

# The winner who took it all

**J**UDY CRAYMER fell in love with Abba the first time she heard Winner Takes It All in 1980. Many years later, after meeting Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus through her job as assistant to Tim Rice, their collaborator on the musical Chess, she set her heart on developing the Abba canon into a musical of its own, even selling her home to turn the idea into reality.

Now, on the 15th anniversary of the musical opening in the West End, Mamma Mia! has been seen by more than 54million people in 39 productions in 14 languages. It went on to become the highest grossing musical film, with one in four British households said to own a copy of the DVD.

Now that producer Judy is worth an estimated £90million as a result of Mamma Mia!'s astronomical global success, the winner truly has taken it all. From selling her home to pay off a big overdraft and to buy time to develop the project, Judy now owns homes in London and Los Angeles. Hiding a hangover behind big black sunglasses, she arrives at her chic, all-white Mayfair office in Chanel jacket, vertiginous heels and so many gold bracelets that at times they drown out her softly spoken voice.

As she pours herself coffee from an enormous cafetiere, she chats about the previous night's Stonewall charity auction event where Clare Balding, Sue Perkins and Mary Portas were leading the bidding. One of the best things about the wealth that she has accrued from Mamma Mia!, Judy says, is the freedom to bid generously at this sort of event.

She has come a long way from being Tim Rice's assistant. "One of my first jobs was picking up Björn from the airport," she says. Over the next few years, they got to know each other well and Judy, who once hoped to become a professional showjumper, would go to Henley to ride Björn's horses.

In the late Eighties, Judy suggested to Benny and Björn that she use their catalogue of songs to make either a musical, a film or a TV series. They were politely encouraging, suggesting she come up with a script and, by 1995, she was collaborating with a range of writers. She finally joined forces with playwright Catherine Johnson, who had never written a musical before, and Phyllida Lloyd, who had never directed one, just as Judy had never produced one.

The holiday wedding storyline was Judy's idea, "to represent the feelgood factor of those songs", while Catherine came up with the premise of Sophie uncovering her father's identity.

"I had nothing to lose but I had everything to lose at the same time," says Judy. "Benny and Björn always had the right to pull Mamma Mia! if it didn't work and that was the driving force for me. I remember before the show opened, signing the first deal with Universal Music which was a major investor. There was this fear that if the show did not work or Benny and Björn thought it was not going to work that I would have to pay it



**ABBA FAN:** Judy Craymer approached Benny Andersson in the Eighties, resulting in the stage show and later the film starring Meryl Streep

back." Industry support was lukewarm.

"People would say: 'Are you sure? Abba? They're not really in.' I don't know if I would have the nerve now. I really believed in it and I had no alternative but there was always this fear of it all coming crashing in. I never had a doubt that it was a big risk."

Mamma Mia! opened at the Prince Edward Theatre in London in 1999, booked for a six-month run. However, the musical had taken an advance of £2million before it even opened. Judy was too much of a novice to know how impressive that was. "I'd say, 'Oh, so we'll be OK then?'"

The following year, the musical opened in Toronto then went on tour in the US. Next came Australia. Finally, in 2001, it opened on Broadway.

As the Mamma Mia! juggernaut kept on rolling around the globe, it took over Judy's life. "You need to be there to oversee things, make sure tickets are going on sale in the right way, publicity, marketing. I was permanently worrying about something, that is the producer's life, you can never quite let go."

Still the brand had not reached its zenith. In 2008, Mamma Mia! the movie opened. It was the number one musical in history in 44 countries and became the highest grossing the UK box office had

had. Judy cites her greatest achievement as enlisting Meryl Streep to play Donna, although she admits: "It wasn't difficult because she loved the idea. She was amazing to work with, amazingly ambitious for all of us."

One of the highlights of making the film was a cast party while the team were filming on Skopelos. Judy's assistant had to import a piano because, as Judy puts it: "We knew that if there was a piano then Benny would play it," so the cast and crew could let their hair down.

"It was amazing. We just had a big singalong with Meryl and Pierce and Colin and Stellan, everyone was screaming at the top of their voices, it was hilarious, like a big Abba karaoke."

"I remember Meryl saying a few weeks before we finished shooting: 'I've finished my songs'. There was a real sadness. The music really did put everyone in a good mood."

However this landmark anniversary of Mamma Mia! is tinged with sadness for Judy, who was devastated by the expensive and high-profile failure of her latest project Viva Forever, a musical based on the Spice Girls' music. It closed after just six months, losing £5million.

As Judy talked me through the colourful memorabilia decorating her shelves, from an Abba matryoshka doll to mini Mamma Mia! cars, she admitted, "There's less Spice now." So why did Viva

Forever fall so far short of Mamma Mia's success? There is a long silence and Judy stares at her feet.

"We are in a slightly different world of celebrity," she offers, eventually. "Also people used to buy tickets further in advance, crucial for musicals which survive on advance sales." She believes people are now more likely to look for last-minute bargains online. However she also concedes: "I suppose the music wasn't like Abba's music," which is something of an understatement.

Would she go back and do anything differently? "There are always things I could have done differently. I blame myself for various aspects. It was meant to be a wink at that world of celebrity culture, reality shows, family... maybe it was too early. With the Spice Girls, they've earned their place in our history of pop culture and that landscape in the Nineties. They have become iconic in that sense. But maybe it should have been in five years' time. I hope it gets revisited. There have been shows in the past that did not open well and are now revered as the greatest revival."

**I**T DIDN'T quite get right [sic]. You think, 'Did we open too close to Christmas?' or 'If only Victoria had smiled more [at the premiere]'. It was meant to be the coming together [of the Spice Girls], a jolly experience."

It is clear that the flop has hit Judy hard. "I felt a big responsibility to them [Spice Girls]. You have to move on. I got back under the Mamma Mia! blanket."

Fortunately, Judy has another exciting reason to be cheerful: she is in talks with Benny and Björn about collaborating on another musical. She refuses to divulge any details and insists it will be some years before any plans come to fruition but this is still thrilling news for those millions of Abba fans around the globe. Mamma Mia, here we go again!

● Mamma Mia! is at The Novello Theatre, London: 0844 482 5115/mamma-mia.com

## SUPER TROUPERS ABBA MADE SO MUCH MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

● Benny bet £100 on Abba winning the Eurovision Song Contest because he thought it was a good omen that the fire extinguishers in his hotel were called Waterloo.

● Abba shared their name with

one of Sweden's largest seafood companies, which was only too happy about it.

● Benny and Björn appeared in the Mamma Mia! film; Benny as a piano-playing fisherman and Björn as a Greek god.

● The English lyrics to Abba's song Ring Ring were written by Neil Sedaka and Phil Cody.

● For a few years in the Seventies, Abba were second only to Volvo as Sweden's largest export money-maker.

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