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Q&A: Judy Craymer of Mamma Mia! How did they resist you?

By Melissa Leong



Lorenzo Agius Producer Judy Craymer chased ABBA's Benny Anderson and Björn Ulvaeus for a decade trying to convince them to turn their songs into a musical.

Judy Craymer chased ABBA's Benny Anderson and Björn Ulvaeus for a decade trying to convince them to turn their songs into a musical. She sold her apartment to bankroll the project and her first royalty cheque went to car repairs. Today, more than 40 million people around the world have seen *Mamma Mia!* since it opened in 1999. It has grossed more than US\$2-billion and its 52-year-old producer is listed as one of Britain's wealthiest people in the music industry. Craymer spoke to Melissa Leong about her recipe for success and the show's return to Toronto.

Q What reasons did Benny and Björn give you for not wanting to do the musical?

A They were very resistant to it at the time because they were moving onto other things. ABBA was incredibly successful. They didn't need a show that was going to damage their canon of work. Björn and Benny wanted reassurance that it wasn't going to be the story of ABBA or a tribute show. I worked with several different writers. Then I went to Catherine Johnson, thinking that she would be the right person to write it.

Q You said in a previous interview that the plot is inspired by Johnson's life. How much of it is based on real-life events?

A I said to a journalist that it was very much based on Catherine's life and when she was interviewed, she said, "Judy Craymer is such a liar. She thinks I'm a single woman who got banged up by a man I don't know." It was very funny. I think all writers write what they know and Catherine wrote this from the heart. The vision was that it had to have a sense of irony. It had to be tongue in cheek. It had to be funny and romantic. It was Catherine who came up with the mother and the daughter and the wedding idea. It had to be a woman's story because Benny and Björn wrote those lyrics for women to sing.

Q How were you able to maintain creative control of your project in Hollywood? I heard the studio executives considered people like Kylie Minogue for the lead role in the film.

A There were always conversations and debates about casting. Meryl Streep was who we wanted. And we were fortunate that she had seen the show and loved it and thought this was a fantastic idea. After that, we almost wanted to have T-shirts that said, "We were here before Meryl," because once Meryl said yes, everyone was interested. I had a lot to aim for. The show was successful and I didn't want a film that could damage that, almost like how Björn and Benny had not wanted a woman with an idea that was going to do damage.

Q So what is your recipe for success?

A It's a mixture of ingredients: knowing your own weaknesses and strengths, collaboration but just determination. If people say it's not going to work, you have to be thick-skinned. It's funny because now I'm starting another project and people love to give opinions and I think, "God, I'm sure I couldn't have been this sensitive then."

Q How is the work going on Viva Forever, your production based on the Spice Girls, and the Mamma Mia! sequel?

A The sequel is just something that we talk about. Björn and Benny have said they don't think there are enough songs. But we'll go through a process and we'll see where that ends up. Viva Forever is my new passion. I am mad for the Spice Girls. This wouldn't be a tribute show either or a story about their lives. It's another study of women. It will be a story about girls, not girl power, but a story of friendship and all the things that go with that, loyalty ... betrayal.

Q What is one of your highlights from the last 10 years?

A One of the most exciting things was opening in Toronto because it was the first time outside of London and just seeing Canadian audiences embrace *Mamma Mia!* like their own. One of the funny things that I remember about it was when we opened at the Royal Alexander Theatre, everyone stood up at the end and we were concerned because the dress-circle, the balcony upstairs started to sway. Then an engineer said you could ask the audience to come downstairs. We said, "Don't be so ridiculous. We're only going to be here a little while." But actually we were there for five years and it's still standing.

• *Mamma Mia!* plays at Princess of Wales Theatre until June 27. Visit [Mirvish online](#) for details and ticket information.