

JUDY CRAYMER



First, producer Judy Craymer turned the songs of Abba into the world's

THE WINNER TAKES

INTERVIEW **HILARY ROSE** PORTRAIT **CHRISTOPHER LANE**



Here's a funny thing about the musical *Mamma Mia!*. It is a bona fide global phenomenon. Thirty million people have seen it and sung along to Abba's songs. It has made \$2 billion at the box office, and played in 160 cities around the world. Yet when I got two free tickets for the London show, I couldn't persuade a single person to go with me. Not one. Ooh, sorry, if only you'd given me more notice, my colleagues lied. Lucky you! Wish I could make it, said friends, running gratefully for the hills. So why is it such a success? Who goes to see it? And how did they persuade Meryl Streep to star in the forthcoming film version?

The answer to all these questions lies in the immaculately groomed person of Judy Craymer, the show's originator, producer and, now, self-styled gatekeeper. Craymer, 50, lives in a fabulous penthouse flat in Knightsbridge, where Diptyque candles burn in every room and ranks of silver photograph frames march across the surface of the grand piano. An attractive blonde in a black dress and black leather jacket, with a white Chanel watch, she has an immaculate manicure and immaculate bare, brown legs. She is, in fact, well-camouflaged among the tasteful Kelly Hoppen-ish black, white and taupe decor. Given the wariness with which her charm is tinged, that could be the plan.

She rarely gives interviews, because there is rarely any need: *Mamma Mia!* is a juggernaut that has been rolling since opening night, back in 1999.

"We're hoping to create pure pleasure," said director Phyllida Lloyd at the time. "We're not splitting the atom." They obviously succeeded; by 2005 it was the most successful musical in the world.

Now, there is the film. Hollywood came calling years ago, but Craymer, Lloyd and the writer, Catherine Johnson, refused to sell the rights. If *Mamma Mia!* was going to become a film, they were going to do it when they wanted and on their terms. Hollywood invariably wants Hollywood directors and producers but, miraculously, they managed to keep hold of the film themselves. The feat becomes even more unlikely when you consider that none of them had ever done anything remotely on the scale of a Hollywood movie before. But faced with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, Universal decided they wanted the film enough to take it. The one concession was an experienced American producer, Gary Goetzman.

"They wanted to keep the essence of what it is," Craymer thinks. "The big thing was convincing them it was going to be a great film, and that we weren't just making a musical into a film."

It's a long way from Craymer's roots as a jobbing producer working on shows such as *Cats* and *Chess*, with stints in film and TV also on her CV. Born and bred in North London, she had studied stage management and music at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, always knowing that she wanted to be behind the scenes, not on stage. After graduating, she worked for a rep company in Leicester alongside Cameron Mackintosh – "He was broke too then!" – who was making his name with touring versions of *My Fair Lady* and *Rocky Horror Show*. She lived in an unheated house, showered at the theatre, earned £30 a week, and loved it.

Then, in 1982, when she was 23 and working for Tim Rice on *Chess*, she met the men who would change her life: Abba's Benny Andersson and >>

Below: Julie Walters (left) co-stars with Meryl Streep and Christine Baranski in the film version of the hit musical *Mamma Mia!*. Opposite: Craymer on Broadway, in New York



biggest musical, *Mamma Mia!*. And now she's cracked Hollywood

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<< Björn Ulvaeus, who were writing the songs for Chess. Though not much of an Abba fan – Led Zeppelin, T.Rex and punk were more her thing – she nonetheless had a hunch that Abba songs would work in a musical. The only problem was persuading Benny and Björn to let their songs, of which they were fiercely protective, be used.

"If I hadn't known them and had that relationship with them, there's no way the idea would have been taken seriously," she says. She already had the bones of the plot – two generations of people, a holiday, a wedding. What she needed was someone to pull it together and write a script. Step forward Catherine Johnson, the third piece of the puzzle who, with Craymer and director Phyllida Lloyd, became the holy trinity responsible for *Mamma Mia!*

"I was working with a writer and director called Terry Johnson," remembers Craymer, "and asked if he'd like to write it. He said, 'No.' He regrets that now," she adds, deadpan. "He suggested Catherine, and she and I had this long meeting where we stuffed our faces with sandwiches at some Sherlock Holmes place near Selfridges. Just as we were ending, at 4 o'clock on a winter's day, she said, 'Have you thought of a mother and daughter?' and I said, 'Ooh, fantastic!' So we sat back down and ate more sandwiches."

With hindsight, Craymer says, it's easy to look back and think it was all just great fun. "But there wasn't anything at stake. We weren't earning any money for it, we weren't going to lose a job. The whole idea [at that stage] was to get Björn and Benny to say yes, and they hadn't yet."

Johnson wrote a feel-good story, *Shirley Valentine meets Muriel's Wedding*, set on a Greek island, with a bit of mystery, a happy ending and, of course, Abba's greatest hits. She and Craymer went round to Björn's place near Henley and pitched the script: he said yes there and then.

Cynics may sneer that the music sounds tinny, the production looks low-rent compared to many West End extravaganzas and that the script is hardly Shakespeare. But by the time three middle-aged women break into *Chiquitita* halfway through the first act, it's hard not to smile, albeit a little incredulously. Therein, of course, lies its appeal. Craymer delightedly quotes one New York critic who said it was like going to a karaoke bar after you've taken Ecstasy. It is, she says, a tonic, and doesn't pretend to be anything else.

"We couldn't have made it Chekhov, but it has Shakespearian themes," she says. "The three dads, the mistaken identities... It's lasted this long because you don't have to be an Abba fan. It won over the cynics, and people who don't see themselves as Abba fans. They enjoy the story and being taken on a fun journey to the Greek islands."

And because Craymer and her cohorts have kept tight creative control over every aspect of every production, all over the world, standards are, well, standard. It's partly control freakery, but also practical: Abba would never countenance selling the rights to the songs for anyone to do with as they liked. So there are associate

Left to right: Stellan Skarsgård, Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth and Amanda Seyfried in *Mamma Mia!*



creative teams putting together productions all over the world, from Las Vegas to Seoul, and a full-time workshop in London churning out costumes. Every country has indigenous casting directors, and songs translated into their own languages. Only the choruses stay in English, because they reckoned that was the bit of the song that most people knew the words to. Besides, as Craymer points out, "Gimme gimme gimme" just doesn't exist in Japanese."

As to her claim that you don't have to be an Abba fan to enjoy *Mamma Mia!*, it seems incomprehensible that anyone who didn't grow up singing *Dancing Queen* into a hairbrush would want to go. But if a random Wednesday night at the West End production is anything to go by, it's true. By the first interval, everyone said they were enjoying it because of the story, and only one group of people, five Norwegian women tourists, claimed to be Abba fans. The audience was mostly middle-aged and up. John, a Canadian man with a perm, was typical. In London on holiday, he had come with his wife. Is he an Abba fan? He shrugs. "Not really, no." So why are you here? "The hotel told us about it. We just thought it'd be fun."

An honourable exception is Emma Stibbs, 39. Emma works at Tesco in Basingstoke and is a member of its social club, 40 of whom have come along tonight. She happily admits to being an Abba fan and is hoping for a good songsong. "The club organised for us to go to *Grease* last year," she says ruefully, "but it was rubbish. This is far better."

"I think," says Craymer, "that the show has a vast appeal to women, but one that doesn't exclude men. And part of its success is that they like to come back again. We have a huge repeat audience."

As luck would have it, one of those women to whom it appealed was Meryl Streep, who wrote a letter to the Broadway cast saying how much she'd enjoyed it. When it came to casting the film, they must have hardly dared hope. But, less than three weeks after asking, they found themselves in New York, faced with the woman herself saying, "So, do you want me to do it?" (They said, "Yes, please.") Apparently Streep can sing, as can co-stars Colin Firth and Pierce Brosnan, which seems even more implausible. But the shoot was, she says, enormous fun, and you imagine it probably was: there seems little downside to spending a few months on a Greek island singing Abba songs with Meryl Streep, James Bond and Mr Darcy.

But what of Craymer herself? She sold a decade of her life to *Mamma Mia!*. She's single and childless, hasn't had a holiday in years and says she can't remember what life was like before. The money, she says, has mainly been a relief. It's been a decade in which both her parents died. (One of the last things her father, a lawyer, did was help her draw up her will. The show had taken off, "and I said, 'Dad, it might make more than £20,000.' I think he probably felt he could go now.") She doesn't have children because she always thought she wasn't old enough, "and now I'm 50. I've always put work first. I don't think I've sacrificed anything because it's what I wanted to do. You don't go into this business for financial gain, you go into it because you have a passion for it."

Back at the Prince of Wales Theatre, they're working themselves up to have a good old sing-along. First it took the West End, next it takes the big screen. And Craymer, maybe, will take a holiday. ■

Mamma Mia! is released on July 11

'YOU GO INTO THIS BUSINESS BECAUSE YOU HAVE A PASSION'