

# Celebrating the mother of all MUSICALS

It took Judy Craymer a decade to persuade ABBA to turn their songs into a show. Now *Mamma Mia!* is celebrating 25 years and there are plans for a third film. Louise Atkinson meets the ultimate dancing queen and film producer

Judy Craymer was 16 when ABBA won the Eurovision song contest back in 1974 – but she was more of a rock chick teenager than a disco queen, preferring T. Rex, Bowie or Led Zeppelin and dreaming of a career as an international show jumper.

It was only after a chance meeting with ABBA's songwriting duo Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson in the early 1980s that she *really* listened to the words of their hit *Winner Takes It All*, and the seeds of an idea for a story inspired by ABBA songs began to take hold.

'Those lyrics revealed a rollercoaster of love and loss that struck me as extraordinarily theatrical,' she tells me. 'I was intrigued by the way two men had written a song that could resonate so powerfully with women – there were so many boyfriends I'd loved to have sung those words to!'

But it would take more than 10 years of dogged persuasion before Benny and Björn finally gave Judy the go-ahead to make what they thought might be a 'little show'.



Björn, Judy and Benny outside Winter Garden Theatre on Broadway

“  
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”

*Mamma Mia!* opened on the West End stage in 1999, 25 years after *Waterloo* had catapulted the Swedish foursome into pop history. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the musical phenomenon that broke all box office records, having been seen by more than 65m people worldwide in 50 productions running in 16 different languages.

Life is very different now for Judy – the London girl who sold her first flat to bankroll the development of her

*Mamma Mia!* idea, exchanging potential plot ideas with writer Catherine Johnson over a cheese and ham sandwich at Reading Station.

Now one of the most powerful women in the West End, she owns two top-level and highly pampered dressage horses and a share of six National Hunt racing horses, and divides her time between a London penthouse flat, a home in Warwickshire (near the horses) and jetting around the world to keep all her *Mamma Mia!* plates spinning.

At 66, when many people might be thinking of taking

things a little easy, Judy is still the head of the *Mamma Mia!* family. 'I'm very much involved,' she says, 'whether we're searching out a potential theatre in Mumbai or auditioning new lead roles for Shanghai, I'll be making the final call of what cocktails we serve at the welcome party.'

With both Meryl Streep and Cher on speed dial, she's also currently working on concepts for a third *Mamma Mia!* film and a biopic with Cher.

## TAKE A CHANCE ON ME

Judy completed a degree in stage management at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama ('it was so much fun, like living an episode of *Fame!*' she recalls) and landed a job as one of the stage managers for *Cats* when it first opened in 1981. It was through working with lyricist Tim Rice on the musical *Chess* that she met and became friendly with Benny and Björn, who were writing the music for the production.

Over the next decade, Judy stayed in regular contact with the Swedish songwriters, intermittently nudging them about her fantasies of a musical. 'I'd send a fax or sidle up to one of them at a birthday party, and they'd usually humour me but bat me away,' she remembers.

Their reticence stemmed from the fact that ABBA had long disbanded, and both couples had divorced (Björn was married to Agnetha Fältskog and Benny to Anni-Frid [Frida] Lyngstad).



'I met the girls on a couple of occasions, but they seemed to share Björn and Benny's concerns,' she says. 'They'd all moved on from ABBA, didn't see themselves as pop stars and didn't think anyone would listen to those songs again.'

But nostalgic affection *did* grow and, in 1992, a compilation album – *ABBA Gold* – was released, heralding a popular revival. The 'boys' buckled, and Judy was thrust into top gear. 'I gave up my day job and, much to my father's horror, sold my flat to pay off my overdraft and keep myself afloat,' she remembers. 'There were some buttock-clenching moments, and a lot of people thought I was mad.'

## KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU

Judy and writer Catherine Johnson created the new famous mother and daughter storyline with the 'three dads' twist. 'My brief was that none of the song lyrics could change, the story should be a contemporary, ironic, romantic comedy, which incorporated

two different generations,' she explains. With the script written, Judy persuaded Phyllida Lloyd (who had a background in theatre and opera) to come on board as director.

The three women – all in their late 30s – firmly bonded



Catherine Johnson, Phyllida Lloyd and Judy Craymer in Times Square

to carry the production over the line, making the story of *Mamma Mia!* as much about the women behind it as it is about the three women who perform it on stage.

The musical had its world premiere on 6 April 1999 and was an immediate and resounding success.

Tickets back then were like gold dust, and the production had already been running for a number of years before I finally got to see it. I remember being completely swept up in the feelgood positivity of the story. For those few hours, I was Donna – free-thinking, still sexy, a bit groovy – and I wept like a baby when Donna and Sophie sang *Slipping Through My Fingers*, thinking about my relationship with my own



mother, but also about my then five-year-old daughter, Flo, tucked up in bed back home.

## MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

'I vividly remember receiving my first royalty check (£1,500) and thinking, "Oh, good, I can get my car repaired,"' says Judy. Three years later, she had accumulated enough money to buy a house. Benny and Björn were thrilled with the show's success, but Judy didn't really know how Agnetha and Frida would react.

'I was in Toronto with *Mamma Mia!* when I got a call to say Frida had been to see the West End show and had loved it so much she climbed up on stage to sing *Dancing Queen* at the end with the cast,' she says. 'It's fantastic that she could see something of herself in these more mature female characters.'

Inevitably, Hollywood came knocking, and Judy managed to keep complete control, insisting that she, Catherine and Phyllida stayed together as the controlling team. She fought suggestions for other experienced directors (such as Steven Spielberg) to take over, and insisted that the musical's central middle-aged, hippie mother character (Donna) remained

exactly as written, politely declining suggestions of younger women such as Kylie Minogue, Nicole Kidman and Michelle Pfeiffer.

'We had a dream casting list with Meryl Streep at the top,' says Judy. 'I knew she was a fan because she had taken her daughter to the Broadway show and had written to say how much she loved it. So, very naughtily, I approached her before clearing it with Universal Studios – and she said yes!'

For the central role of her daughter Sophie, Emily Blunt was considered, as were Natalie Dormer, Kirsten Dunst and Gemma Arterton, but they looked nothing like Meryl. Amanda Seyfried turned out to be the perfect match, and her chemistry with Dominic Cooper (as her fiancé, Sky) ensured he got the role



Above: Judy with the cast of *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*. Right: Judy with the *Mamma Mia! I Have A Dream* judges and presenter Zoe Ball



## THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC

When a sequel, *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, opened in 2018,

over other big Hollywood names such as Henry Cavill, James McAvoy and Tom Hardy. 'We didn't audition any of the dads,' says Judy. 'Everyone immediately started saying yes once Meryl signed on. Pierce Brosnan heard "ABBA", "Meryl" and "Greek island" and was an immediate yes.'

The *Mamma Mia!* film premiered in London on 30 June 2008. It was a huge box office success, grossing more than \$400m worldwide, and the DVD released

later that year became the fastest-selling DVD of all time in the UK.

'There's a famous picture of me with all four original members of ABBA at the Stockholm premier,' says Judy.

'It was the first time the four of them had been photographed together since 1986 and the city

had been completely shut down for the occasion. I was with Meryl when we were introduced to ABBA and it was a case of "your majesty, meet your majesties!"'

Naturally, I went to see the film with a gang of girlfriends – everyone was talking about it! – and Flo also went to watch with her school friends a few weeks later. To my complete surprise, she came home sobbing about the *Slipping Through My Fingers* scene that had touched me so deeply when I'd seen the stage show.

Meryl Streep saw *Mamma Mia!* and wrote to tell me how much she loved it

with many of the same cast as the original, it became the most successful live music movie sequel of all time – and it welcomed a new wave of young fans.

Judy talks fondly of plans for a third *Mamma Mia!*: 'I know there's a trilogy there,' she says, adding her pals Meryl and Cher are both keen to be involved.

It was Judy who persuaded Cher to join the gang, and she says the production team affectionately called her 'the Cher whisperer' because, although Cher was only signed up to sing one song (*Fernando*), she somehow ended up singing *Super Trouper*, too.

'We bonded,' says Judy. 'I think she was intrigued by me – a woman – making all the big decisions.'

This year, the *Mamma Mia!* brand has seen a fresh surge of popularity, thanks to ITV talent show *Mamma Mia! I Have A Dream* in a quest to find a new Sky and Sophie for the West End show.

When Judy very kindly offered me tickets to see it in action, my daughter begged me to take her along and we had an absolute blast – laughing, crying, dancing in the aisles together. How is it possible for a set of songs written in the 1970s and tied together by a crazy story to be so uplifting, poignant and joyful – and, after all these years, to continue to resonate across so many generations?

Judy, we salute you!

• To buy tickets to *Mamma Mia!*, visit [mamma-mia.com](http://mamma-mia.com) □