

Judy Craymer

Producer in focus...

Judy Craymer is the producer of *Mamma Mia!*. Next year, the show will celebrate ten years in the West End. To date, there have been 19 productions of the Abba musical, with three more in the pipeline – in Norway, France and Mexico. A film adaptation of the show, also produced by Craymer, was released this year. It has since become the highest ever grossing film at the UK box office and the highest grossing movie musical of all time worldwide

What was your first job in theatre?

Working in stage management at the Leicester Haymarket. I went straight into panto with *Mother Goose*, then *My Fair Lady* with Cameron Mackintosh. Leicester was new and happening, and it had a studio theatre with new plays. It was a great place to be, lots of great actors came up to work there. I ended up running the studio – in a stage management sense – then I went to work with the Actors Company and the Old Vic. Next, I worked with Wayne Sleep on his one-man show, then, through that connection, I landed the job working on *Cats* [Sleep was the original Mr Mistoffelees]. I'd also done the workshop for *Cats* at Symbionton for Andrew Lloyd Webber a few years earlier.

And your big break?

When I was offered a job working for Tim Rice as a production assistant in his London office. That was a real grounding, because he was dealing with publishing books, theatre, film rights, all kinds of things. It was great fun. And then, of course, another real turning point for me was working with Benny, Bjorn [Andersson and Ulvnaus from Abba] and Tim on *Chess*. It all led somewhere.

*But Benny and Bjorn were resistant to the idea of *Mamma Mia!* at first. Yes. Their caution was my driving force, so in a way that was a good thing. The length of time it took ended up being the right amount of time for the musical that it turned into. Looking back, I don't blame them.*

Why did you want to create the show?

I was just fascinated by the songs. Cameron had *Abba* songs [a children's musical using Abba songs] and



I loved that show. By this time I'd left theatre to work in film and television. I wanted to turn *Abba* into a kind of Jim Henson-esque [creator of *The Muppets*] TV show, but it didn't work out. So I was left with this unrequited love of these songs, but I still had a connection with Benny and Bjorn.

Why have you kept such close control on the various productions of the live show and now the film?
To maintain the integrity of the show. People wanted to get their hands on the *Abba* music, so I had many offers of "Why don't you bring the show here and we'll do our own version". It could have been turned

terms, you'd be lucky to get anywhere near the amount of advertising you get on a movie and what they spend. So I knew that even if the film didn't do that well, it would rub off in a positive sense on the show. But obviously it's actually been incredibly positive. We're coming up to our tenth anniversary on the show and it has an appeal with big teenage girls – that audience would have been barely born when we started. Now, it's like a new show for them. Also, the global reach of Universal Studios' distribution was really important.

Why has so much of your career been focused on one show?

The creative process is incredibly important to me. I like thinking up an idea and working it through and bringing a team together. I think you can count shows like *Mamma Mia!* on your hand and they don't come around very often, and there's always been something every year to keep it going. So, there hasn't really been time and I wasn't really set up for this when we started. I hit the ground running and built up an organisation around the show. Then the film came and the same thing happened – suddenly we were making a big Hollywood film and I hadn't increased the staff. I was concentrating on it and a lot rested on me. So I don't think there was any other way. I have turned down things and I've always been very honest to people that first and foremost for me, it's *Mamma Mia!*.

Do you think that will continue?

Maybe not so much in the future. It has gone through a fallow year cycle and I'd like a bit of a break.

What would you like to do next?

Definitely a musical, something with music. I'd look at film projects and theatre. There's nothing specific though – I haven't bought any rights. There are talks about a sequel to the film, but we'll see. We haven't discounted it. It's the kind of thing we've talked about jokingly, but if there is a way in creatively, going through the same intense process that we went through before, then why not?

Who do you think is the most influential person in UK theatre?

Michael Grandage. I'm a big fan. It's incredible the energy of what the Donmar does, especially with its additional work at the Wyndham's this year. He's a genius, really, and extraordinarily good looking as well. I would very much like to work with him.

Abigail Smith

Has there been a noticeable

improvement in box office for the live shows?

The film has helped. In theatre

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