

THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL



'I used to assume I was going to get married and have children, but I was always more excited by the job than the boyfriends'

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Judy Craymer has gone from being a stage manager in Leicester to the most powerful woman in the West End, earning £4 million last year – and all because she couldn't get her favourite Abba hits out of her head...

Interview **Louette Harding**
Photograph **Richard Legge**

Sitting beneath a bank of clocks that tell her the time in Las Vegas, New York, Tokyo and Sydney, as well as in London, where her office nestles in the heart of theatre-land, Judy Craymer sniffs, 'I can't believe I've got a cold. I don't have time to be sick!' Recently named the most powerful woman in the West End, Craymer, 44, is the producer of the hugely successful Abba musical *Mamma Mia!*. Last year, she earned a cool £4-million salary.

No mere cold germ can dim Craymer's energy. She is enjoying both the thrill of success and its fruits, such as the black-and-white Jill Sander outfit she is wearing. 'Feel that,' she says, offering me the cashmere hem of her jacket.

Her office is similarly classy. Not intimidatingly big but white, bright and artfully accessorised. Subverting the elegance is a daft photograph of Judy with *Mamma Mia!*'s scriptwriter, Catherine Johnson, and its director, Phyllida Lloyd, in an Abba-esque pose, shoulder to shoulder, each pointing at the camera. One wonders what they were mouthing? A lyric from 'Money, Money, Money' perhaps...

Recently, the musical transferred to the Prince of Wales Theatre, and the eponymous royal, with Camilla at his side, attended a gala night. 'I can't believe I know all the words,' Charles whispered to Judy in the dark auditorium as the hits rattled past.

The next morning, nursing a thundering post-party hangover, Judy was back at her desk, overseeing a ➤

55

◀ global empire that employs 1,000 people. She is used to late nights. There are 11 *Mamma Mia!*s on four continents, with two more shows in the pipeline, for Madrid and Stockholm. 'Pretty much every evening in my diary is busy at the moment,' she says. 'Thank goodness you can get a late-night leg and bikini wax these days.'

'If it's your own business and your passion, there aren't set hours. I can be on the phone till three in the morning. But I have to be careful not to expect my staff to do the same.'

Her management style is quasi-maternal. She is single and childless by choice, speculating that she would go 'slightly mad' if she had to juggle more balls than she already keeps airborne. So do her circumstances corroborate the idea that women simply cannot have it all? She thinks not. Rather that women no longer want it all. 'There's a line in the script spoken by Donna, the leading female role: "Every morning I wake up and thank God I don't have a middle-aged menopausal man to bother me! I'm free, I'm single and it's great." I think that sums up some of my sentiments.'

'I used to assume I was going to get married and have children, but it was never the right time. I was always more excited by the job than the boyfriends. And I never much fancied being a mum, either.'

Such sentiments may trip lightly off the tongue at 20; at 44, they stem from hard-won self-knowledge. The younger child (she has an older brother) of a solicitor and a nurse, Judy's quiet North London childhood and private-school education were supposed to culminate in a career in law. But when the stage-struck 16-year-old announced she wanted to learn stage management at the Guildhall School of

Music & Drama, her parents swallowed any disappointment. 'My father told me, "Do what you want and you should do it well."'

From her dogsbody first job in Leicester, Judy was in seventh heaven. 'Poorly paid but out each night, hanging out with actors, always having a fag at the stage door.' There is a pause and a snort of laughter. 'I should rephrase that.'

She worked with Cameron Mackintosh on his first shows, with Tim Rice on 1984's *Chess* (music by Abba's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus) then on films and in television. But for much of that time the tunes of Abba were jangling in her head as she tried to persuade Björn and Benny to agree to a musical featuring their songs but based on an original storyline about female friendship. Raw from the self-destruction of the supergroup, Björn and Benny took years to come round. The popularity of the Abba *Gold: Greatest Hits* album, released in 1993, and films such as *Muriel's Wedding* helped her case. By 1995, they were beginning to concede she might be right. Meanwhile, Judy listened to their hits with the tenacity of a fanatic. 'Start, pause, rewind. Start, pause, rewind. Drove the neighbours mad.'

In 1997, Judy jacked in the day job to speed up the process. 'I had a huge overdraft. I lived in dread of letters from the bank. I sold my flat and rented. It was worrying for my parents to watch their daughter go back to square one and, while they were not wealthy, they helped me out when I needed it.' Eventually, she persuaded Polygram to stump up £3 million, and Cameron Mackintosh offered her a theatre. Benny had always been hesitant about the project, but turned his concern into a running gag with Judy: who would be the first to say, 'I told you so.' Would it be him, bitterly, when the musical flopped? Or

her, gleefully, when it proved a smash hit? On the opening night, as the audience danced in the aisles, he prompted Judy, 'Go on, say it.' 'I told you so,' she flashed back.

It was a sweet moment for her, but scarcely as sweet as splashing out on chauffeurs for her parents, 'when they had always been assiduous in using their free bus passes'. Buying her swanky Georgian townhouse, 'nice and close to Harvey Nicks', provided another rush of glee. 'And it is so much fun to go shopping without having to worry. But,' she adds, 'you never really cast off the shadows of unease about money; the suspicion that it might slip away.'

With her parents dying recently, Judy's friends have assumed the emotional importance of family, especially the two women who share in *Mamma Mia!*'s success with her, Catherine Johnson and Phyllida Lloyd. Catherine had been recommended to her by a friend and, once the script was written, Judy approached Phyllida, best known for directing Shakespeare and opera. 'She was so highbrow it took all my courage,' Judy says endearingly.

It is unusual for a creative team to bond so tightly. 'We were the matriarchs, the matrons bossing everyone around. After the show worked in London, it was a huge bonding experience.' Though she swerves and dodges past adjectives like 'lonely', she is far too honest to lie: there are some areas in which family can never be replaced. 'My parents were the only people who used to love to see my press cuttings and now I have no one to send them to. The fact you can't just phone them and rattle on, boasting about yourself. You have to be a little more humble to friends,' she laughs.

Judy's approach to business is unrepentantly feminine. The stereotype is of the cigar-chomping, grasping male impresario. She received little encouragement – except from Cameron Mackintosh – from the cartel of men, the producers, managers and owners who run the West End. As she points out, although she made the West End's ruling men reappraise her – turning from jumped-up Judy with her 'mad' Abba idea into rich and triumphant Judy – she was still the subject of a subtle male put-down. She was promptly dubbed 'the most eligible spinster in the West End'.

'Isn't that love-ly?' she drawls. 'Spinster! At least now everyone's fascination is with the £4 million a year,' she jokes. 'So now I'm the most powerful woman in the West End. That's a fun title. I'll hang on to that for a while. I might even get a T-shirt made.'

A documentary made around the fifth anniversary of the show, *Super Troupers – 30 Years of Abba*, will be shown on ITV1 on Tuesday



Judy Craymer (second left) and three former Abba members, Benny Andersson (third left), Björn Ulvaeus (fourth left) and Anni-Frid Lyngstad (second right) with the *Mamma Mia!* cast at the show's fifth birthday