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They all said I was crazy, that Abba was so passe - Mamma made Mia fortune

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Last updated at 7:32 AM on 04th July 2008

The smash musical has hit the big screen. But for producer Judy Craymer, it has been an epic 13-year labour of love

When Meryl Streep was sounded out about starring in Mamma Mia! the movie, she whooped: 'Mamma Mia!? I am Mamma Mia!' No, she wasn't confessing to a promiscuous past, or a passion for Lycra and glitter. (The 30 million people who have seen the stage musical will know the plot centres on a girl trying to identify her father from three of her mother's previous lovers.)

Truth is, the Oscar-winning actress had fallen for the female triumvirate created and sold to her by another feisty blonde: producer Judy Craymer.



Stars: Christine Baranski (Tanya), Meryl Streep (Donna) and Julie Walters (Rosie) in the film version

Judy, like Streep, is stylish and ballsy. She is also the driving force behind the Mamma Mia! project. As she says: 'For ten years, people said: "The story of Mamma Mia! is the story of Judy Craymer and two blokes with beards saying no."'

The two blokes with beards are Abba's Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, who retained tight artistic control over both the musical and movie. And it is the brilliance of their songs and the story of Donna (Streep), Rosie (Julie Walters) and Tanya's (Christine Baranski) friendship in middle-age that will resonate with cinema-goers.

Streep stars as a gutsy single mum who runs a taverna on an idyllic Greek Island, with Pierce Brosnan and Colin Firth among the supporting cast. Behind the glamour of the Universal movie set, Craymer, 49, is the truly inspirational story - and, like the plot of the film, at its centre is her enduring friendship with two other women.



Inspiration: Creator Judy Craymer and director Phyllida Lloyd

It was Judy who had the idea for Mamma Mia! - years ago, working behind the scenes on Tim Rice's musical Chess, she got to know the Abba men, who had written the music for the show, and started to try to persuade them to do something based on their greatest hits.

She asked Catherine Johnson, 50, to pen the musical's plot, brought in director Phyllida Lloyd, and together they produced the most successful musical on the planet.

'Catherine, Phyllida and I thought: "What can we do together before we get too old?" Collaborating on the film was what we wanted to do.

'We said our ideal casting was Meryl Streep and people said: "Oh, you'll never get her." Well, the rest is history.'

Streep had become familiar with Mamma Mia! after taking her daughter to see the show on Broadway. 'It was just after 9/11 when everyone was feeling low,' she recalls. 'I saw this musical advertised with the words: "New British musical - buoyant fun." And I thought: "Boy, I'm there." We ended up dancing in the aisles.

'Filming with those disco lights for eight hours every day gave me a migraine, but I still couldn't wait to get on the set every morning .

'There was a great atmosphere. Julie Walters was divine: so warm and yet so wicked about everyone. Oh, we had such fun!

Christine Baranski says: 'Everything was so spontaneous - we said we wanted it to look like we were having fun, but we really did.'

Mamma Mia! has made its three female creators a fortune - the musical rakes in more than £4 million a week around the world, and each of them receives a percentage.

The two bearded blokes, who own the copyright to the Abba songs are very happy with how things have turned out ('No one expected it to have this kind of success,' says Andersson), but others with less facial hair, I'm told, have been shaking their heads incredulously.

A leading West End figure reveals: 'There's a lot of jealousy. Men stage something and move on. They've laughed at Judy behind her back for being so obsessed by this. Judy has nurtured Mamma Mia! like a child. And it's paid off, big-time.

'She's also shown 110 per cent loyalty to Catherine and Phyllida, insisting that they work on the movie, even though none of them had ever made a film. Now it's being talked of as the feelgood hit of the summer.

'Only a woman who understands the importance of female friendship and loyalty could have pulled this off. And she has, but it p****s the men off.'

Craymer and her friends put their collective blood, sweat and tears into the Mamma Mia! project or, as Lloyd says survived on 'sleeping pills, intravenous caffeine and vodka'.

Craymer, who hails from Mill Hill, North London, confesses: 'I was never a huge Abba fan, but after meeting Bjorn and Benny I became hooked. I wanted to reinvent the Abba songs for the stage.'



Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Anderson, Abba's songwriting team

It took more than a decade to convince them ('I thought: "What if it isn't good?"', says Benny), who eventually said that if she came up with a good story, they might let her use their songs. Craymer approached Johnson, a single mother from Bristol who was struggling to pay the bills.

Johnson had always wanted to be a writer, but was expelled from school at 16. She married at 18, was divorced at 24 and found herself unemployed with a young child and another on the way by the time she was 29.

Then she spotted a playwriting competition in her local newspaper. She wrote Rag Doll, a play about child abuse and incest, which was shown at the Old Vic theatre in Bristol.

She and Craymer were introduced in 1997 and hit it off. 'We thrashed out ideas for the show,' says Johnson.

'The songs are about relationships - the young, falling in love - Honey, Honey - and the older falling out of love - Winner Takes It All. So the show needed two generations - a mother and a daughter.

'Then an angel passed through the room and suddenly I knew [the story]. The daughter's getting married and wants her dad to give her away. But she doesn't know who he is because her mum slept with three men and isn't sure which one is the father.

'Often in drama women get portrayed as so understanding. They always get it right, while men in drama are written as really rounded characters who do nasty things. I wanted to do that for the girls - warts and all.'

Craymer shared Johnson's vision, but they still had to convince Andersson and Ulvaeus. Craymer says: 'It was a white-knuckle ride. I still didn't have the rights and I knew that at any moment Bjorn and Benny could jump ship.' She'd also started spending

her own money on lawyer's fees, flying overseas for meetings and hiring a creative team. When she met Johnson, she'd run up a £20,000 overdraft.

'Everyone thought I was crazy. They said Abba was so passe,' she says.

Persistence, though, paid off. By the end of 1997, she finally secured Ulvaeus and Andersson's agreement to use the songs and approached the third member of the female team.

Phyllida Lloyd is a rigorous director who flits with ease between Wagner and Abba. Indeed, she'd just finished Verdi's *Macbeth* at the Paris Opera when rehearsals began in February 1999. The three women worked night and day fine-tuning the musical and cementing their friendship.



World-wide smash: Staging Mamma Mia! in Monaco

Johnson remembers: 'I was skint and had a tax bill to pay. But I didn't have time to worry too much. Under Phyllida's inspired direction, the musical kicked into shape. But none of us knew whether it would be a success or not.'

It was, of course, an immediate success. To date it's grossed more than £1 billion around the world, making Craymer £78 million (and that's before the movie opens on July 10) and her friends ... well, Johnson no longer has to worry about her tax bill.

For each of them, though, creative, not financial, success was the inspiration and Mamma Mia! the movie was the final stage in their baby's development. A major coup was getting Streep on board in her first musical. She's stunned those who have seen the film with her singing.

'Our passion for Meryl and Meryl's passion for the show made it work,' says Craymer. 'She saw the show on Broadway and wrote us a fan letter saying what a great time she'd had. And it all happened rather fast. We spoke to her agent, her agent spoke to her, and apparently she said: "Mamma Mia! I am Mamma Mia!" and the next thing we knew, we were on a plane to see her, like over-excited teenagers.'

The climax of the film is Streep on a cliff-edge belting out The Winner Takes It All. 'It was my inspiration,' Craymer says. 'I just love that song.'

Indeed, it could be her epithet.

Mamma Mia! opens in cinemas on Thursday.

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