



Mother of a musical

The creator of *Mamma Mia!* had trouble getting it off the ground but it has since broken box-office records, writes

Stephen Downie

JUDY Craymer was never a *Dancing Queen*. Certainly not in the 1970s, when the Swedish hitmakers ABBA were sweeping the charts. She bopped to punk rock and fantasised about being a horse-riding champion.

Now, with an estimated fortune upwards of \$160 million, the *Mamma Mia!* creator can boogie all the way to the bank. Or wherever she likes.

But Craymer's path to money, money, money was by no means an easy one. Right up to *Mamma Mia!*'s Australian premiere in Melbourne on June 9, 2001, there was confusion about what it was all about. To Craymer's horror, some presumed it was an ABBA tribute show.

"I remember people asking, 'So, who's going to be playing the blonde one?'" she recalls.

Instead, they got the ultimate feel-good jukebox musical, with the stamp of approval from ABBA's songwriters Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus.

"Success" almost seems the wrong word to describe what has become a global phenomenon. Since its debut in London in 1999, 40 million people in 200 cities have seen *Mamma Mia!* The Australian production, which returns to Melbourne in February, has pulled 2.2 million.

And yet Craymer could not find a suitable West End theatre for the world premiere.

"We got the Prince Edward Theatre, which seats about 1700, and I think Benny and Bjorn envisioned starting somewhere slightly off the radar,

slightly smaller," she says.

"But then, anything with ABBA cannot be off the radar."

Craymer was born in North London and studied stage management and music at the Guildhall School. When she was 23 she worked with theatre producer Tim Rice on *Chess* — and met its composers, ABBA's Andersson and Ulvaeus.

A lightbulb flicked on in her head. She pondered the idea of a small film, then considered a stage musical.

"I always thought it would be a kind of woman's story," she says. "*The Winner Takes It All*, that was the inspiration for me. That's the song I played quite obsessively.

"But how do you make a happy musical out of a soulful break-up song? The challenge started. And it took quite a long time."

Ten years after she proposed the idea, Andersson and Ulvaeus finally gave Craymer the green light.

"They were always interested in the idea, but they had moved on. They were resistant to going back and, in the beginning, didn't quite understand what I wanted to do."

Craymer also suspects the duo was hesitant because by the late '80s ABBA was deemed uncool.

"Well, not in Australia, of course," she assures. "But now, they're more like monuments on the landscape."

Having secured the blessing of half of ABBA, Craymer knuckled down with writer Catherine Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd.

"It was Catherine who came up with the idea of a story based on a mother and her daughter," Craymer says. "Then it began to really develop.

"I had marked out the kinds of

songs which I thought were story-centric. *Dancing Queen* was there and also others which would help provide

light and shade." It was Ulvaeus who, as Lloyd searched for a way to open Act Two — which centres on Sophie reflecting on her life — suggested the song *Under Attack*.

Interestingly, even after picking over every ABBA tune

thousands of times, Craymer doesn't tire of the band's music.

"I realise that even more now because I've lived with them so long. Every time I try to start another project, after a few weeks I can't stand hearing those songs."

As to the billion-dollar question of whether ABBA will ever reunite, Craymer is doubtful but never says never. She points to a BBC Radio 2 ABBA tribute concert in September, in which Kylie Minogue joined Andersson and Ulvaeus to sing *When All is Said and Done*.

"It was a big celebration and I think closest one would get to a reunion. I think it shows that at last they realise how much people love their music."

see > Mamma Mia!, Her Majesty's, Melbourne, from Feb 13. Tickets: \$29.90-\$119.90; gift vouchers available. Bookings: 13 28 49. The show is also at the Lyric Theatre, Sydney, until Feb 7.



Hard road:
Mamma Mia!
creator Judy
Craymer and
(below) the cast of
the latest
Australian
production.

Main picture:
LORENZO AGIUS