



Dancing queen

Cameron Mackintosh is the king of the West End musical, but Judy Craymer – producer of the hit Abba musical, *Mamma Mia!* – shows all the signs of becoming its queen Picture by Wolfgang Mustain

Even the most stolid critics of *Mamma Mia!* have had difficulty containing their enthusiasm. The stars of the show are household names, and the fortunes of librettist Catherine Johnson have become the source of much tabloid speculation. Yet virtually nothing is known about Judy Craymer, the blonde producer whose idea it was to put Abba's hits on the musical stage.

Before we met, Craymer had suggested that I see *Mamma Mia!* on a Monday or Tuesday evening; on Fridays and Saturdays, the audience apparently refuses to leave. "We have a real problem getting them out after the end of *Dancing Queen*," says Craymer. "The cast is changed and out the door, and the audience is still in the theatre clapping."

On a low-key Tuesday, however, the crowd was a mixture of tourists, Essex housewives, and rather hip-looking men in black turtlenecks who looked as though they had mistaken *Mamma Mia!* for *Rent*.

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blockbusters
By Helen Kirwan-Taylor

The show opens with a pretty girl, the actress Lisa Stokke, singing an Abba tune which everyone but me recognised (I never was much of an Abba fan). The story has nothing whatsoever to do with Sweden, Eurovision Song Contests, or blue eye-shadow. *Mamma Mia!* is *Ab Fab*-meets-*Shirley Valentine*: a single mother finding love at 40 on a Greek island. The rest is a rather camp weaving of Abba songs, whose every first line elicits applause.

The setting is a taverna on a small Greek island, where Donna, the mother played by Siobhan McCarthy, is about to marry off her 20-year-old daughter, Sophie. The plot revolves around Sophie's desire to find her biological father. She invites three men who figured in her mother's youthful sex life (facts gleaned from stealing her diary), and sets about discovering which one is her true father.

Judy Craymer looks soft and cuddly, but her manner can best be described as a mixture of Bette Midler's frankness and Anna Wintour's hauteur. I wouldn't want to be the one messing up my lines in rehearsal. Still, she's a girl's girl. Ten minutes into the interview, we were discussing the late John Kennedy Jr's alleged marital spats, and, suddenly, she's all gossip and giggles. I can see how Donna's line, "I have to clean out my handbag", at the most emotional moment in the musical, was lifted from Craymer – in Craymer's case, though, the bag would be Gucci or Prada. It's little wonder that Johnson based aspects of Tanya – a hard-drinking, thrice-married blonde character – on Craymer. Tanya's marital words of wisdom addressed to Sophie ("Get yourself a good lawyer") were also probably Craymer's.

Craymer's Jewish father was a lawyer, and she was meant to be one, too, "but I didn't think it was for me. Little did I know that I would end up with a desk full of contracts. And lawyers always get paid first."

Her success is still new enough to joke about. "I used not to be able to get a table at the Ivy," she quips, "now I don't have the time to go." The week after *Mamma Mia!* opened, the box office took an average of £250,000 per day. The latest booking

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period produced a record figure for the Prince Edward Theatre – £520,000 in one day. One American fan paid a tour £100 to watch the show twice on the same day.

Mamma Mia! has grossed £15m in advance sales since it opened on April 6, and there is the prospect of a Hollywood movie. "This is a real story based on real people rather than on epic novels, like most musicals," she says, explaining Hollywood's interest. But she's cautious: "In the film world, the money doesn't go to those who created the film. I know that, no matter how successful a film is, it rarely makes as much money as a successful musical. Even if it's \$500m, a musical playing in 10 countries in 10 years will make far more." She's not saying how much of that £15m is hers to play with. "But she doesn't have to put bills behind the teapot anymore," says Johnson.

Craymer was born in London in 1957. "I must start lying about my age," she adds, seconds after admitting it. Her passions were horses and the theatre. "At 18, I discovered horses had to go."

After graduating from the Guildhall School of Music, she was a stage manager before joining the original London production of *Cats*. "For me, *Cats* was a great training ground for commercial theatre because it was the most inventive show of its time. It was also the beginning of how shows were marketed outside the UK. Musicals were starting to become a real business."

In 1984, she became the managing director of Three Knights, a company formed by Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvåus and Sir Tim Rice which went on to produce *Cheers* – at the time, one of the most expensive musicals ever made, and a crash course for Craymer in the art of bookkeeping: "*Cheers* in 1986 cost £4m to produce. "Twelve years later, I'm doing a £3m show."

She then moved into TV, produced the film of *Neville's Island*, and worked for Rowan Atkinson's Tiger Aspects Productions, until finally she formed Little Star Services with Andersson and Ulvåus to produce *Mamma Mia!*. She had originally conceived *Mamma Mia!* as a screenplay. Then she became convinced that, buried within Abba's 90-odd songs, was a musical waiting to be written. "Their songs are pure theatre," she says. "The lyrics are stories in themselves; they're about relationships."

The Abba duo weren't convinced at first. Then *Abba Gold*, a greatest hits collection, sold 14m copies as the soundtracks of two Australian movies, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*; and, crucially, Craymer met Catherine Johnson, an experienced writer with stage and TV credits, such as *Rag Doll* and *Love Hurts*. The director, Phyllida Lloyd, completed the trio.

"I hadn't met many theatrical producers," says Johnson, a rather outgoing, emotional woman. "I expected a Thelma Holt [the legendary producer]



with a cigarette holder, but I knew the moment we met that the process would be fun."

Johnson conceived the mother/daughter idea. "I thought Donna should be a single parent because I am," she admits, "and I wanted it set on an island, because when you think of Abba, you think of holidays." The rest was collaborative. "*Mamma Mia!* is really a mature feminist's riposte," Johnson says. "Abba's best songs are about experience. It's the older people who relate to those songs. All young people ever do is fall in love and break up."

But, first, Craymer had to find the "seed" money to pay for the draft of a script and legal costs. "I could have gone to the bank, but they would have said fine, here's your money – but you have to put your house up as collateral," she says. Instead, she turned to private investors. "There are people," she says, obliquely, "who enjoy business and can afford to take financial risk. For me, this was the most terrifying part. Theatre is a risky business. It all comes down to believing in the person – that's me."

Once the script was finished, Craymer called Universal Music, Abba's label. "We did everything but sing them the songs," she says. John Kennedy, chairman and CEO of Universal Music UK, liked her. "She reminded me how successful Abba had been for Universal Artists, and how well they had done internationally. I knew throughout the first meeting that if anyone could pull this off, Judy could."

Universal became a substantial investor in the £3m production; the rest was financed from within Little Star Services, which raised sponsorship from two big Swedish companies, SAS and SEB.

Then the Abba score, she found, had never been committed to paper. "No one realised quite how complex Abba's music was until they had to write it down. Many of the songs have up to 16 harmonies."

Finding a theatre proved to be the last stumbling block. "We wanted to go into a small theatre because we had small pretensions," says Craymer. "But there was nothing available." Finally, Craymer got a call from her friend, the producer Cameron Mackintosh, who offered her the Prince Edward – with a seating capacity of 1,650. "I remember thinking, 'Blimey! So big'. Cameron said, 'Yes, and at weekends you get extra balcony space!'"

She was, frankly, terrified. "We'd only ever calculated the costs for a 1,300-seat theatre. With a big theatre, costs are higher, you need more staff –

everything is raised proportionally. You cannot guarantee you will run at 100 per cent capacity, so your figures have to work so that you can still recoup at, say, 60 per cent. It's a matter of your weekly operating costs versus your weekly take." In fact, the theatre has had 100 per cent capacity since opening night.

"I think the reason *Mamma Mia!* is successful is because it is a real-life soap opera which people can relate to," says Craymer. "The songs and

their lyrics fit the mood. They're sad, but they make you feel good. Leonard Cohen is emotional, but it doesn't make you feel happy." The feel-good songs are used as jokes in the musical. "Swedes have a great sense of humour," says Craymer, stoutly.

The show is going to open in May 2001 at the Royal Alexander Theatre in Toronto, Australia and the US are scheduled for the start of 2001. For Craymer, it means having to raise the money all over again. "You go, 'Phew! Got the money', and then you have to start the marketing education all over again – that this is not the story of Abba. But word of mouth is obviously the best marketing tool you can have."

She is spending much of her time juggling calls to Toronto, New York and Australia, as well as overseeing the *Mamma Mia!* album. "You could easily end up not going to sleep at all," she says. To cope, the staff at Little Star has grown to 60 people.



"We started with one." Now one person has the full-time job of looking after the VIP seats (60 are reserved every night), just in case the show and queen of Sweden (who have seen the king twice already) should pop in at very short notice. "The irony is that you start off trying to steer a small ship, and now you realise you're running a mini-empire. No one ever said how busy it would be."

Ironically, Craymer does not see herself as a businesswoman. "Success in this business isn't about wearing starched suits," she says, "and getting up at 4.30 in the morning to be on the treadmill. This business is about passion, not figures."

"But I really never had a single moment when I didn't think it wouldn't work. And I never let a single thing get in the way. There was far, far too much at stake." **FT**

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Pictures by David Redfern, Catherine Ashmore