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HOLLYWOOD BRIEF

RACHEL
ABRAMOWITZ

'Mamma Mia' love is global

MY 8-YEAR-OLD son asked me the other morning why I was dancing around the breakfast table singing "Take a Chance on Me." "I don't usually sing in the morning. I definitely don't dance. And I didn't know I knew any ABBA songs (I've never actually bought an album), but then they were "D.O.B.," "Dancing Queen" and "Mamma Mia" — bouncing around in my subconscious. Like unrecovered neurons, suddenly reactivated by an infusion of "Mamma Mia!" The big screen adaptation of the musical, which I'd seen the night before.

The movie, in theaters this Friday, stars a singing-dancing star-of-the-show Meryl Streep. Another highlight: the posing beauty from HBO's "Big Love" as her daughter, and a dream team of middle-aged men that women still want to sleep with: Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth and Stellan Skarsgård. Meryl has her choice among James Bond, Mr. Darcy and the Swedish bank boss "Good Will Hunting." According to the pitch, the three guys are called to a Greek isle

by the daughter, who believes one of them is her father, but she's not sure which one. Ah, the '90s.

OK, LAUGH all you want. I've had to endure snickers from almost every man I've told about my passion for this movie. And I'm not even the target demographic — but I would be if I were Greek, Spanish, German, Scandinavian, Australian, Japanese or from any foreign country that truly appreciates leisurely wacky tunes and big-hearted camp.

Although "Mamma Mia!" stage shows have toured the continental U.S. since 2000, it's primarily an international sensation, with albums in a multitude of languages (from Swedish and Dutch to Korean and an estimated \$1 billion in gross ticket sales). Every night, some 15,000 people watch "Mamma Mia!" somewhere in the world, joining the more than 80 million who have already seen it.

In their barnstorming to promote the film, Streep and company aren't focusing on the U.S. but instead have hit locales like London, Melbourne, Stockholm and

Sydney, London in Athens. (Meryl is only talking to do music promo for a mere four hours in New York.) And the plan is working: The film has already opened No. 1 in the U.K., Australia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Canada, where the movie was shot. It also performed strongly in Iceland, New Zealand, the Middle East and the Philippines. Total take in 22 international markets? A strong \$24.3 million.

"It's huge abroad," says Universal President Donna Langley, who's hoping for a "Sex and the City"-type smash by appealing to mothers and daughters. "It's absolutely huge. It's a multi-billion-dollar franchise worldwide. We were pursuing the rights probably as long as the shoe has been running in the U.S."

While the film may have been greenlit with the international potential in mind, Langley notes, "I think it's bigger U.S. title than one may have suspected in the beginning, now that people can see the movie. It has such playability."

I recently asked Judy Craymer, the impresario behind "Mamma Mia!" (both the musical and the movie),

whether she ever finds herself singing ABBA songs in the shower. She thought I was nuts. "Not anymore," she says. "I'm singing 'Dancing Queen' comes on, I might dance around a bit," she points. "It's pretty irresistible." However, she does have "a picture of Bjorn and Benny on my walls."

That would be Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvén, the songwriting duo behind ABBA, which has sold some 270 million albums worldwide. Craymer famously met the duo back in early '80s, when she was working for lyricist Tim Rice, and they were all making the 1984 musical "Chess." "I remember having to go pick up Bjorn from the airport. I couldn't think of what to say," says Craymer. About getting them to agree to the musical "Mamma Mia!," she says, "It was the years of trust. They got to know me, which is how I convinced them that this would work. They weren't looking for this."

WITH A basic idea in her head about an international musical about women, Craymer talked to a lot of writers about ideas for the plot before enlist-

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ing Catherine Johnson, a struggling single mom who writes a musical that was never produced because she didn't have the rights to the music. "She said, 'What about a mother and a daughter act on the night of the daughter's wedding?' That was it," says Craymer. "She had no track record as a writer of original musicals, but she had a great understanding of music and ABBA songs and a lack of pretension, which was tremendously important. We were both so broke we had nothing to lose."

The duo were later joined by Phyllida Lloyd, a production opera director. "I took Catherine and Phyllida out to dinner the first time we got together, about a year into working on the creative development. And Bjorn, I just prayed they would go with the set design and not as a carter, or I couldn't afford to pay for it."

After the success of the musical, which premiered in London in 1999, Craymer initially turned down all of Hollywood's advances, in part to let the show run its course. But she was also adamant that if there was a movie version, she would make it themselves and would keep control. "We could never let that music out of our sight," she says. "We could never just sell the rights. That's the way it was set up. Catherine, Phyllida and I were very parts to them, couldn't do it without the girls."

Of course, the movie idea really got a boost, and became an inevitability, when Streep became interested. Craymer and company had made a point never to use big-name actors in the stage production, because the ABBA songs were the star, but were willing to take a chance with the movie version so it could travel in the international marketplace more easily. (Personally, I probably wouldn't have been to see the movie without the Meryl Streep and) approval.)



Photo: Michael Grecco/Photo

MOTHER-DAUGHTER: Judy Craymer (left) helps Meryl Streep (right) get ready for wedding dress.

In discussing the casting, Craymer refers repeatedly to their "music police" — i.e. splits in the entertainment world who can ferret out whether anyone can really sing, especially because many A-listers don't audition. Of Streep, Craymer says, "We kind of knew [from] 'Fools in the Field' that she had a great belt and a great voice."

And there there was the letter that Streep wrote to the Broadway cast after seeing the show in 2001. It read, "I loved the show so much, I took my daughter, and took to my children's school to sing. I wanted to give you stage after — want to feel what it was like to be 'Mamma Mia,'" reads Craymer. "It came on Meryl Streep paper. We all kept copies like school girls, and it stayed pinned on the notice board backstage forever."

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