

## How Mamma Mia's Judy Craymer became the £90m dancing queen

**She was just a middle-aged Abba fan with a dream – but Judy Craymer defied the odds to turn her favourite group's songs into a musical. Now she's a £90m dancing queen**

By Daily Mail Reporter



Mamma Mia! producer Judy Craymer

When Mamma Mia! impresario Judy Craymer's classmates were dancing around to Abba's Money, Money, Money, she was mucking out ponies, her sights set on the bright lights of the international show-jumping circuit. A horse-mad teenager, she had little thought for Lycra, glitter or disco hits.

So who would have thought, 35 years later, she'd be sitting in a swanky West End office festooned with photographs of her larking about with the Mamma Mia! gang, with enough squillions in the bank to make Fred the Shred's mind-boggling pension seem like peanuts.

The first production of Mamma Mia! the musical opened a decade ago at the Prince Edward Theatre. 'It was just after the Easter weekend,' says Judy, who produced the show. 'Everyone said it wasn't a great time to open because people were away. But Soho literally came to a standstill – the traffic stopped, barriers were up, Abba fans were in the street.'

'It was, "Oh, my God. All these people are turning out to watch people arrive for my first night."

'Benny and Björn [Andersson and Ulvaeus, the men behind Abba] had people running alongside their car like a presidential cavalcade sweeping down the streets because fans were trying to leap all over their car.

'That night there was such a huge, lovely feeling from the audience. After the party, which was done on a shoestring at a restaurant in Soho, we all went back to the Covent Garden Hotel until 5am. I just remember a great feeling of relief.'

More so a few weeks later, when Judy's first royalty cheque arrived. 'I had to get the car repaired, which was going to cost £1,500. I remember opening the envelope and thinking, "Wow, there'll be change." The cheque was for £10,000. I thought, "Oh my God. It's working." Right up to the wire I'd been worrying whether the investors were going to make their money back.'

When I meet Judy, she strolls into her West End office with a bottle of Evian in one hand and a Joseph carrier bag in another. Judy likes to shop. She's just bought a New York apartment overlooking Central Park. She likes clothes too. Today, the look is expensive but trendy, a pair of soft black leather trousers, a white shirt and plimsolls, which I'm guessing aren't Dunlop green flash.

Judy is a ballsy blonde with a big laugh and big hands. Today, she's wearing two identical gold rings, only one is set with precious stones. This seems appropriate somehow. A decade ago, Judy, now 51, barely had two brass farthings to rub together having sold her flat to bankroll her vision of a Mamma Mia! musical. Many of her contemporaries thought she was barking mad.

'People always said Abba's passé, finished, but I knew those songs had a theatricality, and my dream was to make musical theatre. But there were some buttock-clenching moments,' she says. 'It's been said that, for a long time, the story of Mamma Mia! was the story of Judy Craymer and two blokes with beards who kept saying no.'

The two blokes with beards are Abba's Benny and Björn, who retained tight artistic control over both the musical and the songs. Judy had met them while working with Sir Tim Rice on the musical Chess long after abandoning her showjumping ambitions. She nagged them for a decade to let her do something with their songs, having fallen in love with their anthem The Winner Takes It All.



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Within nine months of the West End first night, such was the phenomenal success of Mamma Mia! that Hollywood studios began to express an interest in a movie. Judy insisted that the Mamma Mia! writer Catherine Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd were involved, despite the fact that between the three of them, their experience of working on a major film added up to zilch.

Before Mamma Mia! the musical, Johnson was a little known writer and single mother of two, living in Bristol and struggling to pay the bills. A fellow writer, who'd decided Mamma Mia! wasn't his 'cup of tea', recommended her to Judy.

'We met and really got on, although she had no huge track record,' says Judy. 'And she got Mamma Mia!. A lot of people hadn't. After three hours of meeting over an egg sandwich she came up with the mother and daughter storyline.'

Lloyd was a hugely respected director with a formidable reputation in opera and theatre. 'When we met,' she says, 'we got on really well – I think she dashed out and bought Abba Gold that day.

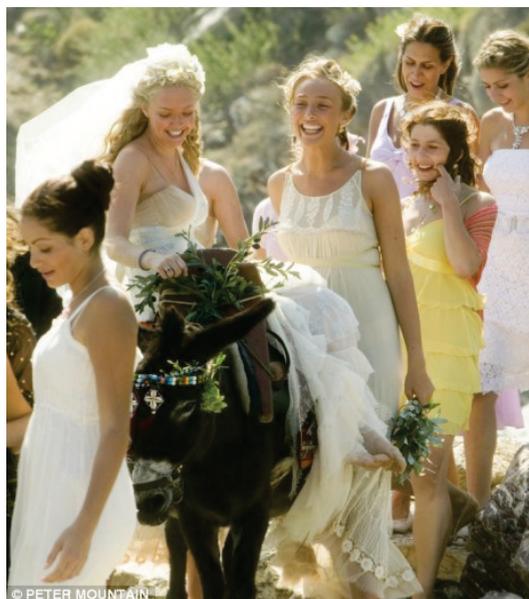
She'd just had her 40th birthday and I was about to have mine. At the end of the meeting I said, "When will you let me know?" She said, "Before you're 40" – and she did. That was the beginning of the three of us.'



The triumvirate of Tanya (Christine Baranski), Donna (Meryl Streep) and Rosie (Julie Walters) resonated with cinema-goers as much as the songs

Mamma Mia! is, of course, the story of the fifty-something female triumvirate of Donna (Meryl Streep), Rosie (Julie Walters) and Tanya (Christine Baranski) that resonated with cinema-goers as much as the songs. 'We were a bit minxy in a way. We wanted Meryl, and we slightly jumped the gun by phoning her agent before the studio agreed.

I was so used to doing everything myself, I kind of forgot I had a major studio to report to. She'd seen the musical on Broadway and when she was contacted by her agent, she screamed, "I am Mamma Mia!" 'Phyllida and I travelled to New York to meet her. When she walked into the room, I let out this schoolgirlish scream of "ahhh" and Meryl went "ahhh". We were thinking we were going to be put through our paces, but she sat down and said, "Do you want me, you really want me?" She always wanted to work on something that was going to take more than 100 per cent of her energies, and Mamma Mia! was that project.



Amanda Siegfried in Mamma Mia! 'We became part of a kind of family', says Judy

'We became part of a kind of family. Meryl loved to go out for a Martini with us, and I remember her shedding a tear on her final day. On the last day of shooting credits, we finished at 10pm and went out for a last Martini. We had quite a few and woke up fully clothed the next day.'

As Mamma Mia! reaches its 10th anniversary, Judy is said to have £90million in the bank. 'I wish,' she says, but refuses to be drawn on exactly how much she's made. She says she never went into showbusiness to get rich: 'It was about the excitement, the thrill. You don't go into theatre to earn big money.'

I wonder what's next. 'Isn't this enough?' she asks, flashing that oversized gold ring. Plenty. But still? 'The thing I've noticed working with fifty-something women, is the more you do the younger you become. Should I relax now and go to live in Monte Carlo? Oh, God, no. Obviously, the answer to everything is to keep going.'

Just like Meryl Streep, who is 60 this year and seems to be making more films than ever. But, as Judy says, 'Meryl is a complete dynamo.'