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SUPER TROUPER

THE REAL STAR OF MAMMA MIA! THE MOVIE

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22 News

MONDAY 30 JUNE 2008 EVENING STANDARD

Super trouper

As Mamma Mia! the movie premieres in London tonight, the woman behind the show's success tells how she refused to lose control of the film to Hollywood's moguls

EVERYONE has an Abba story to tell Judy Craymer: whether it's the first song they fell in love with or the first time they dressed up in a pink feather boa with glitter trousers. And I'm no different. Within minutes of meeting, I'm confiding to Craymer — the woman who created London's mega-musical Mamma Mia! — about how, age 15, I bought myself the Abba single Chiquitita in case I didn't get a Valentine's card. In the event it was a good decision. Love failed me that year. But I still have the single.

Putting her faith in Abba turned out to be the right gamble for Craymer, too. Today, at 50, she is the most powerful woman in the West End with a personal fortune of at least £58 million and a staff of more than 1,000. It's all down to creating a musical fashioned from the Abba songbook. Mamma Mia! has played in 170 cities around the world and been seen by 30 million people. Every week it rakes in another £4 million.

So it's no surprise people talk of Craymer as a human dynamo, a workaholic with extraordinary focus. Yet when I meet her in the fashionable Tea Palace in Westbourne Grove, she confounds my expectations. The Judy Craymer before me is a delicately pretty blonde in a floaty black dress and simple gold jewellery. Sipping Earl Grey from bone china cups, she appears small, quiet, controlled. There is nothing in her calm demeanour to suggest she is the brains behind this kitsch, raucous musical.

"I do protect what's mine," she admits when I ask her where she found the strength to turn Mamma Mia! into a global hit, taking nearly £1 billion at the box office. "People call me softly spoken but I think the description is misleading."

Hollywood bosses discovered the depth of Craymer's inner steel when they

LIZ HOGGARD



tried to wrestle the rights to the £32 million film version of Mamma Mia!, which premieres in London tonight, and looks set to be this summer's blockbuster. Craymer refused.

"We wanted to maintain control," she says simply. Control meant the original creative team stayed in place — writer Catherine Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd, who are close friends of Craymer. Considering none of the three women had Hollywood experience, this was an astonishing concession on the part of Universal — and an audacious coup for Craymer. "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." But her trump card was persuading Meryl Streep to play the lead role of Donna Sheridan, a single mother, who once spent a hedonistic Seventies summer with a trio of men, one of whom is the father of her daughter.

Streep had fallen in love with the show when she took a party of 10-year-olds to see it for her youngest daughter's birthday in 2001.

"Our passion for Meryl and Meryl's passion for the show made it work. She saw the show on Broadway and wrote us a fan letter saying what a great time she'd had. And it all happened rather fast. We spoke to her agent, who spoke to her and the next thing we knew, we were on a plane to see her, like over-excited teenagers..."

To Craymer's amazement, Streep begged to play the role, insisting she was longing to show off her skills as a rocker, a mother and a comedian. "Meryl is such a rock chick," Craymer says, laugh-

ing. "She's also terribly maternal and has the stamina of an ox. Frankly, we're all just a little in love with her."

The story of Mamma Mia! is deceptively simple. A young bride-to-be invites three men to the Greek island where she lives with her mother, hoping to find out which one is her father. It's not Chekhov, Craymer admits, "but it has Shakespearean themes: the three dads, the mistaken identities. 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."

MAMMA Mia! has attained a level of success Craymer never dreamed of as a child. She grew up in a solidly middle-class home in Mill Hill, daughter of a solicitor and nurse. She was more interested in riding but when she was 18 her horse died and she applied to drama school. Later, working as an assistant stage manager for Tim Rice, she met Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson of Abba, who were writing the music for Rice's musical Chess, and her obsession with writing an Abba musical began. She stayed in touch with Ulvaeus — he kept a horse at his house in Eng-

land which she would occasionally exercise — and in 1995, after years of persuasion, she got the go-ahead from the Abba boys to use their songs.

"If I hadn't known them there's no way I'd have been taken seriously," she says now. Craymer gave up her job and got to work on what would be the biggest — and most successful — job of her life. "It was a white-knuckle ride. I still didn't have the rights and I knew that at any moment Björn and Benny could jump ship. It kept me so focused."

"I had a huge overdraft. I lived in dread of letters from the bank. I sold my flat and rented. Everyone thought I was crazy. They said Abba was so passé and I should just get over it."

But Craymer refused to give up. "I had nothing to lose and I think that was a huge part of the tenacity," she tells me. "Mamma Mia! came from huge passion. I know people think it was a carefully choreographed commercial exercise. But it wasn't. For years I used to sit on the floor of my flat day in, day out, listening to Abba songs thinking it would work in this kind of way."

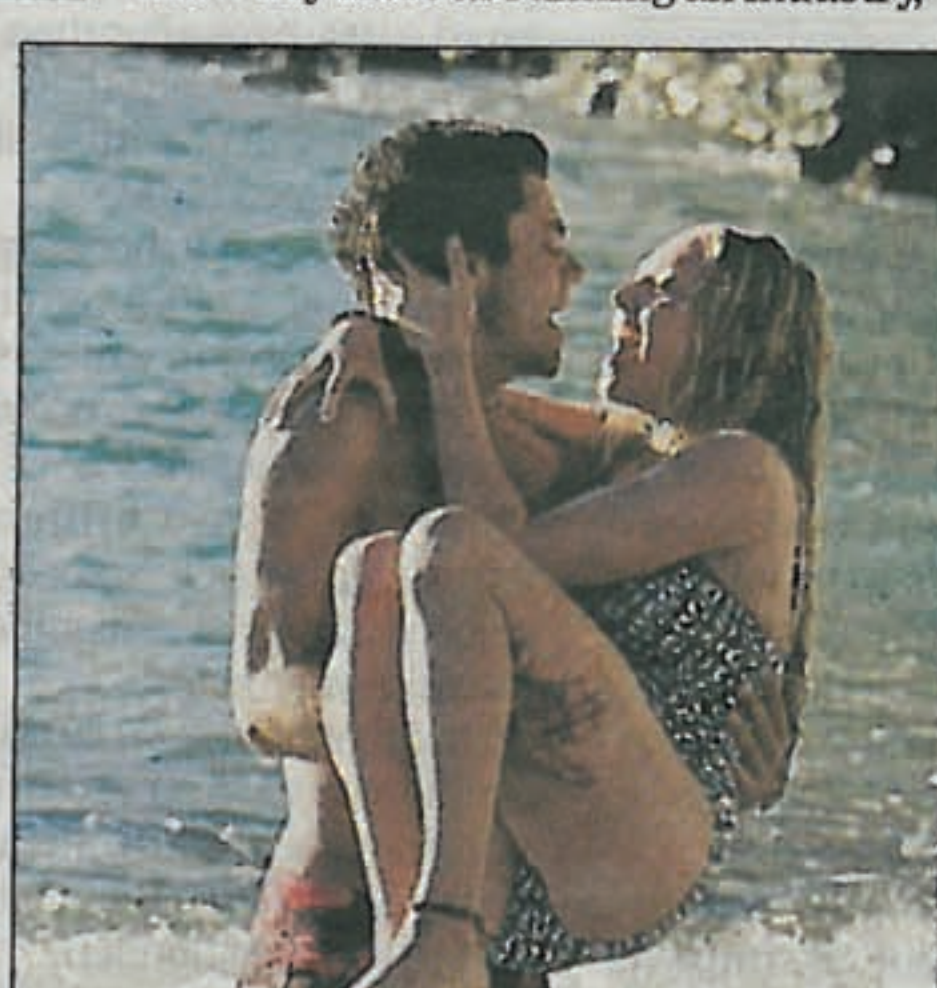
Eventually she persuaded Polygram and the Swedish bank SEB to give the project £3 million backing. It was the result, she says, of sheer bloody-mindedness. "You have to make people believe in what you are doing. It has taken every fibre of my focus and concentration. When someone at one of the meetings suggested we put the show off, I just shouted: 'No! You can't do this! It has to happen! Mamma Mia! is my life.'"

"One of my ambitions was never having to work for somebody else again. I wanted the freedom to create projects on my own and not have to go cap in hand to people. And that is what I have now." Throughout filming she still had to keep 10 musicals all over the world ticking over. "I'm not so much producing a show any more as running an industry,"

'Our passion for Meryl and Meryl's passion for the show made it work. She saw the show on Broadway and wrote us a fan letter'



Abba ABC: Meryl Streep (Donna); Stellan Skarsgård (Bill), Pierce Brosnan (Sam), Colin Firth (Harry) and Amanda Seyfried (Sophie); and Dominic Cooper (Sky) with Seyfried in Mamma Mia!



Picture: Peter Mountain

EVENING STANDARD MONDAY 30 JUNE 2008

News 23



Thank you for the music: Mamma Mia! has been Judy Craymer's life for the past 10 years

she says, "a juggernaut I have no training for."

She admits it's hard to relax. "I think a woman's mind is churning and filled with so much peripheral stuff — are you about to run out of milk? Did you return that call? Even if you have assistants and help you'll still be the one who is multi-tasking. If it's your own business and your passion, there aren't set hours. I can be on the phone until three in the morning. But I have to be careful not to expect my staff to do the same."

Today, home is the exclusive enclave of Belgravia — "as close as I could get to the office without stepping on to Piccadilly". But even with her vast fortune, she insists she isn't extravagant. "It just means I can buy two of practical things, to cope with all the back-to-back travelling." She drives the same old car and never takes holidays. "I just stopped enjoying them, partly because I was on the phone all day."

She still struggles to come to terms with her wealth. "I remember someone saying: 'You're going to be a millionaire' and I said, 'Don't be ridiculous.' Yet I knew it would happen. Because it just had to. But you never really cast off the shadows of unease about money: the suspicion that it might slip away." Nonetheless, she has just splashed out on a flat in New York overlooking Central Park — the realisation of a teenage dream.

Single (despite being dubbed "the most eligible spinster in the West End"), she has always been more excited by her job than by boyfriends. "I'm always fascinated by people who leave work at a certain time and go and play squash

'I'm not so much producing a show any more as running an industry. A juggernaut I have no training for'

and go out to dinner. I'm admiring of people who can schedule their lives like that. I don't think I could I have done it with children."

She likes to quote Meryl Streep's line in the film: "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."

"That sums up my sentiments," she says. "I used to assume I was going to get married and have children but it was never the right time. And I never much fancied being a mum. Happily, some great friendships have come out of Mamma Mia!"

There is a sadness though. Her parents, her greatest fans, are both dead now. "It was a particular knock-on effect to lose them both in two years," she says. "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."

But what next for Craymer? Mamma Mia! has been her whole life for the past 10 years. "It's going to feel like I've stopped being institutionalised, and I'll probably go cold turkey. It's a hugely exciting and energising experience but you're living on the edge constantly. Because it means so much to me — and all the people connected to it — you constantly feel you can't mess up."

She needs a new obsession. She'd love to do another West End musical, but is wary of the trend for copycat "jukebox" musicals. And yes, she'd like to do another film. "Making movies is not for the faint-hearted," she says. "You can't learn all that, and then not use it again."

■ Mamma Mia! The Movie opens on 10 July. A Southbank Show on Abba: The Mamma Mia! Story is on 3 July at 9pm on ITV1.

Festivals? Best seen in your own bed

A LONDON LIFE SOPHIA MONEY-COUTTS



THE summer festival season separates hardcore music fans from the feeble chaff among us, and I fall into the latter camp. Why would anyone willingly give up a weekend for mud, sleeping on the ground and non-stop dancing while swilling watery, warm beer from a plastic cup? It's plain grubby and no place for uptight claustrophobes like me.

Nelson Mandela's Hyde Park gig on Friday night seemed much more my speed. How hedonistic could a 90th birthday party be?

Other than a threatened appearance from Amy Winehouse (who in the end summoned the strength to hoist that mushrooming beehive from her hospital bed and sing), the line-up was relatively tame. And best of all I knew I'd have a warm bed at the end of the night.

The evening sun shone, I held a Moscow Mule in hand and stood, relaxed, near the front of the stage. But then as June Sarpong waltzed on stage to kick things off, that mobile moment pushed the crowd surging forward and I remembered why I hate rock concerts so much. All sense of personal space evaporated. I was so close to the man on my right that I could smell — practically taste — his dreadlocks.

Worse, the lady behind me had with her two young sons, one of whom she picked up and put down every five seconds as if lifting weights in the gym. With each lift, he neatly clocked my calves with his feet. This became trying. "Irritating boy behind me," I scribbled crossly on my notepad.

But not subtly as it turned out, for after returning from a loo break with more drinks, his mother rapped me on the shoulder.

"You think my son is annoying?" she demanded. "This person," she said pointing at a puce-faced great belly of a man behind her, bottle of beer in each hand, "this person is drunk. This is a family event, you're missing the point."

Allergic to confrontation, I garbled an apology and tried to laugh it off. But trapped as I was by the packed crowd, the woman glared at me for the rest of the night, and I could not escape her wrath.

She danced hand in hand with her boys, right beside me, and with each ensuing act I became more ashamed. It was tiresome, my legs ached and even the ludicrously sexy of Brian May's hair failed to cheer me.

Back home, I watched a bit of Glastonbury in bed. Thousands of cramped festival-goers were leaping to the music, wafting their arms in each other's faces.

Just watching them made me feel panicked. Rock 'n' roll it ain't, but I'd never been so happy to fall back on the personal space of my own bedroom.