



"That song was always my inspiration," she says, pouring coffee in her Littlestar company's stylish Soho office, which is decorated in cool shades of cream, mocha and bitter chocolate, because she wanted it to look more like her home than a workplace, although few of us own houses which have a wall of clocks showing the time in New York and Las Vegas and Tokyo.

Nibbling on a chocolate biscuit, Craymer, a former Woman of the Year, says: "I just knew that the songs had an innate theatricality; that they would translate effortlessly into a big musical. We all danced to Abba, but no-one ever listened to the lyrics. Bono says that they wrote great songs for women and he's absolutely right. There's that line in *The Winner Takes It All* - 'Tell me, does she kiss? Like I used to kiss you?' Which girl hasn't wanted to ask that question?"

"I knew there was a terrific story there. There was a chronology, a cross-generational story of love and loss."

The men in suits were, however, not convinced. And, conceded Craymer, there was also an element of who-does-this-ditty-blond-think-she-is? All the impresarios, managers and theatre owners that she approached were men, so it was "a bit of a boys' club". And the subtext was that Craymer would probably meet her Waterloo with an Abba show.

There was also the even bigger problem of persuading Bjorn and Benny to agree to it. She had first met them more than 20 years ago when she was working as Tim Rice's assistant before becoming executive producer on the musical *Cheese*, which Benny and Bjorn co-wrote with Rice, and which had not been the happiest of experiences for the shy Swedes, with its runaway budgets and serial disasters.

The privately educated, ambitious daughter of a north London solicitor and his wife - both of her par-



Left: Abba's Frida Lyngsted with Judy Craymer, left; Abba performing in 1979, right

ents died in recent years - Craymer was never a big Abba fan. She was heavily into rock and punk when she was growing up.

However, the boys bowled her over. She recalls thinking: "Wow, I've met the men who wrote *Dancing Queen*." So she began talking to them about her idea in 1987 but they weren't interested in anything to do with the group, which had ended with a double divorce. Every few years she would meet up with them again to discuss her proposed musical, trying to persuade them that they should take a chance on her. "They'd just go, 'Yadda, yadda, yadda,'" she recalls.



Left: Abba's Frida Lyngsted with Judy Craymer, left; Abba performing in 1979, right

LIKE THE SUPER TROUPER THAT SHE IS, Craymer was not to be deterred since, by her own admission, she is nothing if not stubborn, despite the fact that since *Cheese* she had been struggling financially. But by 1992, the Abba Gold album had come out on Polydor and had sold millions, there were tribute bands, such as Bjorn Again, and the group that had once been the epitome of raffish fashion had become gay icons, thanks to movies such as *Maria's Wedding* and *Paisley, Queen of the Desert*. So she carried on begging and borrowing money for development. By this time she was working in film and television for Tiger Aspect, but she was

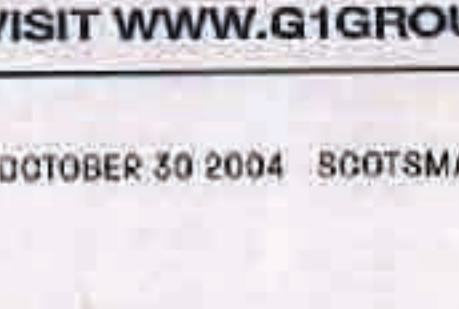
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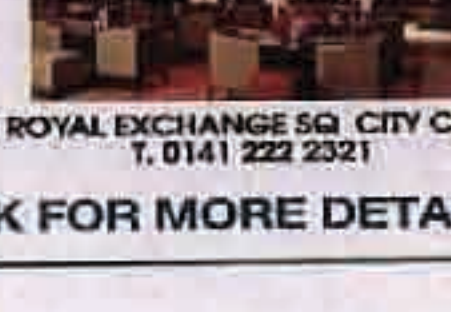
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Super Trouper

Judy Craymer had a dream ... and it made her lots of money, money, money. Now the producer of global smash hit *Mamma Mia!* is bringing her show to Scotland

BY JACKIE MCGLONE, PORTRAIT BY STUART WHITE

JUDY CRAYMER IS A HIGH-MAINTENANCE woman - drop-dead glamorous from the top of her gleaming spun-gold bob to the perfectly pedicured tips of her polished toes, which peek out of a pair of diamond-encrusted sandals. As befits a dancing queen, she is dressed in exquisitely embroidered pearly-grey velvet and chiffon by Dries Van Noten, with a lilac padmum that sets off her St. Tropez tan and antique jade jewellery.

"God! It's hard work," she exclaims in confiding tones when I compliment her on her fabulous grooming and enviable designer threads. Life, it seems, is just one round of expensive hairdressers, manicurists, chi-ropodists and beauty salons, not to mention the endless massages to alleviate her back pain, and then there's all that shopping for yet another sleek little Donna Karan number. But, hey, she's not complaining, since it was not ever thus.

For Craymer, the producer of a global smash hit, the Abba musical *Mamma Mia!*, which opens in Edinburgh next month on the first leg of an international tour, may have broken into the rich man's world of mega-musicals with a show that is set to be the highest grossing ever, but there was a time when she was hard pressed for a cab fare. Today, though, with a snap of her fingers, she provides me with a taxi across London so that I can catch my flight home. She could afford to keep a fleet of black cabs waiting these days because, according to a recent *Sunday Times* Rich List, 46-year-old Craymer earns an estimated £4 million a year.

She lives alone in a glossy new interior-designed

home in Chelsea, with a private gym, drives a Toyota RAV4 and flies first class as she jets around the world touring his shows there. He called one day and said: "Now, darling, about this show of yours..." By the end of the first week the box office was taking £500,000 a day.

Now in its fifth year in London, *Mamma Mia!* is performed in Macintosh's £7 million restored and refurbished Prince of Wales theatre. It's the theatre Craymer always wanted for the show.

It's a wonderful night out - I should know, I've seen it six times - from the moment the exuberant audience starts whooping and cheering at the pre-show announcement: "We'd like to warn people of a nervous disposition that platform boots and white Lycra feature in this production", until the final curtain when every one of us is up on our feet joining in - what else?

- *Dancing Queen*. As did Abba's famously publicity-shy Frida, who climbed on stage to singalong and tell the audience how much she loved the show.

Over the years, she pitched her idea for the show to potential investors, but no-one could grasp what she was trying to do. Was it the story of the band? Who would play Abba? Who would be Frida? Or Bjorn? Or Benny? Was it a tribute show?

Indeed, everyone told her that she was mad, especially when she finally revealed that what she wanted to tell was a contemporary story about a mother and daughter, an unashamedly romantic tale based on holidays and weddings, featuring three middle-aged women and songs ranging from the band's bubbly early hits (*Money Honey*) to later numbers, such as the melancholic *The Winner Takes It All*, which she knew was going to be the *Don't Cry For Me Argentina* torch song of the show.

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"I know, I know," says Craymer, whose late mother saw the show 18 times and twice on Broadway. "*Mamma Mia!* just melts hearts - it's like some sort of happening. Of course when you listen to the songs, you realise how much Bjorn is writing about all their own relationships."

MORE THAN 17 MILLION PEOPLE have seen *Mamma Mia!* worldwide. It has earned about £410 million - *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* have both grossed more than £1 billion, but it's predicted that it will beat their record. "By which time I'll be a very old lady indeed - with a sequined Zimmerman frame," grins Craymer.

On Broadway, after a three-year run, the advance holds steady at around £5.5 million. In January, the musical opened in Seoul with an advance of £1.6 million and in Tokyo it's been seen by 550,000 people.

Six further productions are planned over the next 18 months, including the international tour, which comes to Scotland. *Mamma Mia!* is now the world's No 1 show and Craymer employs around 600 people worldwide to oversee the various productions. "I'm a complete control freak," she sighs. Next year, the show is set to beat *Les Miserables'* record of 15 concurrent productions.



A scene from *Mamma Mia!*

still badgering - in her nice, laid-back way - Bjorn and Benny. "I just couldn't let it go," she says.

Finally, in 1993, Bjorn said to her: "You're right!" - and she of course replied: "Thank you for the music."

Meanwhile, the tenacious Craymer had gone through three writers on the project in as many years. Their ideas were "too Gothic, or childlike, or futuristic". In 1996, she finally assembled her all-woman creative team - "It wasn't planned that way, it just happened and it was serendipitous" - a former commissioning playwright Catherine Johnson (then known for sagging somewhat serious, offbeat dramas on the London fringe) to write a script. Craymer then persuaded Phyllida Lloyd, the renowned opera director, to join them. Coincidentally, the three women were exactly the same age - they are now all 46-year-old multi-millionaires and firm friends.

"There was no pretentiousness. As women we just got on well. I think there was, and still is, a kind of maternal atmosphere surrounding *Mamma Mia!*. That's not to say there weren't hugely supportive men out there eventually. But I do think women naturally multi-task in a certain way and that's why we bonded. There was a kind of sympathy that you might not have got if men had been doing this - I guess we're just very nurturing of the show."

Johnson and Lloyd shaped the story with Craymer. They came up with a plot, set on a Greek island, about a young woman on the eve of her wedding who summons three ex-lovers of her former rock-chick mother to find out which one of them is her father. The characters had to be believable, says Craymer, although it's the songs that tell and sell the story.

Seven years ago, she left her TV job to begin raising the necessary backing. She found most of the £3 million she needed at Polygram, now Universal, as well as securing funding from the likes of SEB, the Swedish bank. Her own bank manager told her she could spend £15 a week on groceries at M&S and draw only £50 cash. Working all day, making all night to pay the bills she had to pay, Craymer was forever being asked: "Who's going to produce this for you?" And she would reply: "Actually, I am." But she knew that they were also wondering: "How on earth can a nice, smiley blonde lady do that?"

After devoting ten years to the project, squatting in a tiny office "with one fantastic assistant, a tiny computer and one phone", Craymer, whose first job on leaving the Guildhall School of Music was as an assistant stage manager at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre, had her musical. Unfortunately, she couldn't find a theatre to open it in. The show that changed the face of musical theatre eventually opened to standing ovations on 6 April 1999, at Cameron Mackintosh's Prince Edward theatre. She had known him since her

days in Leicester when as young impresario he would tour his shows there. He called one day and said: "Now, darling, about this show of yours..." By the end of the first week the box office was taking £500,000 a day.

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So, they keep asking the blonde with the Midas touch, what's next? "It's funny isn't it," says Craymer, playing with a huge mother-of-pearl bracelet. "Everyone wants to do a *Mamma Mia!* now. It was such a hard sell at the time, but now the 'dizzy blonde' is a success."

With the record industry in shreds, she's had approaches from representatives for Neil Diamond, the Carpenters, Dolly Parton and even the Supremes. And, yes, she has already chosen her next project. But she's playing her cards close to her chest: "We've a couple of ideas for the next one," she hints. "It's a musical but very different - definitely not a back-catalogue musical."

A relaxing, highly amusing personality to be around, Craymer is a world away from the caricature of the carpet-chewing, cigar-smoking theatrical producer. She's parentally reeling in the good life and the wealth that *Mamma Mia!* has brought her and her colleagues. "It's changed all our lives for ever; it's become my life, 24/7, ten-hour days, but it has its perks. Yes, I'm still single, although I never wanted children anyway - I'm a mother *Mamma Mia!* As for relationships, the problem is that the creative people one works with are more exciting than the boyfriends. But I'm having the time of my life," she admits, unable to take the look of pleasure off her face.

So the winner takes it all? The loser standing small? Beside the victory? That's her destiny? "Yes, indeed!" she replies, adding that she's currently planning stagings in China, Spain and Sweden.

Looking back she can't quite believe the angst she went through to get here, especially when she had to buy an office once she had found the backing for the show. "We'd no idea how successful it was going to be and I had this big overdraft. I actually sold my house to buy the office, but I had nothing to lose, no dependents, despite being in debt. All I had was this vision, although I do remember thinking, 'God, I'll never be able to buy clothes ever again!'"

"Now, I'm worrying about what to wear for the Edinburgh opening. I expect I'll just have to buy something new - clothes are a huge tonic and I never seem to have a thing to wear. Then I'll have to find a hairdresser in the city and possibly a chiropractor, or a physio perhaps. It's a schedule of planning. High maintenance! I could create the website - I've even introduced Phyllida Lloyd, the archbishop intellectual, to it. She isn't quite educated me on Wagner yet, but I've got her into Mac lipsticks. Oh yes, there are lots of lovely treats in my life these days."

My, my... it's tough at the top for a dancing queen. ■

■ *Mamma Mia!* previews at the Playhouse, Edinburgh, from 12 November before opening on 16 November until 29 January. For 24-hour telephone booking call 0870 606 3424, www.mamma-mia.com