



Godmother of Mamma Mia! Judy Craymer brings her "baby" back to the Princess of Wales Theatre on April 28.

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#### Five faves Women

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Queen Elizabeth II: I think this is self explanatory. I admire her on so many levels — her grace, her dedication and dignity. I think she is fabulous.

Anna Wintour: Inspirational leader of fashion and incredible magazine editor. She seems to stand by her choices and isn't afraid of making a commercial decision. I think she has been an incredible influence to women in the last 20 years. You don't have to dress like a man to be taken seriously.

Tina Fey: Brilliant comedian, writer, producer. I think she is hilarious and a genius.

Evelyn Lauder: For what Evelyn has done for breast cancer awareness. Formalizing the pink ribbon campaign and establishing the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, which has raised millions of dollars. She is incredibly organized, incredibly generous and a woman on a mission.



By **Richard Ouzounian** Theatre Critic

What do you say to a woman who had one brilliant idea that has translated so far into \$2 billion in earnings on stage and \$602 million on screen?

You say, “Brava, Judy Craymer!” and the Godmother of *Mamma Mia!* is likely to smile right back at you and lift a glass of champagne in a toast, especially when she’s returning to town on April 28 to celebrate two things: the 10th anniversary of the hit show’s Toronto debut and the first time it’s returned here on tour in five years.

Come to think of it, every time I’ve seen Craymer she’s had a flute of bubbly in her hand. Of course, the fact that we usually meet on opening night might have something to do with it, but I can’t help but think that this is a lady who was born to be surrounded by Mumm.

The story of how Craymer came to Toronto and how her British hit became an international phenomenon is the kind of near-legendary fable she thrives on.

When she first got the idea of mounting an ABBA musical, she was working on the fringes of British show business and “didn’t have the proverbial pot to tinkle in, darling.”

It took six years, but Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, the gruff but genial bearded Swedish giants who guarded the gates to [ABBA-land](#), finally gave in to Craymer’s dreams.

“I honestly think it was more out of exhaustion than anything else,” laughs Johnson, “But once they said yes, it was full steam ahead.” She put together her team: director Phyllida Lloyd and author Catherine Johnson — all women, who like Craymer were on the cusp of 40 and bursting with ambition.

The show opened in London in April 1999 to smashing reviews and wildly enthusiastic audience response. Craymer was thrilled and wasn't really thinking about her next move.

"There was never really any thought at first about taking it to North America. I was producing it for London and that was it.

"But then Mr. David Mirvish came along and was incredibly charming and persuasive and convinced me we should just take it to his wonderful theatre, the Royal Alexandra, for 26 weeks."

But once the previews started, the theatre was selling out and the Mirvishes wanted to extend the run. But that meant hiring a new to replace the original company, led by Louise Pitre, Tina Maddigan and Adam Brazier, which was going on to tour North America.

"I remember having a discussion and thinking crikey! This bloody thing has taken on a life of its own," says Craymer.

"We broke all boundaries with that," Craymer sighs. "And nowadays people talk about 'the *Mamma Mia!* strategy' in touring North America, but we had no strategy. We had a show that a lot of people wanted to see and we were trying to get it to them as rapidly as possible!"

The tour gradually made its way across North America and Craymer blessed Pitre and Maddigan by asking them to open the show on Broadway. But then fate intervened.

"We were supposed to open on Oct. 18, 2001. But first, along came 9/11."

Everyone in the industry was divided. "At first I thought our show was frivolous and silly and we shouldn't bring it into that market," feared Craymer, but a lot of the old-timers said we had a duty to help Broadway.

"And then I thought, 'Well, we won't have a party, but the late, great Gerry Schoenfeld came to me and said, 'Judy, you cannot open a show like this and not have a party. You must carry on.' And so we did."

Making the movie was another rush for Craymer. "If you don't think having Meryl Streep in my movie wasn't the greatest thrill of my life, than you are absolutely rolling bonkers!," she roars.

But despite the atmosphere of fun, Craymer admits that "it was bloody hard work, keeping that budget in line, keeping all those stars in line. How did we do it? Phyllida and I knew one

thing and that was *Mamma Mia!* We were the original architects and we knew how to make it work.

“All the actresses in the film always kept asking people who I was supposed to be and Phyllida would jokingly say, ‘Oh, Judy is Tanya. So much luggage, so little time!’ But the more I looked at it, I realized that I’m Donna. Why? Because just like her, I worked damn hard and I did it on my own.”

So what’s ahead for this human dynamo? There are rumours floating around about a sequel, to be made strictly for the screen. And Craymer carefully chooses her words when she says, “I won’t deny it hasn’t been talked about or taken seriously.

“But we won’t call it a sequel or even a prequel — if that’s what it turns out to be,” she says, dropping an enormous clue. “I think we’ll just call it *Mamma Mia 2*.

“Benny and Bjorn’s concern is if there are enough songs left, but I tell them not to worry. We just have to give them characters to fall in love with.”

And does she have a time frame? Of course, she does.

“If I could do a master plan, I’d like to open the next film for the 15th anniversary of the stage show in London.”

That’s April 4, 2014. I’d mark that date in my calendar if I were you.

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