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Mamma Mia!: The Birth of a Global Hit

Producer Judy Craymer on how the ABBA stage spectacular just keeps rolling, with 11 productions currently running around the world

By Susan Berfield

Producer Judy Craymer started with the catalog of songs by Swedish pop group ABBA. Then she added a story about a young woman about to get married, her single mom, and the three men who could be her father. Then she set it on a Greek island. What she ended up with was *Mamma Mia!*, the musical that has become a cottage industry.

Craymer is now overseeing 11 *Mamma Mia!* productions in six languages around the world. The show has grossed more than \$1.4 billion since it opened in London in April, 1999, and some 24 million people have seen it. Craymer spoke by phone to BW Associate Editor Susan Berfield about how she's managing it all. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow:

What were your initial hopes for the show?

You don't dare think that it can't work. But our expectations were to recoup our money without egg on our faces. In the beginning, it was one show in one place. Now, we operate around the clock and around the world. We'll open in Moscow next year. We want to go to China. We've never opened somewhere unsuccessfully.

Describe the *Mamma Mia!* operation now.

My company, Littlestar, finances all the English-language productions. We have 12 people in London and 1,500 people around the world. Our costume department in London sometimes supplies costumes for overseas production. We do all the casting. We're the *Mamma Mia!* shop. Eventually, we'll make a film.

How do you adapt the show for each country?

Our casts are always local. That way the show becomes indigenous. We make only small changes, a word here or there, usually slang, that the cast might ask us about. The story and the lyrics are translated too. Only the choruses of the songs are sung in English. We've even translated the lyrics into Swedish. We have a local presenter in each country, and it's absolutely essential to have their advice. Though there are some suggestions we just couldn't allow: I've drawn the line at having a real wedding on stage. There will be no ABBA pop quizzes. I'm very protective of the group and try to separate them from the show.

What is the strangest thing that has happened as you've gone global?

There have been counterfeit productions, and we've dealt with them legally. I won't say where. But we spend millions on marketing, and we're very protective of that.

Who are the lucky ones who invested in the show?

We've had the same pool of investors from the beginning. Universal Music provided 50% of the finances initially. There's the *Mamma Mia!* family -- the theater owners in New York, the Swedish Bank SEB is involved. At first I was just hoping that they understood it was an investment, not a loan. I think they're all happy now.