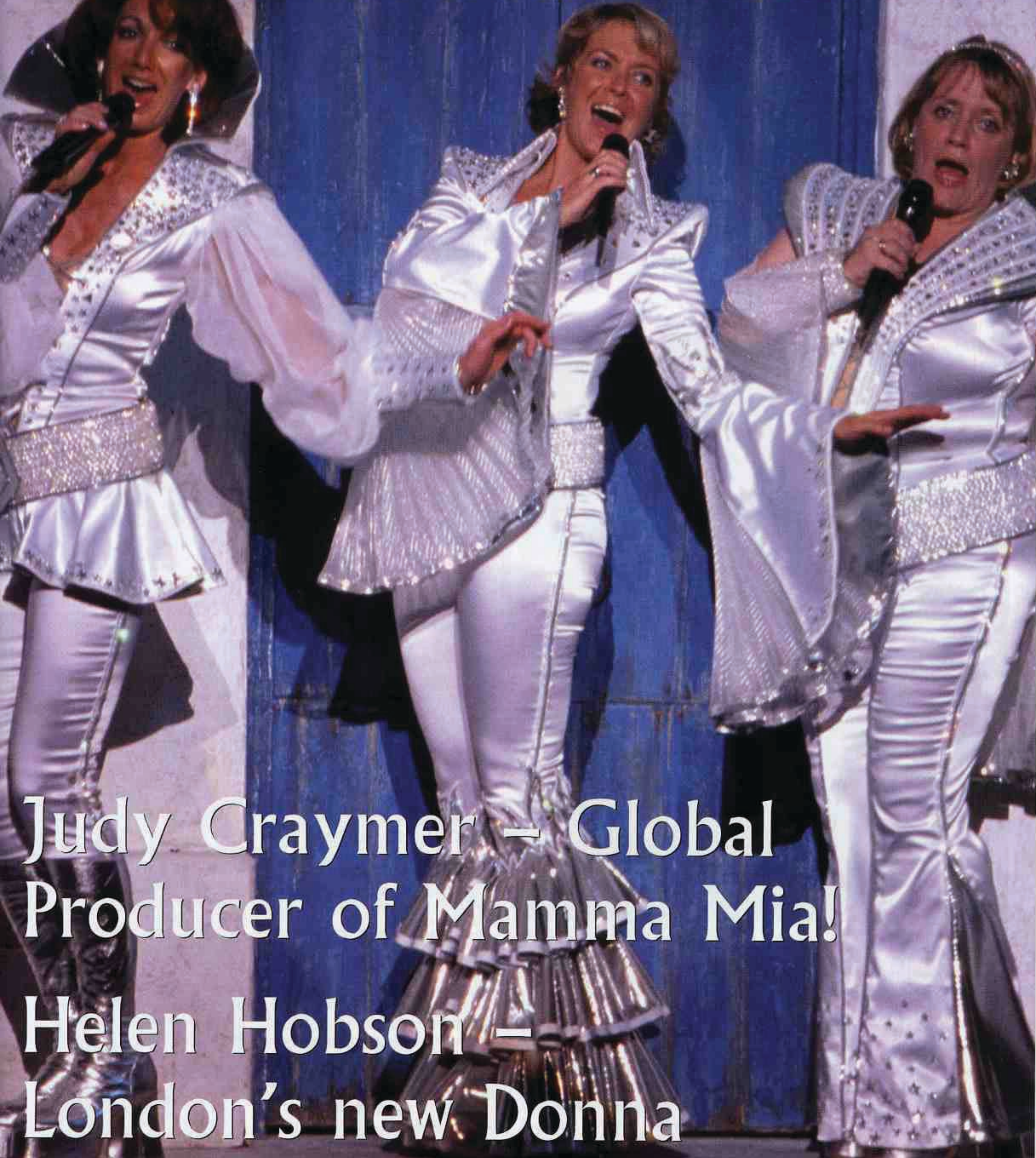


# MUSICAL STAGES

## The World of Musical Theatre



### Judy Craymer – Global Producer of Mamma Mia!

### Helen Hobson – London's new Donna

“The Parish Magazine of the West End”

The success that is ...

## Judy Craymer

*A telephone conversation with the Global Producer of Mamma Mia!*

Judy Craymer was in New York when we finally managed to chat. It was 7.0pm in London and 2.0pm across the pond. When I called her, the telephone was picked up immediately, so after introducing ourselves because so far, we have never met, I asked her what she was doing in America.

“We have three shows here, Broadway, Las Vegas and the North American Tour and when we are changing casts there are always things to do. I spent a lot of time in Las Vegas when we put the show on there and that city is fun for a few days but exhausting. Everyone wants to go and see all the things like *Treasure Island* at one in the morning.

#### Celebratory

“Then when we were into previews and rehearsals, one show was going up at 10.00pm at night. It is the third year there and the New York production is coming up to its fifth year in October. But that opening still seems like yesterday. We are working on various low key celebratory things.”

Judy is a London girl brought up in North London and after leaving school, she went to Guildhall to study stage management. It was early days for the course – only seven people were on it – and they started off in John Carpenter Street before moving to the current home of Guildhall at The Barbican Centre.

“It gave me the pick of the jobs when I left!”

Which started with the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, then The Actors' Company, Wayne Sleep's one-man show, the Old Vic Theatre and in 1981, she

took on the job as Stage Manager for the original production of *Cats* for Cameron Mackintosh and The Really Useful Theatre Company. A stint with Tim Rice co-producing *Biondella* with Cameron followed and then she became Managing Director – quite a leap – of Three Knights Ltd which was formed by Benny Andersson, Tim Rice and Björn Ulvæus making her Executive Producer for *Chess* written by the three men, at the Prince Edward Theatre.

Judy then gave film and television a go, working on *White Mischief* directed by Michael Radford and *Madame Sousatzka* directed by John Schlesinger. She produced and developed television drama and comedy for Tiger Aspect Productions and Primetime Television for whom she produced Tim Firth's *Neville's Island* with Timothy Spall. And then 1996 arrived!

How did *Mamma Mia!* come about? Was it Judy's idea?

“Entirely my idea. Over the years, I had the advantage and privilege of working with Benny and Björn in the early 1980s so I was able to study the ABBA songs and became fascinated by them. I was Tim Rice's assistant on *Chess* at the time but I always had this ambition that I wanted to do something of my own. I was convinced those songs would work. The big inspiration was ‘The Winner Takes It All’, the big break-up song, but then the difficulty struck. Making a musical about a song would not work if it was starting with a tragedy. I realised the songs fell into two generations – the younger, happy ones with weddings and holidays and then the older ones. So then I went to Catherine Johnston who came up with the mother/daughter thing. I knew her work through her agent, Sebastian Borne and

having talked to Terry Johnson and tried to interest him, he suggested Catherine so I followed up. She did not have any experience of writing for musicals except a libretto for a fringe production which had impressed me.

“That was 1996/1997 and we did a workshop in 1998. I still had to convince Benny and Björn and I still did not have their permission to use the songs but eventually Björn said, ‘If you could find the right writer...’ All the time I had to prove to them that I could pull it off, wondering if they would pull the whole idea. And I still feel that from time to time! They said it would only work in London, ‘You can't take it to Broadway’. But I had no doubts at all – I could not allow myself to have any. I had complete tunnel vision.”

#### Justified

Which, of course, has been completely justified. At the time of writing, there are eleven productions world-wide including London, Las Vegas, New York, Hamburg, Madrid, Utrecht, Stuttgart, Osaka, Stockholm, the North American Tour and the International Tour. Indeed, there are currently more productions of *Mamma Mia!* playing around the world than any other musical. They are grossing over \$8m each week in ticket sales and 18,000 people see the show around the world every night.

So far, over \$1.4 Billion has grossed at the box offices and the show has premiered in more cities worldwide faster than any other musical in history, opening in more than 130 major cities since the first production in London just six years ago.

Judy's company, Littlestar Services, was formed with Benny, Björn and Richard East in 1996 solely to produce *Mamma Mia!*

“I had to build our company as

we went along. We had just an office and an assistant and a computer. Now we have thirteen people in the London office but thousands around the world!”

Surprisingly, Judy tells me, people still say negative things about the show but she adds that if you believe in something, you have to let them think what they want.

“It's funny when you look back because other shows modelled themselves on *Mamma Mia!* but people seemed not to realise that the songs were used to take the action forward. I told Catherine that you know the music is successful, you can't change the lyrics, they are what they are, so you must concentrate on the story. Björn, the lyricist, was not allowed to change the lyrics either. He changed the odd word here and there. So there must have been some doubt but I did not have anything to lose! I just beavered away and I had ABBA's cannon of work. I had to raise three million pounds, but I raised money from Polygram (now Universal) and I look back and think how bold I was to go in there and say 50% of the financing please!”

Judy's enthusiasm carried her through. Everyone in the creative team shared that and the fact that Catherine had not written a big musical and the director, Phyllida Lloyd had not directed a big musical; nobody had big pretensions.

“Even the cast were doubtful.” Judy tells me. “But now it has become so full time, I can't imagine anything else. It is an industry in itself. I had to learn very quickly. I found Andrew Treagus, the General Manager, and we were just rolling out the shows. We were opening two shows a year and I did not want to let go. Things like this do not come along that often! There are many big grossing movies each

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year but big musicals like *Chicago*, *Les Misérables*, *Evita* – not so often.”

Interestingly, in the USA whilst people are charmed and fond of the show they look at it slightly differently. ABBA was big but they did not tour there. So when people hear an ABBA song in the USA, they tend to say it is from *Mamma Mia!*

The start of ABBA's career was winning the Eurovision Song Contest with ‘Waterloo’ which was originally written in Swedish, but after that, they wrote everything in English. So when the show was taken to countries other than English-speaking, people presumed that Littlestar would keep the lyrics in English. No, they have now had them translated to quite a few different languages.

#### Delighted

“You have to understand the lyrics to understand the story and once the audience hears them in their native language they are delighted. We have two productions in Germany; Hamburg for three years and Stuttgart for two. If you play in the native language you run for a longer time. But then we have the International Tour from the UK which goes to all kinds of interesting places in various parts of the world. I rather wanted to go with them as boot carrier!”

We take it to places that could not really afford their own production and we never licence it out without quality control.”

Judy goes to all the major productions and tells me that there was a time when she thought that British Airways staff were flying less than she was. She has not missed one production.

When setting up the interview, I had heard that Littlestar is considered to be the kindest and most generous management to work for and I wondered how that came about. Is Judy's philosophy that you get good when you give good?

“I think it is also from being a theatre manager; I know what it's like. Cameron once said, ‘Always be nice to your ASM,’ (assistant stage manager) ‘You never know’. But also, I love actors, crews and musicians and I think it is the right way to run things. I started working as soon as I left Guildhall and

when I worked for Cameron there were always good parties. I worked at Leicester Haymarket which I loved. I think life is too short to be any other way and *Mamma Mia!* is a happy show. I have worked on shows where it is an unhappy company and it always shows. We are all doing things we love and I hear about unpleasant producers but Andrew Treagus has worked in the business for years and says he has never seen anything like this and he is still very excited by it.”

Björn and Benny are currently workshoping *Kristina from Duvemala* which regular readers will remember being reviewed by our Swedish correspondent some years ago. It has a beautiful score, but I commented to Judy that it has a very sad story. Still, we will see what happens. And meanwhile, does Judy have another idea?

“Yes...I do, but not something I can talk about yet!”

The admiration she receives makes her laugh.

“First woman to...it is always retail or banking but we don't go into theatre to make money. I had committed to do some other things and thought I could manage without an income if we made 55% houses! And if we got to 70%, perhaps I could draw a couple of hundred pounds a week.”

I politely forbore from asking how much she can now draw but I suspect she has a very comfortable lifestyle.

We finished with Judy telling me about Charles and Camilla's visit to *Mamma Mia!* when Frieda from ABBA was also present. Charles was all for jumping up and singing along with the finale and Judy had great fun pointing out that he was standing next to the original ‘Dancing Queen’!

I can't wait to find out what this delightful woman will do next. She has a ready laugh, a lot of charm and no pretensions – a complete joy to talk to even when it is on the telephone all those miles away. I had been told I could have about fifteen minutes, but she is generous with her time as she is with her staff, crews, musicians and performers and we spent fifty minutes laughing about the crazy business that is musical theatre. We need more people like Judy.

LYNDA TRAPNELL



Photograph: Joan Marcus