



MAMMA MIA! charms
amid a Broadway
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WATCH THAT SCENE: Producer Judy Craymer worried whether a lighthearted show like 'Mamma Mia!' would fit with people's moods in New York after Sept. 11, but the Abba-inspired musical turned out to be just what they needed.

Dancing queen

'Mamma Mia!' charms in Broadway slump

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

It swept onto Broadway in October with a \$27 million advance. More than 100 people clamored around the box office on opening day. Now it's sold out until the middle of next year.

If you thought *The Producers* was the hottest show on Broadway, guess again.

Bialystock and Bloom have been upstaged by three ordinary women in their 40s. They dress in white spandex bell-bottoms and platform boots and belt out Abba hits like "Dancing Queen," using their hair dryers as makeshift microphones.

Sound like a cheesy home video you made in high school? That's part of the charm of the new Broadway hit *Mamma Mia!*, which offers up a strong dose of nostalgia, poking fun at itself the whole time.

While many productions have been struggling to survive since Sept. 11, *Mamma Mia!*

Mamma Mia!, dancing queen

has quietly become nothing short of a pop-cultural phenomenon expected to bring in billions of dollars.

That's quite an achievement, particularly given that its producers haven't spent a dime on advertising in New York. They also couldn't rely on much initial press attention, because any that the show received was eclipsed by news about the terrorist attacks.

Instead, the hype has built slowly by word-of-mouth, thanks to the initial production in London—which has received raves for two years—and a well-planned and unusual strategy of touring the United States before heading to Broadway.

"After the first London preview, the audience came out of the theater, got on their cell phones and called their friends, saying, 'You've just got to come see this,'" says Judy Craymer, the show's producer. "That's the effect we wanted to create before we came to Broadway."

The show's opening on Broadway couldn't have come at a tougher time. The recession and the loss of tourists after Sept. 11 have cost most shows millions and threaten to close at least eight long-running productions next month.

Even Ms. Craymer was worried about whether people's moods in New York after Sept. 11 would fit with a lighthearted show like *Mamma Mia!* But it turned out to be just what people—not to mention Broadway—needed.

"It's bringing a lot of non-Broadway goers to Broadway, which is needed now more than ever," says Pete Sanders, a Broadway publicist not connected to the show.

The toughest tickets to get on Broadway these days are all in the same vein. While most shows are playing to empty seats, two funny plays—*Noises Off* and *The Women*—are practically sold out. The megahit *The Producers* is a light, escapist night out as well.

Unlikely story

Mamma Mia!'s unlikely story takes place on a Greek island, where a single mom lives with her 20-year-old daughter, who is about to get married. The daughter reads her mother's diary and discovers that her father could be one of three different men, and she invites them all to her wedding.

A shallow, yet romantic story unfolds, leaving ample room for 22 Abba songs to be inserted at opportune moments. Part of the fun is finding out where each song is placed.

"It doesn't take itself seriously at a time in this country when a respite from taking yourself seriously is needed," says Nancy Coyne, chief executive of Broadway advertising agency Serino Coyne. "It defines a generation, and that's the generation that is buying tickets now."

The response audiences are having to *Mamma Mia!* is leading many to predict that it may run as long as its predecessor in the Winter Garden Theater, *Cats*. The show is almost certain to bring in much more money. *Cats*, which closed in New York last year, grossed more than \$2 billion.

Mamma Mia! cost \$10 million to produce on Broadway—Universal Music, Abba's record label, put up about half of the investment—and at \$100 a ticket is expected to break even in less than 10 months.

Global expansion

Its success on Broadway will help the London-based production company expand its reach around the world. Already there are productions of *Mamma Mia!* running in London (so far grossing nearly \$90 million there), Toronto and Melbourne, and touring the United States. A second U.S. tour will open in Providence, R.I., in February, playing shorter runs in many cities.

Now Ms. Craymer is licensing the show to production companies in other countries, where it will be translated into different languages. First up will be a Japanese production, scheduled for the end of 2002.

"*Mamma Mia!* has become a corporation in a sense," Ms. Craymer says. "It's turned into a sizable organization running the shows all over the world."

The show's producers—who include Ms. Craymer, Richard East and Abba stars Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson—never imagined the show would become so successful.

It all started about 12 years ago. Ms. Craymer, a film and television producer in London, met Mr. Ulvaeus and Mr. Andersson when she was the executive producer for *Chess*, the 1980s Broadway flop that the Abba men composed.

Ms. Craymer would go home from work at night and listen to her Abba records, dreaming of turning the hit songs into a musical. It took five years for Mr. Ulvaeus and Mr. Andersson to agree, with the stipulation that the story wouldn't be about the pop group.

Ms. Craymer then found the British playwright Catherine Johnson to create a story that could accommodate Abba songs like "Take a Chance on Me" and "The Winner Takes It All." Most important, by the end of the night the audience is moved enough to get up and finish the evening singing and dancing to "Dancing Queen."

Along the way, people told Ms. Craymer that a show based on Abba wouldn't work on Broadway because the Swedish pop group wasn't popular enough in the United States. Then when she came up with the strategy of building up interest with a U.S. tour before coming to Broadway, others told her that that a tour wouldn't be successful unless it was a Broadway-branded production.

"Either way, the stakes were quite high," Ms. Craymer says. "I just kind of followed my heart and instincts." ■