

THE BIG INTERVIEW Judy Craymer

‘I didn’t expect Mamma Mia!’s success, but I can’t see the West End without it’

In the 25 years since the curtain rose on Mamma Mia! in the West End, the ABBA-inspired mega-hit musical has raked in billions at the box office, birthed two hit films and secured its place in theatre history. Its creator and producer Judy Craymer tells **Matthew Hemley** the story of how the show came into being and reveals plans for a third film and her new Cher biopic

MARY MCCARTNEY

Mamma Mia! producer
Judy Craymer



Shortly before the recent 25th anniversary of Mamma Mia! in the West End, its writer Catherine Johnson asked the show’s producer, Judy Craymer, a question. “Was Anthony Horowitz offered Mamma Mia!?” she enquired, pushing Craymer to know if she wasn’t her first choice for the cherished ABBA musical. “I read it in a book that he’s written,” she continued.

Craymer recalls the exchange from her swanky offices near London’s St James’ Park. Hers is a room filled chockablock with memorabilia from a quarter of a century of the Mamma Mia! brand – there are pictures of Meryl Streep from the set of the film, bits of the set, too, as well as props from the musical and merchandise. It’s musical theatre heaven.

Laughing now – something she does a lot during our interview – she tells of the exchange between her and

Johnson. “I said he wasn’t actually offered it – I probably talked to him about it,” she recalls. “Catherine was laughing and then I said: ‘Don’t you forget there was another director at one point, too, but he wanted a different script.’ And Catherine said: ‘I was so bricking it, I thought you were going to fire me as I wasn’t sophisticated enough.’”

Bringing the vision to life

How different things could have been, had this unnamed director got his way. Fortunately for us – and everyone else involved in this beloved show – Phyllida Lloyd was chosen to helm the musical and Johnson was the writer tasked with bringing Craymer’s vision to life – because it was Craymer whose idea it was to use the music of ABBA for a stage musical.

Twenty-five years since its West End premiere and audiences are still packing out London’s Novello Theatre

(its third home) to watch the story of a young bride-to-be trying to find her father out of three possible men, set to the music of ABBA’s infectious, timeless songs, and with its now-iconic Greek-island setting as a backdrop.

The relationship between the three female creative powerhouses at the heart of the project is, in no small part, a reason for the show’s success. “Catherine sent me a text the other day and said: ‘Who would have thought it would take three 40-year-old women to create the magic?’ and I thought that was great,” Craymer says.

“The three of us each brought something to it. There was my vision that these songs could be used in storytelling and it was a woman’s story – and then Catherine came on board with the mother and daughter plot and cheekiness of the three possible dads, and Phyllida added her sharp eye on themes and structures.

Celebrating 25 years of *Mamma Mia!* in the West End: Catherine Johnson, Judy Craymer and Björn Ulvaeus (centre), and original Donna Siobhán McCarthy (right), on stage with the cast at the Novello Theatre (2024)



It's very unpretentious but Phyllida understands structure – Shakespearean structure – and that is what it has: the island, the mis-identity, the romance and the action. And it has to take place in 24 hours. It sweeps everybody into it – however cynical, I think. At least, I hope.”

It certainly has. Since its original opening in April 1999, the show has taken more than £4 billion at the box office, been seen by upwards of 70 million people and had more than 50 productions in 450 cities, performed in 16 languages. It is only the third musical in the history of the West End to celebrate 25 years, after *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The idea for the show came to Craymer when she was a production assistant working for Tim Rice, in the early 1980s. Craymer, who had studied stage management at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, was working for Rice in a London office on Shaftesbury Avenue.

“It was a job from heaven,” she recalls. “I had been an assistant stage manager on *Cats* in the West End and I went from there to being in an office and not wearing blacks and setting props for the *Rum Tum Tugger* and *Mr Mistoffelees*. Tim was working on a show called *Chess* with Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson from ABBA, and that was how I met them.”

Craymer recalls staying in Rice's London home while he was out of town and listening to the band's music, confident there was a musical theatre story to be told using it.

“I would blast ABBA out of the guest room and I would have to rewind the tape with a biro because I played it so much and the tape kept breaking,” she says. “I wanted to know more about these songs and the men who wrote them.”

Craymer stopped working with Rice soon after *Chess* opened in 1986, but the idea of a musical based on ABBA's music was still firmly in her mind. Having moved into television and film development, Craymer initially thought there would be a movie version of a show called *Abbacadabra*, which ran at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in 1983, and which used the music of ABBA but with new lyrics by Alain Boublil, of *Les Mis* fame, and Don Black.

“I thought it would make a great Jim Henson TV kids fairytale, but it wasn't to be,” she reveals. “I got Cameron Mackintosh, who was producing it, interested but Boublil was not interested. I thought there was definitely a story to be told and thought: ‘Okay, *Abbacadabra* will not do it, I will have to think of my own one’”

The catalyst for Craymer was the ABBA songs *My Love*, *My Life* and *The Winner Takes It All* – two songs she knew could be used theatrically. She managed to persuade a friend of hers – Siobhán McCarthy, who had been in *Chess* – to record a version of *My Love*, *My Life* to show Ulvaeus and Andersson how “theatrically these songs could work”.

‘Catherine Johnson, Phyllida Lloyd and I each brought something to the show. There was my vision, Catherine's plot and Phyllida's sharp eye on themes and structures’

When the workshop of *Mamma Mia!* did eventually take place some years later, it was McCarthy who played the role of Donna Sheridan, the central character whose daughter is getting married, the same daughter who – unbeknownst to Donna – has invited her mother's three former lovers to join the celebrations, in the hope of discovering which one might be her real dad. McCarthy went on to originate the role of Donna in the West End.

The workshop was a success, but the road to it opening would prove to be a long one. The ABBA bandmates had been “sitting on the fence a bit” about Craymer's idea until they were presented with the plot suggestion from Johnson. “There had been different ideas, different configurations – but I always knew it had to be the two generations and had to reflect that,” Craymer says.

She adds: “Catherine, I thought, was right. We are very much the same – there is no pretension or grandness.” Even with Johnson on board, however, Ulvaeus and Andersson could change their mind at any moment, such was the deal Craymer had with them. “Nothing was a given and if the workshop didn't go well or rehearsals didn't go well, we had a deal they could shut it down,” she reveals. “It was quite stressful, but I had nothing to lose then.”

Craymer was so sure of her idea that she put everything she had into it. “I had a tiny flat with a big mortgage and a huge overdraft,” she says. “I sold my flat and paid off my overdraft and ran up another overdraft to get to the next stage of development. With Catherine, it was a case of: ‘Here's 500 quid and a lager and lime, can you write a treatment?’. These days you can't really do that.” She laughs again, baulking at her own nerve. ▶

JAMES GILLHAM



Cast and creatives of Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again at the world premiere in London (2018)

Along the way, the story has undergone many changes. It wasn't always going to be set on a Greek island, for example. "It was Phyllida who seriously went to Greece," Craymer says, adding that a 10-day workshop process helped refine the story.

"It was a really good workshop," Craymer explains. "A lot was learned and, even from there, there were songs that didn't make it to opening night that were in previews. We had a song at the start called Summer Night City, with people arriving for the wedding with hat boxes and caterers. Our designer, Mark Thompson, was like: 'How many more boxes?', so that was cut." Craymer laughs heartily at the memory. She's clearly serious about the show, but not so serious that she can't see the funny side in things.

"Waterloo wasn't in the curtain call in London for a year," she adds. "We only put it in for the show's run in Toronto. Initially, we only had Mamma Mia! and Dancing Queen and then when we went to Toronto we added the dads in costumes and Waterloo."

Toronto, it turns out, has a lot to answer for. It's where the musical first travelled to after playing in the West End – even before Broadway. This, Craymer says, is because the ABBA bandmates were cautious – even about the West End, let alone New York.

"They didn't want me to open in a big theatre in the West End – I think they thought it would be a small, preferably out of London show that might disappear eventually," she explains. "But then I secured the Prince Edward – 1,700 seats. They were proud and loved it, but they were cautious about Broadway as they had not had a great time doing Chess there in the 1980s."

She adds: "We went on a different route and that became a route that was incredibly successful for us and others that followed. Toronto was an exciting city for theatre and geographically was so close to New York. That was the biggest marketing exercise we did for North America – opening in Toronto after the West End, then a tour, before we set up a company to go to Broadway by 2001."

From stage to screen

The musical ran for almost 14 years on Broadway. Among the many who saw it was Streep, who sent the cast a letter following her trip to say how much she had loved it. "We all had photocopies of that letter," Craymer laughs.

But that letter was to become worth so much more to the team behind Mamma Mia!. When they began work on a film version of the stage show, released in 2008, it was Streep they thought of for Donna Sheridan.

"She was first choice," Craymer explains. "Phyllida and I were like: 'We know she liked the show so why don't we ask?' I asked her agent and he said she wanted to do it. There was a lot of screaming."

People were sceptical, however, about the idea of a film. "I remember people saying: 'How will you capture the excitement of the show or the auditorium or the feeling people get at the end?' And I said: 'We will, somehow,'" she explains.

"Musicals were not seen as big box-office draw," Craymer adds. "People were also saying: 'Meryl – are you sure?' She is an Oscar-winning actor. And Phyllida had never done a feature film before. But suddenly Meryl was in and then everyone was in. We always wanted T-shirts saying: 'We were here before Meryl!'"

But how do you audition someone like Streep to make sure they can sing? The answer is, you don't.

'When we opened Mamma Mia!, I got calls from music managers saying they wanted to put on shows and to 'get back to me by Monday' as if over the weekend I would get one together'

"You don't audition big Hollywood actors, not for Mamma Mia! you don't," Craymer explains. "You kind of find out."

She adds: "We knew Pierce Brosnan (who played Sam Carmichael) had done this film Evelyn, where he sang. And Meryl had sung in the end credits for Postcards from the Edge, so we would send the snippets of these around and say: 'What do you think – can they hold a note?'"

As Craymer also points out, Streep would not have accepted had she not known she could do it. She laughs: "Benny was more nervous than her, I think. He went to play for her in a rehearsal studio and he thought it was the greatest thing ever, and she thought it was the greatest thing to have Benny playing for her."

A second film followed – Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again – in 2018. This time, Craymer enlisted the support of another megastar – Cher. The singer played Donna's mother, Ruby. Cher had initially been part of the

discussions for the role of Tanya in the first film, but that eventually went to Christine Baranski. "But I have always loved her," Craymer says. "Then of course there was the irony that she was going to be playing Meryl's mother and there is only three years age difference."

She adds: "I think when Meryl first read the script, she thought she was playing Donna and her mother, and we were like: 'No, we are getting Cher to play your mother.'"

Those of us with deep knowledge of the first film, may recall that Donna alludes to her mother being dead. I ask Craymer how they managed to get around that one. She reflects, and reflects some more.

"Yeah, erm, yes," she says, before adding: "Well we just hope people don't have such good memories." And she laughs.

"But we never really know what happened with Donna's mother and we don't know who her father was and when we started Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again, we open with her mother not turning up for her graduation and that bled into the Cher character," she continues.

So is there a third film in the works? Absolutely there is.

"There is a trilogy there," Craymer says. "I think we have not finished where we left off. Little did Catherine know when she wrote the original script that we could continue mining those characters. Do we ever find out what happened between Donna and her mother? We can go back and forth again."

Craymer is also planning another film – a biopic about Cher herself. It will tell the story of her life, but is absolutely not a musical.

"It's at the stage of being written, rewritten, changed and developed," Craymer reveals. "It won't be a musical, it will be a real biopic – nothing like [existing musical] The Cher Show. And that was one of the reasons [we're doing it]. Cher felt it never was right. Not that she didn't love the way it was done, but with this movie she wants the story really told."

As for musicals, it's not entirely clear whether Craymer is likely to do another one. After Mamma Mia!, she worked with Jennifer Saunders on a Spice Girls musical, Viva Forever!, which ran for only six months in the West End from December 2012.

Compared to the mega-hit that is Mamma Mia!, the show was a disappointing failure. Why does she think it didn't take off? "I think it was great, but it was unfairly beaten up," she suggests. "I don't know why. I think there was probably slight prejudice towards the Spice Girls. Maybe prejudice towards me – not prejudice, but..." She doesn't finish that sentence.

Celebrating 25 years of *Mamma Mia!*:
Mazz Murray stars as Donna Sheridan
in the London production at the Novello



She ponders on it, and continues: “Everything can always be better – I think it’s very difficult, whatever you do, putting on a show. That music is still out there and in the DNA of generations and there are generations interested in the Spice Girls. I love the Spice Girls, their music and them as women. They have shown themselves, with their ups and downs, as inspirational. It wasn’t a big story, but I think it was fun.”

Would she revive it? “A lot of people loved it,” she says. “I am so hands-on with all I do, so I don’t know.”

Okay then, would she do another musical, full stop? “I am interested,” she says. “I think I would love to do another show as there is nothing as exciting as putting on a show, really. But with *Mamma Mia!*, we may go to Broadway again and there’s another film and the TV series we’ve just done. And it all comes from this office. It’s not a department and I can say: ‘Let’s just put Viva into development’, I don’t know what the future is. Busy, always.”

From the big screen to the small one

The TV series Craymer refers to is the recent ITV talent show, *Mamma Mia! I Have a Dream*, in which hopefuls competed for the chance to win the lead roles of Sky and Sophie in the West End.

“I thought it was a great thing to do for our 25th year,” she says. “A producer’s job, once you have produced something, is about marketing. I have been hesitant [in the past] and we have been asked in the past to do a TV series. I think those TV talent shows done years ago with Andrew Lloyd Webber were great, but life has changed since then. They were auditioning for shows that had not been put on or revivals.”

She adds: “So to cast for a show that was already running and putting in new talent that possibly had no experience was a risk. But I feel we have given first-timers jobs, which I have been thrilled about, and so it seemed like the right time to do it.” All the contestants went through what she calls a “musical theatre boot camp”.

‘People don’t understand the role [of being a producer]. There is no job really, you create the job – you have to have the project, finance it and run for years with it. It’s not even a start-up’

“Even if they didn’t win the role, they learned so much,” she says. “They grew as young talent. The challenge of the TV show was that we were not just looking for people who could sing on the night, they had to do a show.” In the end, the leading roles went to Stevie Doc and Tobias Turley.

Then, of course, there was the small matter of negotiating with the current West End cast about how they would be being joined by two TV talent show winners.

“It had to be handled delicately,” Craymer admits. “It was part of 25 years and coming back from a very difficult time, post-pandemic lockdowns. But it was a way actually of shining the spotlight on the West End – for the whole of the West End. I think it was helpful to do. And Skys and Sophies don’t often stay another year as they have other things or are getting older, unlike the Donnas... Everyone embraced it.”

Everything Craymer does is through her company, Littlestar, which she runs with Ulvaeus and Andersson as partners, along with Richard East. It was formed in 1996 to produce *Mamma Mia!*.

“It was set up to be the vehicle for *Mamma Mia!*,” Craymer explains. “Now we have a brand and a show and a small industry that has been going 25 years. But back then it was a vehicle to put a musical on – in the traditional sense of employing people and raising the money. Now, we have Littlestar Inc and Littlestar Films. They are all here – in this office. Littlestar became the owner entity – but it had no big business plan back then.”

Craymer also reflects on the role of a producer. “People don’t understand the role [of being a producer],” she explains. “There is no job really, you create the job – you have to have the project, finance it and run for years with it. It’s not even a start-up. I think it’s the same with independent films. You have to run with something, you have to have a good script, a good budget and have everything in place. In theatre, back then, there were no jobs unless you worked for one of the big organisations, but they were minimal.”

Craymer also thinks it would be a lot harder to create something like *Mamma Mia!* had she not had the connection with ABBA through Chess.

“It is difficult now to suddenly say: ‘I want to do a Bruce Springsteen musical’ and then just say: ‘I will go and get Bruce to be a partner in a company,’” she says. “I think as Björn and Benny had known me from before, there was a trust and a relationship. Imagine dealing with superstars now – lawyers and accountants would be all over it. I was still using the lawyers they knew from the Chess days.”

Not that people don’t approach her to put on musicals based on existing catalogues.

“When we opened *Mamma Mia!*, I got calls from various music managers saying they wanted to put on shows and to ‘get back to me by Monday’ as if over the weekend I would get one together.”

She laughs at the idea. “I think that is why *Mamma Mia!* has been so carefully nurtured. It all looks so easy, but it’s not just ‘throw on some popular songs’. It has a lot to answer for – mostly good things.”

The show has just extended again in the West End, and looks likely to be around for some time yet. Certainly longer than Craymer initially imagined.

“I never expected this or have taken anything for granted,” she says. “The idea in 1999 was for it to go on and do okay and it would be amazing if it recouped its investment and the investors were happy. I didn’t think it would be this successful, although it was very exiting when it opened and people loved it.”

She adds: “It all seems to have gone so fast, but I can’t imagine the West End without it.”

***Mamma Mia!* is currently running at the Novello Theatre in London’s West End. More details at: novellotheatrelondon.info**