

Producer Judy Craymer: ‘Mamma Mia! was the dark horse that surprised everyone’



Judy Craymer. Photo: Micha Theiner

Features Interviews

by Jo Caird - Mar 20, 2019

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In April it will be 20 years since *Mamma Mia!* first opened in the West End and 45 years since Abba won the Eurovision Song Contest. The musical's producer Judy Craymer tells Jo Caird about persuading Benny and Bjorn to get on board, expanding into film, how Meryl Streep got involved and a new project with Cher

The global phenomenon that is *Mamma Mia!* hardly screams 'shoestring' but that's exactly how producer Judy Craymer describes the process of pulling together her passion project.

“To take everyone out for a meal I risked doing the washing up,” she says, recalling one particular creative team dinner a year before the London opening. “I knew that if everyone had the set menu we’d be okay but if they went à la carte I’d be in trouble. It went horribly wrong when they all started ordering brandy.”

But looking back, Craymer wouldn’t have had it any other way. “Producing is all about bringing things in on time and on budget” she says now, and that includes the creative team’s meals.

Next month – April 6, to be precise – marks 20 years since Mamma Mia! first opened in the West End. But the show has been part of Craymer’s life for much longer than that.



Damian Buhagiar as Pepper, centre, with the cast of Mamma Mia! at the Novello Theatre, London. Photo: Brinkhoff Mögenburg

She first came up with the idea for a project based on the back catalogue of the Swedish pop group Abba after working with the band’s songwriters Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus on the musical Chess in the 1980s.

An assistant to Chess lyricist Tim Rice – her first role on the producing side of the business after beginning her career in stage management – Craymer’s interest in Abba’s songs grew as her relationship with Andersson and Ulvaeus developed.

“I was the person who was bringing together all [Rice’s] theatre meetings. It was a very exciting time and I had this ambition to create something,” she says. “And because musical theatre was something I loved I thought the songs would make a great musical.”

Falling in love with musical theatre

It was a musical that first sparked Craymer's interest in theatre, when a childhood visit to Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* in the West End led her to abandon plans to follow in her lawyer father's footsteps and study stage management instead. She opted to attend Guildhall, a drama school with a dual role as a music college, which meant musical theatre was integral to her training from the start.

"We were working with the musicians and were sent out to work on outside productions and opera as well, so I had a really good grounding," she says, citing *My Fair Lady*, *Oklahoma!* and *The Rocky Horror Show* as particularly strong influences.

After graduation, Craymer got a job at Leicester Haymarket Theatre, a musical theatre house where she first worked with another soon-to-be producing star: Cameron Mackintosh. After a stint at the Old Vic working on "lots of legit theatre", it was her connection with Mackintosh that led to a role as part of the stage management team on *Cats*.

She was "very flattered" to have been offered the job (and is still pleased with herself for having negotiated an extra £10 in her pay packet) but working backstage on *Cats* was a "mad time" and it was at this point that Craymer decided to make the move into production. "I wanted a desk job," she says – the role with Rice came along at just the right moment.

Chess may have given Craymer access to Andersson and Ulvaeus but it would be many years before *Mamma Mia!* began to take shape.



The original cast of Mamma Mia! in rehearsals

Firstly, there was the small matter of the Swedes not showing any interest in the project. Abba had split up in 1982 and Andersson and Ulvaeus seemed keen to move in new directions rather than revisit the old repertoire, says Craymer. Not that they ever actually said 'no'. "They were always nice and generous and patted me on the head and said: 'Come back at some point'," she remembers.

In the meantime, Craymer got on with the business of honing her talents as a producer. “There’s no recipe for putting a musical on and I certainly didn’t have all the tools to do it at that time.”

She moved sideways, taking a job with the British director Michael Radford on the 1987 film *White Mischief*, which was followed by roles on various TV and movie projects. *Mamma Mia!* bubbled away in the background until eventually Craymer realised she needed to devote herself to it full-time if she wanted to take it further.

“That’s when I sold my flat. It was a very small flat and it had a huge mortgage and I had a big overdraft but it enabled me to have some pocket money, so I could live and develop *Mamma Mia!*,” she says. “It seems like a big risk but it was what I wanted to do. I didn’t have any doubts.” Her only regret, she adds with a chuckle, is the sale not raising enough cash to enable her to invest in the show.

By this stage Craymer had persuaded Andersson and Ulvaeus to give her the rights to their songs. “Bjorn was like: ‘Maybe if you can get the right story...’” she says. “But it was always a maybe, there was always the Sword of Damocles hanging over me.”

Continues...

Q&A Judy Craymer

What was your first non-theatre job?

Stable girl. I was horse mad and lucky enough to have a horse. I rode in every spare moment.

What was your first professional theatre job?

Assistant stage manager on the pantomime *Mother Goose* at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester.

What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?

Never expect anything to go to plan.

Who or what was your biggest influence?

I’ve always been crazy for music. Music has always been important to me and still is.

If you hadn’t been a producer, what would you have been?

An international show jumper or equestrian athlete.

Craymer had known from the start that her *Abba* project would be an original story based on Andersson and Ulvaeus’ songs rather than a biopic. “Their songs had to be part of the storytelling,” she says. “My inspiration was *The Winner Takes It All*. I just loved that song and still do, and felt it was the centrepiece of a woman’s story. But what was that story?”

After a couple of false starts with other writers, Craymer started working with Catherine Johnson – who had some success with new plays at the Bush and Bristol Old Vic Theatres, as well as writing for TV series including *Casualty* – and the project took flight, despite Johnson’s initial wariness.

“I really didn’t know if I wanted to write a musical based on the songs of Abba, but Judy’s enthusiasm and sense of fun bowled me over,” the playwright says. “If anyone had a fire in her soul, it was Judy and how could I resist her?”

Andersson and Ulvaeus liked Johnson’s idea of a story set on a Greek island about a mother and daughter relationship and three absent fathers, and Craymer set about pulling together the rest of the creative team.



Kate Graham, Sara Poyzer and Ricky Butt in Mamma Mia! at the Novello Theatre, London. Photo: Brinkhoff Mögenburg

Building the creative team

She went about it in an unorthodox way, signing up choreographer Anthony Van Laast and designer Mark Thompson, and only approaching director Phyllida Lloyd afterwards. “When I went to Phyllida it was a very unusual situation. Not only: ‘Would you be interested?’ but: ‘By the way, your team is waiting for you.’”

The director remembers an “instant rapport and shared humour”, a feeling echoed by Craymer herself. The team coming together was the “start of a big adventure for all of us and of a big friendship”, says the producer, and working with Johnson and Lloyd over the years has been “a huge hoot”.

But the relationship yielded much more than just a fun working environment for the team. Having women leading on the project – a rare enough occurrence these days but almost unheard of at the time – had a “big impact on what Mamma Mia! is today”, says Craymer, citing the many strong female roles in the show.

She believes it is those characters that have made the show such an enduring success, with audience members of all ages seeing themselves on stage.

And not just audience members: “We were sort of the Dynamos,” says Lloyd, referring to the trio of friends at the heart of Mamma Mia! “Jude always had much more and smarter luggage than either of us and was more focused on personal grooming than Catherine and I had ever been.”

Mamma Mia! opened at the Prince Edward Theatre on April 6, 1999. Craymer remembers people warning her against that particular date – the day after Easter Monday didn’t feel like an ideal press night – but they had no choice: Lloyd was needed on another project. And besides, it was the 25th anniversary of Abba winning the Eurovision Song Contest, surely a good omen for the show.



From left: Phyllida Lloyd, Bjorn Ulvaeus, Judy Craymer, Benny Andersson and Catherine Johnson at the Olivier Awards in 2014. Photo: David Benett

It went down well with the critics – “We were the dark horse that surprised everyone,” says Craymer – but she wasn’t counting her chickens. “The ambition was to create something and for it to work. There wasn’t a master plan. I remember thinking: ‘I can afford to live for six months so I better think of what the next project is.’”

Before Craymer could work that out, however, talk turned to doing Mamma Mia! in Toronto. What was meant to be a six-month run, followed by a US tour, turned into a five-year stay, with Craymer and the team mounting a separate production for the road. Then, in October 2001, Mamma Mia! opened on Broadway – the start of a nearly 14-year run.

“We were so busy all the time because all of these things were unexpected,” says Craymer. “It was quite a helter-skelter.” The show’s successes have continued over the years, with more than 50 productions of Mamma Mia! staged in more than 440 cities in 40 countries.



(<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/mamma-mia-review-at-bristol-hippodrome-a-knockout/>)

Mamma Mia! review at Bristol Hippodrome – ‘a knockout’

(<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/mamma-mia-review-at-bristol-hippodrome-a-knockout/>)

Mamma Mia! is about to celebrate its 17th birthday in the West End, and remains a

Along the way, Craymer’s relationship with Andersson and Ulvaeus – long since formalised as the production company Littlestar Services Limited – has remained remarkably similar to when she was still trying to persuade them to give her the rights to their songs in the first place. “It’s push and pull. I’ll say: ‘This is a great idea’, and they’ll say: ‘Hmm, not sure, you have to prove it.’ It’s worked very well, really, so far.”

Among those great ideas of course, was making the show into a film, a process for which Craymer drew on her time working in the film and TV industries. “I knew you needed the right people around,” she says.

The fact she’d never actually produced a feature film when Universal Pictures approached her about turning Mamma Mia! into a movie didn’t overly worry Craymer. Selling the rights and letting someone else take a lead on the project never even crossed her mind.

“I talked the language and they knew that I was going to put my heart into it because I had, by this time, a very important brand,” she says. “I knew my back was being watched. But I said it had to be with Catherine Johnson and Phyllida Lloyd, who’d never written a screenplay or directed a movie. They were like: ‘Righty-ho’ and that was it.”

The people at Universal “raised an eyebrow” at the news that Craymer and Lloyd’s first choice for the role of Donna was Meryl Streep. But they knew something the Hollywood executives didn’t: the Oscar winner had enjoyed Mamma Mia! so much when she saw it on Broadway that she’d written to the cast and company after the show to say so.

Streep said yes and it was full steam ahead after that. When it came to actually make the film, Craymer recognised that the “challenge was how to capture that magic that people have in the theatre”. So to make sure cinema audiences felt as involved in the action as theatregoers, Craymer decided to include a finale. It worked, she says. She attended screenings of Mamma Mia! the movie, released in 2008, and the sequel/prequel Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again 10 years later, of which people leapt to their feet to sing along at the end.



Cast and creatives of Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again 2. Photo: James Gillham

Between producing multiple stage productions of Mamma Mia! around the world and making two major Hollywood films, Craymer hasn't had much time to pursue other projects.

“Maybe I’m not very good at delegating,” she says. “I did try the Spice Girls project. It was something I was interested in doing so I did it, but sadly it didn’t work.”

Continues...

Judy Craymer on...

...Mamma Mia! being the first West End musical to be produced in China in Mandarin:

“We were the pioneer, which was an exciting experience because you’re dealing with all the cultural aspects and the bureaucracy to an extent. The Chinese were very keen to learn how to create musicals and work with us.”

...casting Meryl Streep in Mamma Mia! The Movie:

“We were going to have T-shirts made saying: ‘We were here before Meryl. Because of course once Meryl came on board, everyone did.’”

...producing influences:

“Cameron Mackintosh was a mentor to me and I like to think I learned a lot from him, right down to giving good parties, which has always been very important.”

Viva Forever! – What went wrong?

That project was Viva Forever!, the musical based on the songs of the Spice Girls that opened in the West End in December 2012 and closed just seven months later, after being panned by the critics.

It seems strange that the show did so badly when, on paper, it ticked so many boxes: the back catalogue of one of the most successful girl bands ever; a star book writer in the form of Jennifer Saunders, and, of course Craymer, with all her Mamma Mia! experience, at the helm.

Did Viva Forever!'s failure have something to do with the fact it was the Spice Girls, rather than Craymer herself, who came up with the idea for the musical? "I'm sure it did," says the producer, "and also maybe people expected more from me and expected things faster and we weren't given the time to work it through."

The wider context didn't help either, she says. "Mamma Mia! came along with no big fanfare. We opened 20 years ago at the same time as The Lion King, which was the big show with all the bells and whistles coming into the West End and we were a smaller show. Maybe [Viva Forever!] had too many bells and whistles."

It must have been a huge disappointment, not to mention professionally embarrassing, at the time, but Craymer sounds remarkably calm about the project today, focusing on the positives and looking at it as just one of those things that didn't work out the way it was planned. "It was fun working with them [the Spice Girls] and Jennifer Saunders. The audiences loved it."



Lucy Phelps, Hannah John-Kamen, Dominique Provost-Chalkley and Siobhan Athwal in Viva Forever. Photo: Tristram Kenton

Her experience on Viva Forever! certainly hasn't put the producer off the idea of working with pop stars. Her next project, in fact, will hopefully involve one of the biggest names in showbusiness: Cher, whom Craymer got to know after working with her on Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again.

"She's a big inspiration," says the producer. "She's an activist and humanitarian. She's busy, all the time." What the pair will do together is still unclear, though a stage musical about Cher's life is definitely off the cards given there's already one currently running on Broadway.

It might be a film and will probably be "female-driven", says the producer, but that's as far as they've got. Craymer doesn't sound like she's in any particular hurry to solidify any plans. "I'm in the fortunate position that I can choose what I want to do and I don't have to beg, steal and borrow like I did before."

In the meantime, Craymer has plenty to be getting on with. "I started off wanting to produce a project and it became a business with all these responsibilities. It's being a CEO rather than a producer these days and I am very hands on, very involved, from the art work to the casting to the licensing, everything."

She adds with a smile: "Maybe my father wanting me to be a lawyer worked out quite well because I ended up doing an awful lot of business."

CV Judy Craymer

Born: London, 1957

Training: BA in stage management at Guildhall School of Music and Drama

Landmark productions:

Theatre:

- Mamma Mia!, Prince Edward Theatre (1999)
- Viva Forever!, Piccadilly Theatre (2012)

TV:

- Mamma Mia! The Movie (2008)
- Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again (2018)

Awards:

- Woman of the Year award (2002)
- MBE for services to the music industry (2007)
- Women in film ITV achievement of the year award (joint award for Judy Craymer, Catherine Johnson and Phyllida Lloyd) (2008)

Mamma Mia! is booking at London's Novello Theatre, until September 14, 2019. Go to mamma-mia.com for details



Jo Caird

Jo Caird is a freelance journalist with over 10 years' experience covering the British and international culture scene for publications including The Guardian and The Economist.

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