

Money, money, money

She's the driving force behind the musical that plays to packed houses across continents every night of the week. Malika Brown catches up with Woman of the year, Judy Craymer, to talk showbiz.

Shining like the sun. Feeling like a number one. This is how – in Abba's words not hers – I find Judy Craymer in her Soho office. And with good reason. We meet on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the UK production of *Mamma Mia!* the musical based on Abba songs, of which she was and continues to be the inventor, producer, and the main driving force. The show is running simultaneously in a record 11 productions globally, 18,000 people see the show around the world every night, and the *Money, Money, Money* it attracts is truly amazing. The show takes \$8 million per week in tickets, and the London show alone has already grossed over £100 million.

The show's anniversary on 6 April coincided with the 30th anniversary of Abba's victory at the Eurovision Song Contest with *Waterloo*. A secret party was planned in Soho where the Greek taverna of the show would be recreated, and even a band reunion was rumoured. "The anniversary feels almost as stressful as putting on the show in the first place!" laughs Craymer. A petite, chic and instantly likeable blonde, she is sitting below a framed black T-shirt that commemorates her Woman of the Year award in 2002 for the international success of *Mamma Mia!*

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The show is set on a Greek island, where a young couple are preparing for their wedding. The bride's mother, an ex-rock chick who owns a taverna, has never told her daughter the true identity of her father. The daughter invites three possible fathers to her wedding without her mother knowing, and, with a lot of singing and dancing, the tale unfolds.

"It took 10 years for the idea to make it to the stage", explains Craymer. "I was always convinced there was a story to be told. I already knew Benny and Björn [Andersson and Ulvaeus, two out of four members of Abba] from 1982 when I did *Chess* with them. The songs lend themselves to comedy. I remember Björn falling off his chair when we listened to the song *Honey, Honey* together. He said 'This was never meant to be funny!'"

The team behind *Mamma Mia!* is all female. Phyllida Lloyd is the director, Catherine Johnson is the script writer, and Judy Craymer produces, so is it a coincidence that the main characters are three middle-aged women? "Those three roles are great. It's a very rare role in musicals. Me, Phyllida and Catherine joke that we are those three women, but the female thing wasn't intentional. Björn and Benny love working with women, and Björn writes great songs for girls."

So how difficult was it to convince Sweden's greatest export since the Volvo to do a musical based on their songs? "We had to convince the record company and the publisher as well. That came from passion and persistence. Back in 1995, Björn said it could work as long as we had a good story."

FIVE things I wish I'd known before I started:

1. Follow your instincts – then you can only blame yourself when it all goes wrong.
2. Enjoy every minute of the experience, including the stress (and there's a lot).
3. Sleep on planes, travel light and talk your way into any airport lounge in the world.
4. How successful the show would be, though I'd probably have said, "Don't be ridiculous!"
5. Swedish.

"In the beginning we had a real white knuckle ride," continues Judy. "Toronto was the first place we took the show. It was just the right time. We didn't want to go straight to Broadway because there the stakes are very high. The idea was to do six months in Toronto and then take it into the US. But it was doing so well that we created another company and both went on tour and stayed in Toronto. Word of mouth is the greatest tool we have. But we had to move it to Vancouver when SARS hit Toronto because no one was travelling to Toronto. That's part of the serendipity of the whole thing – we had to make that decision. Then we moved back to Toronto eight weeks later."

"We opened on Broadway a month after September 11th and it was therapy for the cast. People said to me 'you shouldn't have a party' but others said 'you must have a party. If you cancel the party, the restaurant, caterers, limo companies, etc. will all go out of business.' So we had a party. Colin Powell has been to see the show twice, and so has Rudy Giuliani."

"In London we have a huge repeat audience. Businessmen love *Mamma Mia!* but women are usually the ticket buyers. We have serious career women who have been to see it 16 times! Everyone comes back; people who've seen it abroad come to London and want to see the flagship show. The London show is sold out most of the time. We were even full after 9/11 when tourists were scarce."

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As someone who is normally allergic to musicals and not a particularly big Abba fan, I must admit I wasn't really looking forward to seeing *Mamma Mia!* But it's enormous fun. When you're in the theatre, the enthusiasm is contagious and it's hard to imagine anyone coming out in a bad mood. The audience that night were a mix of tourists, girls on a night out and couples of all ages. They were feeling very generous with their laughter, and by the end, the thigh-tapping and singing along had turned into dancing in the aisles.

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"We have a huge Scandinavian audience," says Craymer. "They come for the Friday afternoon to see *Mamma Mia!* and then go to a football match the next day. The night before England played Sweden, we had 600 members of the Swedish Football Club and Benny in the audience. The entire England rugby team has been twice (before they won!), so it's not a girls-only show by any means."

"We've flattened all the barriers. So the US doesn't do irony or know Abba that well? They do now! In Korea they have subtitles in English but it's actually performed in Korean. We could have performed it in English in Holland and Sweden but it wouldn't have run as long, so we're translating those shows too."

"The exciting thing about theatre is that everything is always an emergency. It's a 24-hour job because the show is on all around the world. I travel a lot and have seen every production. But that's the fun part, 60 or 70 per cent of the producer's time is spent on marketing. We've spent £8 million on marketing in the UK alone. You have to sell eight shows a week in each country. You only need to have two foggy nights or train strikes for that week for it to be a disaster – Theatre is very fragile."

So where does the super-trouper see herself five years from now?
 "I'll probably be panicking about the party arrangements for the 10th anniversary!" jokes Craymer. "A move into China would be amazing and ground-breaking. Korea was incredible – monks adore the show! They haven't got a big tradition of musical theatre there but they're hopefully going to build a dedicated *Mamma Mia!* theatre to house it."

"There will inevitably be a movie of the musical, and it will be great, but I think there's a future for the show for at least the next five years. And I still see myself managing the juggernaut that it's become. It's very difficult to let go of something that has monopolised your life for so long. It's still a lot of joy though. I love being called up from Korea with a mobile phone held up to the audience so I can hear their reaction."