

# Mamma Mia, there's

Judy Craymer, the woman behind the musical, tells Giles Hattersley how she got Meryl Streep to sing, found Julie Walters's false bottom and fought Hollywood executives to turn her stage hit into a movie blockbuster

I'm banging on the sleek metal door of the Mamma Mia! headquarters in Soho, central London, as Judy Craymer's chauffeur-driven BMW purrs to a halt behind me. Out steps the 51-year-old queen of the West End — enormous Hermès shopping bag in hand, more than £90m in the bank and a flash of panic in her eyes. "Oh God," she squeals. "Please don't write about the fancy car or the shopping. People will think I'm so superficial."

As if. Under that immaculate blonde dye job ticks the brain of the greatest showbiz impresario of the decade. After all, you don't produce the most successful UK film ever shown in this country, the biggest stage musical of the Noughties, have a staff of 1,000, generate more than £5m a week and make it into DeBrett's (as this producer did last week) by shopping all day.

Craymer — a lawyer's daughter from north London, who spent her early career lugging scenery and answering the phones — is the woman responsible for Mamma Mia!.

Chances are you've been — or were dragged. This feather-light Greek island fable of washed-up women, loved-up teens and Abba hits, is viewed either through tears of euphoria or gritted teeth. It has an uncanny ability to win over nearly all the doubters, though.

An American critic summed up the experience as like doing karaoke on ecstasy, which explains why the stage musical plays to 17,000 people around the world every night, has sold 32m tickets since its London debut nine years ago and has grossed — drum roll, please — more than \$2 billion (about £1.35 billion).

Now the long-awaited film adaptation — starring Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan — is probably days away from out-earning Titanic to become the biggest hit at UK cinemas. With £68m in receipts (and counting, thanks partly to singalong screenings going down a storm in the provinces), it has clocked up \$562m worldwide and is officially the most successful musical film in history. Tomorrow the DVD will be released, with Universal studios minting an unprecedented number

of copies. Odds on, somebody will buy you a copy this Christmas — whether you want it or not.

On a fresh wave of success, Craymer is happy to reveal exactly how she got her baby on the big screen. How she bashed down Hollywood's egos, got wooed by Tom Hanks (and his mustard-keen wife Rita), convinced Streep, the 14-time Oscar nominee, to belt out Dancing Queen, sourced Julie Walters's false bottom, consoled Brosnan over his mean-spirited reviews and — for one terrifying moment — sat in a meeting of blankly smiling studio executives as they considered casting Kylie Minogue as the leading lady.

In her office, which is festooned with photographs of her larking about with the Mamma Mia! gang, Craymer wonders if it's too early for a Martini, adjusts her Chanel jacket and begins to talk. I'm reminded of what Brosnan told me last week on

the telephone: "You'll find there is an air of Absolutely Fabulous about Judy, but she is formidable."

Craymer says the Hollywood suits were on to her within months of the show's first night in 1999. "Hollywood is very shrewd. If something is a success, they're not shy about coming forward. They knew it from the first week and came knocking — and, would you believe, it was all women. Elizabeth Gabler, who was head of Fox, Sherry Lansing of Paramount, Stacey Snider of Universal, before Donna [Langley of Universal] took over. Every studio was interested, except maybe Warner Brothers. Perhaps they had a man in charge," adds Craymer, dryly.

"The courting was hilarious. Heads of studio would call me and I was, like, 'Thank you, that's lovely, but no'. A lot of gift baskets would arrive," she says, laughing at the Hollywood ritual of sending fruit, flowers and chocolates. "I had more jam than I knew what to do with, but there was no way I was going to sell the rights and have someone else do it their way."

By that time Craymer had already been nursing the Mamma Mia! project for 15 years. After studying stage management at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama, she had worked backstage at the Leicester Haymarket theatre, among others, before becoming an assistant producer to Tim Rice in the 1980s. When Rice wrote the musical Chess with Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson of Abba, Craymer got to thinking.

She had adored Abba as a teen and knew the songs were hardwired into most women of her generation. So she approached Ulvaeus and Andersson with the idea of piecing together a musical with The Winner Takes It All as its set piece, Dancing Queen as its barn-stomper and 20 more of Abba's hits. The Swedes were charmed by Craymer but fussy as hell: it took her 10 years of hard graft to put together an idea and a team that suited them. She had to sell her flat and constantly teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.

At its heart, Mamma Mia! is the story of three middle-aged women: Donna (a single mother), Rosie (the funny one) and Tanya (the ageing glamourpuss). It was a similar trio of women who put the show together.

Phyllida Lloyd — the serious theatre director, who was more used to operas than Abba — took charge of the cast; Catherine Johnson — a TV writer with a wicked sense of humour — wrote the script; and the glossy Craymer kept the theatres full.

"We understood the audience better than anyone," says Craymer. "If a film was ever on the cards, I knew I had to keep the tribe of women in place."

After becoming a smash hit in London, the show opened to packed houses on Broadway in 2001 (it was just after 9/11, but Mamma Mia! always provides balm in a crisis). Then Tom Hanks, the actor, called her out of the blue: "Playtone [Hanks's production company] were after Mamma Mia!, so Tom phoned me personally at the office to try and persuade me to do the film. All the girls ran around giggling, 'Come in, Houston', but I held my nerve."

Later she took meetings with executives at CAA (Creative Artists Agency), the fearsome Hollywood agency, where she told a roomful of suits bamboozling her with massive seven-figure deals: "I will not be swayed."

"I look back and think: my God, I did that?" she says, laughing. But she reasoned that she had to protect her cash cow until she was powerful enough to take on Hollywood on her terms.

By 2006 her power was undisputed. At that point Craymer decided to pair up with Hanks and his production company, but she still needed a major studio. They then took Mamma Mia! to Donna Langley — the British "Abba-obsessed" head of Universal — who had wanted the film for years. "I adore Judy," Langley told me on the telephone, "but of course there were always lively discussions."

Given that neither producer, director nor writer had ever made a film before, the studio wanted Craymer to consider replacements. "There was talk of [Steven] Spielberg and others directing," says Craymer, "but I never went so far as to meet him. I was absolutely adamant I wanted Phyllida."

Luckily, she had a trump card. Craymer had held back the film rights to the show all the way

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Streep leapt at the chance to appear in the movie, which is close to becoming the biggest ever hit in UK cinema

through pre-production with Hanks's company — which meant that she could still cancel the project if she didn't like the way it was going. So Lloyd and Johnson were in.

Now they needed stars — or, more specifically, a female lead. With typical gusto, Craymer had her sights set on one of Hollywood's biggest: Streep. "But Hollywood works on rules. We just wanted Meryl, so I said: what's wrong with calling her agent? You don't just do that," they said. But of course I already had. We kept that quiet."

Meanwhile, the studio was drawing up lists of screen beauties for the lead role: Nicole Kidman, Michelle Pfeiffer, Kim Basinger, even Kylie Minogue were floated as ideas. The film was in danger of becoming less Thank You for the Music than Thank You for the Botox.

"The thing about Mamma Mia! is that it was written for middle-aged women," explains Craymer. "That's the joy of it. But of course Hollywood just thinks gorgeous and younger. There is this idea that, as an A-list actress of 40, you don't want to be perceived as the mother of a 20-year-

old. I realise now, whenever I watch a Hollywood movie, everyone has five-year-olds. If we weren't careful, Sophie [the bride-to-be daughter of Streep's character] could have ended up being 12."

Fortuitously, Streep had loved the show ever since she took her daughter to see it in New York. When her agent called her on her mobile while she was driving, the first thing she shouted was, "I am Mamma Mia!" With Streep in the bag and a budget of £35m, suddenly every actor in Hollywood was clamouring for a part. They cast Brosnan, Colin Firth and Stellan Skarsgard as the ageing love interests and Walters as Rosie ("In a fat suit... again!" Walters grumbled).

Craymer had wanted Christine Baranski to play the character most similar to herself, the seductive Tanya. This was to prove problematic. Allegedly, Rita Wilson, Hanks's flame-haired wife, was determined to land the role. She even agreed to audition for it. According to sources, Lloyd had also wanted Baranski from the start and there was "confrontation". In the end Wilson had to be satisfied with her credit as exec-

utive producer of the film. Craymer, naturally, declines to comment.

As cameras began to roll at Pine-wood in summer 2007, Craymer's eyes were everywhere. "I love attention to detail when it's highly unimportant," she says. "False bottoms, platforms, 80-year-old extras, wedding cakes, tapas. You name it, I approved it." Lloyd remembers Craymer obsessing over the tiles that would adorn the wall of the hotel run by Streep's character. Batch after batch was rejected before Craymer finally approved a set — which never appeared on screen. "She's certainly thorough," the director told me.

The control-freakery was good news for the cast: hardly any of them had done a musical before and they needed an on-the-ball producer. "I went to see the show in London before we started filming," says Brosnan, who was deeply shaken by the sight of so much spandex in the finale. "I thought: oh my God. What have I said yes to? I kept repeating: Meryl Streep's doing it, Meryl Streep's doing it, to calm myself down. That was my mantra."

"But actually I really enjoyed

## a fire within her soul



A shrewd impresario, Craymer knew her core audience was 'north-of-middle-age women' rather like herself and her team

working for women," he continues. "There's less of the bluff and bluster of the male ego that sometimes happens."

I'm sure Craymer is more than capable of bluster. She may possess the lavish social skills and steely ambition of a pro, but she reminds me of those rhino-hide women who

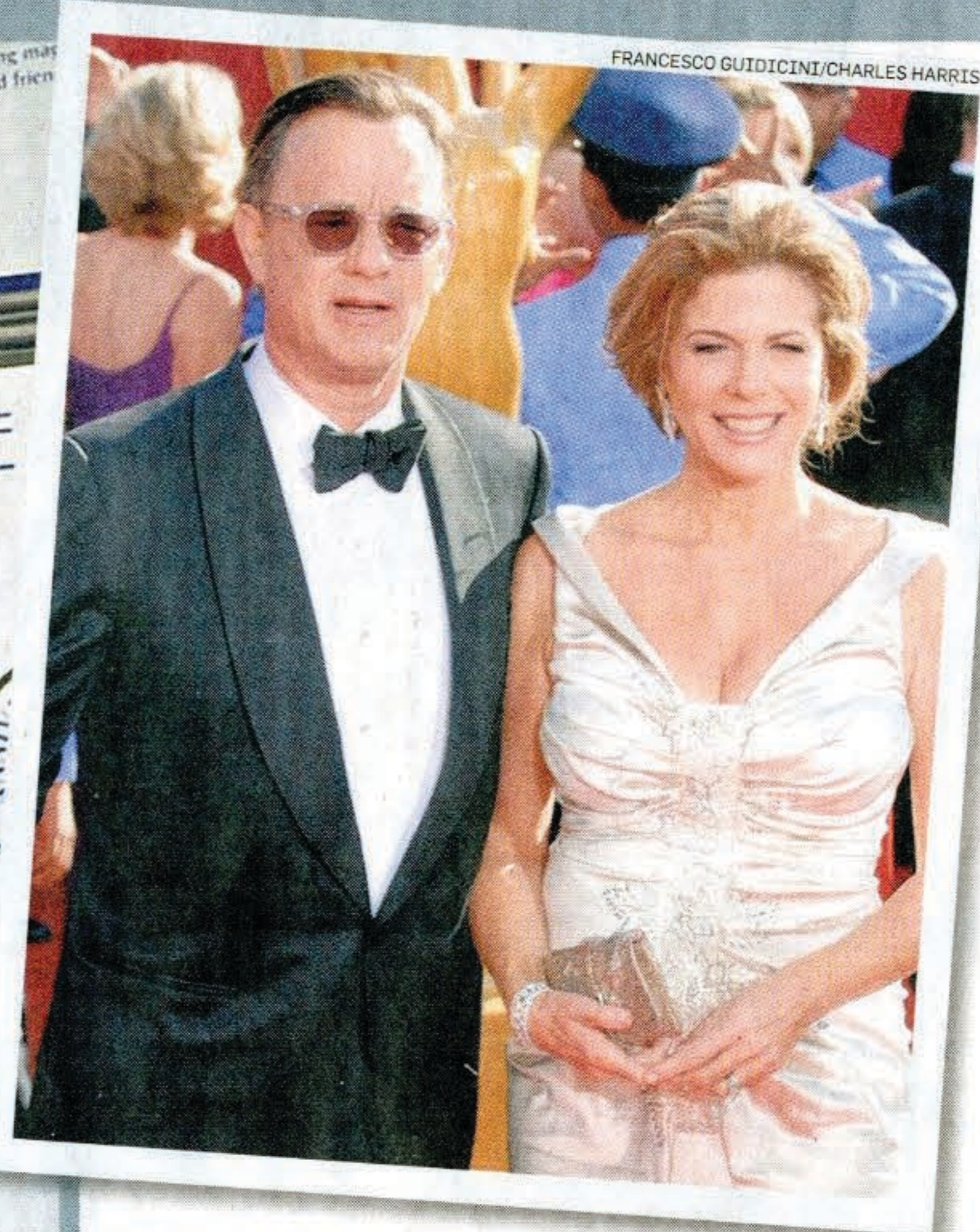
run local am-dram societies. Her secret is never losing her temper, apparently. She simply goes deathly quiet — a bad sign.

Not that she isn't a laugh. On location on the Greek island of Skopelos, she broke with Hollywood protocol by insisting on beers for the cast and crew when they wrapped

each day. In fact, the Abba team took over the Greek island. One night the cast descended on a local taverna, commandeered the piano and sang the entire score to the bemusement of a tableful of tourists.

Brosnan and the boys spent their off-duty hours sailing around the island and drinking ouzo. Streep

kept everyone's spirits up organising cocktails. Walters's most abiding memory is of her prosthetic behind. "It looked like something you could park your bike on," she tells me. "When I fell off the boat in one scene, I thought my bottom was going to come up first, fill up with water and drag me down with it."



Tom Hanks with his wife Rita Wilson, the film's executive producer

Craymer rarely stopped working: "I had to spend every night on conference calls to Los Angeles, but they certainly all had fun. Though heaven knows what Skopelos is like now. I seem to remember, as we left, seeing a picture of Pierce on a T-shirt nailed to a shop front."

There was friction when the time came to edit and publicise the movie, however. Craymer wanted to film an end sequence of the cast in full spandex, sparkles and platforms belting out numbers over the credits. But Langley — and others at Universal — were worried that Streep might be singing and shouting out, "Are you ready for another?" to empty cinemas.

"We went back and forth on it so many times," says Langley. "In the end, Judy's passion meant I let it go, though I'm still asking people if they stayed to watch it."

"She can't still be going on about that," says Craymer, when I tell her what her pal Langley has said. "You tell her Universal should be putting those songs on the end of every film they've got coming up. Why not Frost/Nixon?"

Then Wilson returned to the scene. According to sources, she wanted to show up at the international publicity junket for the

film in Greece — which may have raised a few hackles. For whatever reason, she didn't end up going. Again, Craymer doesn't wish to comment, saying only: "The studio was promoting the three of us [Craymer, Lloyd and Johnson] as

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this trio. They saw us as the women and it was, for me, nearly 20 years of my life. That was the story to tell."

Craymer is content to bask for a moment. The winner, it seems, really does take it all. In the past she has been liable to get lost in work, but she has recently treated herself to a new home in New York (on top of one in Knightsbridge — "Good for the shops"). She is even considering where she might take the all-expenses-paid holiday that Universal has offered her as a thank you.

To be honest, a holiday doesn't really cut it. An early test screening of Mamma Mia! in San Diego last March returned almost perfect scores and since then it has packed out cinemas around the world. Walters says she's never been stopped so much in the supermarket in her life. Streep is being pursued by Abba-crazed children down the village lanes of north-west Connecticut. Brosnan says: "Men keep coming up to me and whispering, 'Brave fellow'."

Brosnan, perhaps, caught the worst of the reviews for his singing — "a braying donkey" was a memorable one — but he is stoical: "They could have got a better singer, but that wasn't the point. I was in on the joke of having James Bond play this part."

It is Brosnan's affecting scenes with Streep that are the touchpaper to the core audience of "north-of-middle-age women", as Craymer calls them. "When you hit old, you hit gold," agrees Langley, and statistics show that the film has lured in millions of oldies who hardly ever go to the cinema.

Craymer puts this down to the music and the soothing Pollyanna effect of Mamma Mia!'s relentless cheer. And the credit crunch? "Perhaps — but I think people are always up for a good time, whatever else is happening."

Lloyd definitely sees it as a cure-all: "I met a woman the other day whose business was going belly-up, it was her birthday, she was bursting into tears — and her sister rushed in and said, 'What can we do?' This woman cried out, 'Just take me to Mamma Mia!'"

"That story proves that we did it," crows Craymer, pointing out that she and the women were 40 when the musical premiered in London and 50 when the film was released. "It goes to show you can do it at any age. Beat The Lord of the Rings! Harry Potter pushed out the way! Let's have some Martinis!"

Hard work, hard bargaining and a bit of hard liquor — this is Craymer's recipe for making a billion. Like her musical, it's hard to resist.

Mamma Mia! — The Movie is on Blu-ray and DVD from tomorrow