

JUDY CRAYMER

the face Super trouper

DAVID DOWNTON



If the stages of musical theatre are replete with ludicrous hyperbole, sweet generalisations and foot-tapping *joie de vivre*, it is intriguing to know that the woman behind the world's most successful production ever — *Mamma Mia!* — is quiet, poised and tenacious. It is no surprise that Judy Craymer has netted Meryl Streep to star in the Hollywood version; Streep was her first choice, and over the past seven years Craymer has become, if not the winner who takes all, the one who gets a good slice of it.

Craymer's story is itself a simple and inspiring fable. The daughter of a lawyer and a nurse from Mill Hill, North London, she grew up with her own horse and imagined some sort of equestrian future until, at 18, she decided that she wanted to work behind the scenes in the theatre. After a stint at the

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Guildhall School of Music, she worked in stage management and at 22 she reached *Chess*, where she became Tim Rice's assistant. That was when she met Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, two members of Abba, and before long she couldn't get *Dancing Queen* out of her head.

Abba was viewed as a naff 1970s embarrassment at the time, but Craymer, aware that the songs were brilliantly constructed and had a worldwide fanbase, came up with

the idea of wrapping a musical narrative around them. Ulvaeus and Andersson couldn't see it, but they humoured her. Nothing much happened for ten years, but eventually she found a writer, Catherine Johnson, who created the upbeat, feelgood story that has since broken all box-office records. When she brought in Phyllida Lloyd, best known for directing Shakespeare and Brecht, a powerful and effective female triumvirate was in place. By the time *Mamma Mia!* opened in April 1999, Craymer had given up her job and sold her flat, but the £3 million cost of putting on the show was swiftly offset by an equivalent amount of advance bookings. There are now 11 productions on the go (German and Japanese audiences do not necessarily find the same things funny), it has been seen in more than 130 countries, and looks set to become *The Mousetrap* of the 21st century.

All this has made Craymer very rich — worth £78 million at the last tally — though her job now is not so much producing as managing a business that employs 600 people. At 48, she is known for being astute and understated, and if she has luvvie tendencies, she doesn't display them. Money, she has noted, removes anxiety, but building a constantly evolving institution such as *Mamma Mia!* creates it, so while she enjoys the proximity of her Chelsea townhouse to Harvey Nichols, she seems to lack the time for a relationship. You might call that a compromise, but it is unlikely that she sees it that way. She has always been more excited by her job than by boyfriends, she says. The rich girl's world isn't that bad after all.

PENNY WARK

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