

Judy Craymer, the creator and producer of *Mamma Mia!*, is not easy to get hold of. This may come as no surprise, knowing that Judy has produced 49 productions of the show that have played in more than 440 cities around the world. For her contribution to the music industry, she was included in the 2007 Queen's Birthday Honours List and received an MBE. Judy divides her time between London and the countryside because she is a passionate horse show jumping fan. "A bit like Benny," she says, "except it's a different kind of 'race'." When I caught Judy on the phone, she was at the annual *Cheltenham Festival*. "That's why it's so difficult to get hold of me, but here I am!" she started our telephone conversation, bubbling with enthusiasm.

What was it like to experience the ABBA reunion in Stockholm at *Mamma Mia! The Party* in January?

Well, I have been fortunate enough, privileged enough even, to witness a few reunions. It's always incredibly special. Although I didn't know they were all going to be attending *The Party*, it was very exciting. When all four are there, it's a big happening; it's part of history, really. Other occasions were when we opened *Mamma Mia!* in Stockholm [2005] and then, of course, the 2008 premiere of *Mamma Mia! The Movie*.

But you're not directly involved in this *Mamma Mia! The Party* project?

No, though I am - in the sense of legacy and the DNA of *Mamma Mia!*, if you see what I mean. The musical *Mamma Mia!* has always been about people enjoying themselves. To see people celebrating at *Mamma Mia! The Party* was very exciting. I have every confidence that Björn makes sure everything is perfect and very special. He cares enormously about ABBA, and *Mamma Mia!*

What will be your next step with *Mamma Mia!*? Is there still a possibility of a sequel?

Oh, I don't know yet. We're always talking about the possibilities, and then other things distract us. I'm still working 100% on all of the shows. Right now we've just celebrated 17 years in London, we've got a number of productions to do, and we started a UK Tour for the first time in March. I'm always busy, but always thinking and considering. So yes, we've discussed doing another film, in

some shape or form, but there's nothing to announce or talk about. But then, we said that about the first one as well. It took almost ten years to mount the first one because I was waiting for the right moment and the right team of people, and it worked out in the best possible way.

What did ABBA's music mean to you before *Mamma Mia!*? How important were they for you?

They were always important to me in the '70s. I watched *Eurovision* and all the things that people did and danced to their music, but I had no idea it would take me on, what has turned out to be, such a whirlwind journey. I so loved their music, but it wasn't really until I met Björn and Benny in 1982 that I 'restudied' all the ABBA songs. I fell in love with them again because I had met the guys that wrote them! Coincidentally, my first job for Tim Rice was to go and pick up Björn from the airport.

When you re-visited the ABBA songs, what did you find out?

I was following a path of musical theatre, and then Björn and Benny started working on *Chess* in musical theatre. I could already see how the ABBA songs were also perfect musical theatre material.

In your opinion, what do you find most attractive about their songs?

What first appealed to me, when we began creating *Mamma Mia!*, was the sense that there's two generations of ABBA songs that take you through their journey - the younger, 'poppy' songs which they wrote at the beginning of the ABBA period, and then there are the more emotional songs, and the big power ballads, dramas like *The Winner Takes It All* and *Knowing Me, Knowing You*. I would say *Dancing Queen* is one of the most brilliant songs ever, but I would also say *The Winner Takes It All* is a ballad that musically and lyrically is a landscape of emotions.

Does this particular song hold a special place in your heart?

The Winner Takes It All was my inspiration for *Mamma Mia!*. It is the song that I felt was intended for an actress to sing on stage, at the end of a show, but back then I didn't know what that show would be. But I knew that those lyrics mapped a roller coaster of emotions about a break-up - the song sung by a woman, Agnetha, that expresses being

rejected, maybe betrayed even. I developed a curious interest in what she was saying. I wanted to understand. Of course, the song became the core of *Mamma Mia!* It leads up to Donna's relationship with Sam. I find it very remarkable that, however sad the song is and whatever emotion it stirs up, it still transmits this feel-good factor (*laughs*). It takes you to an emotional high. While it explores the lower emotions, it ends with this climactic high. Musically it's genius...

Could you give an example of when Björn and Benny added some personal touches to the end result of the musical *Mamma Mia!*?

We all share *Mamma Mia!* together. Björn and Benny are always there and the quality of the show is of paramount importance to them. But the involvement was experimental. I always lived with the anxiety that if it didn't work, they wouldn't allow the show to use the ABBA song material. I always felt I had to get it right, but they were very kindhearted, very helpful. The challenge was working to recreate those songs for the stage. To Martin Koch, who did the orchestration, both Benny and Björn were very helpful in dissecting the songs, explaining where the choruses came from, like in *Super Trouper*. To recreate the ABBA sound, of which the voices were an important part, we had to have a backing chorus on stage. When the cast are not on stage, they're still singing in vocal booths backstage. Björn was often present at the early rehearsals. To get the "Sup-p-per Troup-p-per" (*sings*) in the chorus of *Super Trouper* right for example, Björn would literally help coach the cast in the musical sessions.

What about Benny's involvement?

At the beginning, Benny was very much involved with the band. The musicians who were in the orchestra pit had to audition for Björn and Benny, and this was particularly close to Benny's heart. When we closed on Broadway last September, most musicians had been with the show for all of the 14 years! In London, some of the musicians have been with the show since the beginning as well. They all have such respect for ABBA's music. Benny also produced the film's soundtrack, of course [with involvement by Björn]. One forgets ABBA were groundbreaking in the studio during their time. That was the genius of ABBA. Technically, they were great producers. Björn and Benny were constantly working in the studio, day and night, layering Agnetha's and Frida's voices. When it came to the film's soundtrack, this time, they had the tools of new technology at their



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disposal, a field where huge advancements have been made compared to 1974.

Are Frida and Agnetha in any way involved, giving advice or commenting on the show?

They're not involved in the same way as Björn and Benny. They've always been interested in the show. Frida travelled to see some of the openings and has always been very supportive. I remember when Frida came to the Las Vegas opening, she absolutely loved it. What I always love when I see both of them in the audience - Agnetha in Stockholm when we opened with the Swedish production and Frida at various productions - is that they can't help themselves, they are singing along! They may not be singing out, but you can see them happily mouthing the lyrics. They're very proud of the show now, but I know they were very wary at the beginning.

And you always got it right, making the best choices, but who is your all-time favourite Donna?

Oh, I cannot possibly...! Yeah, it would be just as difficult as saying who your favourite member of ABBA is. I think they're all fantastic.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH

A more complete interview can be found in Stany's new book *We Love ABBA*.