preview night in 1999 we really had no idea how it was going to be received but the audience went wild - they were literally out of their seats and singing and dancing in the aisles - and they still are, every night."

Of the current productions of *Mamma*



*Mia!*, five are in the US (including Broadway and Las Vegas), there's an Australasian touring show, one show in Japan, two in Germany, one in Holland and one in Korea. The next opening, Craymer hopes, will be in Stockholm.

The producer has looked on as Cher liked the show so much she went three times and how Mikhail Gorbachev was so taken by it that he asked to meet the cast afterwards.

"Even though from the first preview onwards I knew it would work, you still can't take the success of the show for granted. A large part of my work is now spent on quality control with all the different productions. I have no idea how long this can run for, but then I used to work on *Cats* and against what everyone expected, that ran for 20 years. The only thing I do know is that the next work I do will have the story written before the songs. Some of the offers I've been getting on the back of this have been just mad. When we opened in Las Vegas, I had all these phone calls the next morning from people saying to me 'Loved your show - could you do the same with the songs of Dolly Parton or Neil Diamond and have something ready by next Tuesday'."

◆ *Mamma Mia!* opens at The Point, Dublin, next Thursday. There are previews from today until Wednesday. [www.thepoint.ie](http://www.thepoint.ie)