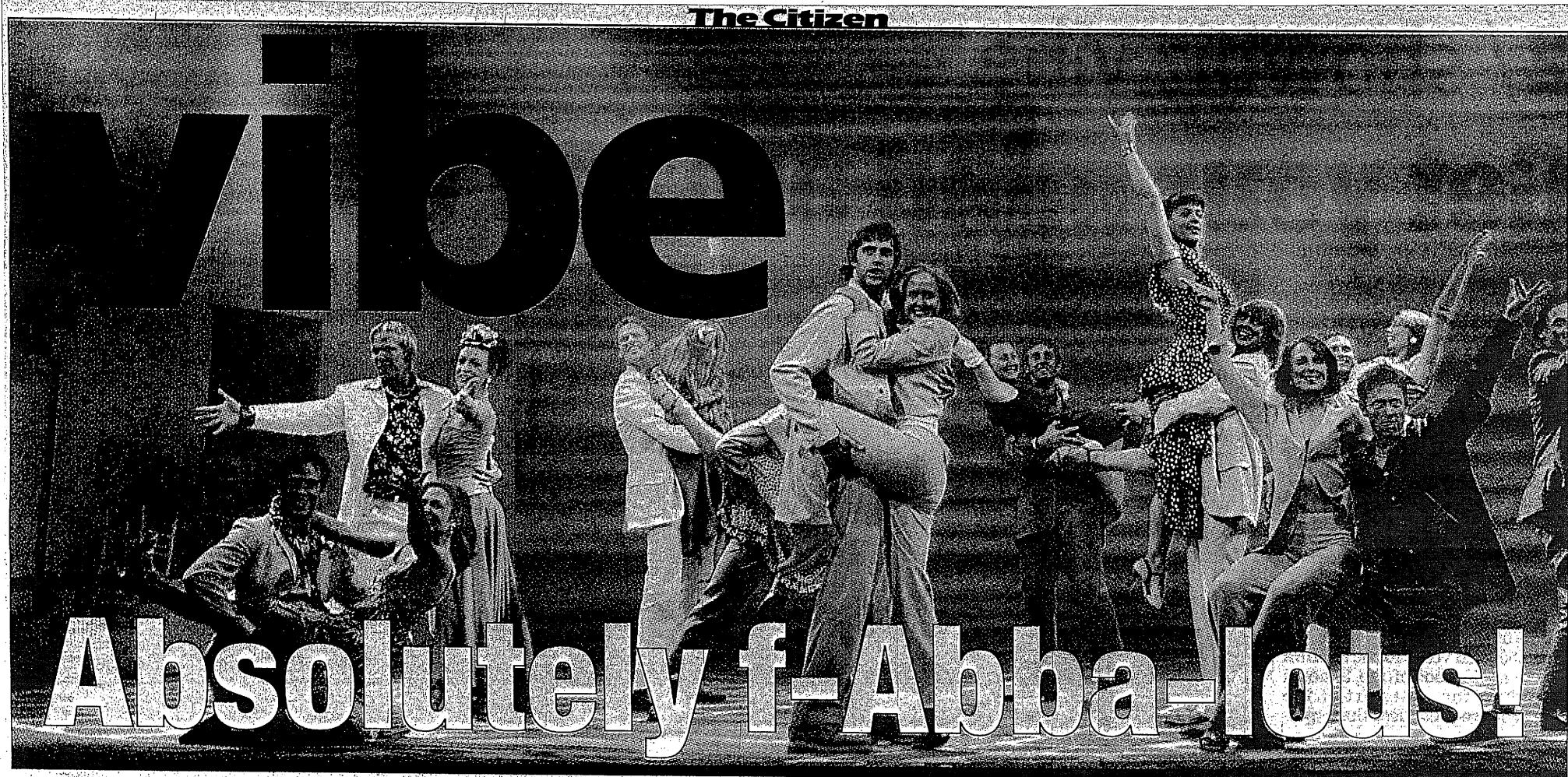


The Citizen



THE billion-dollar-grossing musical *Mamma Mia!* is heading to South Africa this month. CHRISTINA KENNEDY dons her flares and chats to producer Judy Craymer

CHANCES are that right now, somewhere in the world, an Abba song is playing. Although the Swedish supergroup split up 23 years ago, there has recently been a global Abba revival – spearheaded by the hit West End musical *Mamma Mia!*

This feel-good musical, based on the songs of Abba, is officially the world's number one show and was described as having the potential to "put Prozac out of business". It will premiere in Johannesburg at the Sandton Convention Centre on February 15, before heading to Cape Town and Durban.

So why has this show enjoyed such mammoth success? After all, aren't there more than enough other "retro" or "nostalgia" musicals doing the rounds? The aspect that sets this one apart, it seems, lies in the combination of plot and music. Audiences are no longer satisfied with the slim pickings offered by ordinary tribute shows: they want originality.

Mamma Mia! writer Catherine Johnson was inspired by the story-telling magic inherent in Abba's songs, and used them as the glue to hold together what has been described as a "sunny, funny tale of family and friendship on a tiny Greek island". It tells of a daughter's quest to find her father on the eve of her wedding.

Vibe recently chatted to *Mamma Mia!* producer Judy Craymer, who initiated the project. The first seeds were sown 22 years ago, when she was working for Tim Rice, who was collaborating with Abba songwriters Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvæus on the musical *Chess*.

SONGS OF LOVE AND LOSS

It struck Craymer that apart from Abba's hits being among the best pop songs ever written, several were very theatrical as well. "*The Winner Takes it All*," first suggested to me the potential of an original musical using Benny and Björn's classic compositions," she recalls. "The lyrics tell a roller-coaster story of love and loss."

After several years – having listened "endlessly" to Abba songs – she eventually persuaded the initially sceptical Benny and Björn to back a musical, given the right writer and the right script.

Johnson was commissioned to pen the story, her brief being that "the lyrics could not change, the story should be a contemporary, ironic, romantic comedy and that if she listened carefully to Abba's songs, she would notice how they fell into two different generations – the slightly younger, playful songs like *Honey Honey* and *Dancing Queen*, and the more mature, emotional songs such as *The Winner*

Takes It All and *Knowing Me, Knowing You*. The idea of a cross-generational love story was devised."

As Benny and Björn had not written their songs down, it was up to musical director Martin Koch to carefully listen to the old Abba recordings and painstakingly extract and reconstruct the sounds for the musicians in the pit.

Mamma Mia! opened on London's West End on April 6, 1999 – the anniversary, to the day, of Abba winning the Eurovision Song Contest with *Waterloo* 25 years before. It proved a good omen: the show has snowballed into a global phenomenon, and exhibits no sign of slowing down.

UNPRETENTIOUS FUN

So what was the magic ingredient in *Mamma Mia!*'s success? "I think there's something in the melodies and choruses that's addictive," reflects Craymer. "And the way in which they've been reinvented for the stage means that it's not just a show for Abba fans. It's not just about the songs: it's compelling and not pretentious... like watching a romantic comedy."

What is remarkable is the number of young people flocking to see the show. "There is a whole generation discovering Abba," Craymer says, "especially younger people who were definitely not around when Abba were in their heyday. Whether you're eight, 16 or 30 years old, somewhere in life an Abba song will strike a chord with you."

She acknowledges that while *Mamma Mia!* has been hailed for its feel-good, witty plot, "the star of the show is still the music".

It was initially assumed that Abba were not as well-known in

the US as they were in Europe – but there are now three productions running in the States alone!

The English-language international touring production that is coming to South Africa is arriving fresh from a run in Edinburgh. The show we will see is a replica of the West End and Broadway production.

A JUGGERNAUT

Looking back on *Mamma Mia!*'s success, Craymer still seems a bit shell-shocked by it all. "I had no idea it would go on to run in 14 countries, or turn into an industry. Five years ago, we didn't think it would run for very long. I had humble and modest expectations. I put my focus and passion into it, and put all my eggs in one basket – I left my job. I really wanted it to happen." And boy, did it happen!

The show has been translated into six other languages such as German and Japanese, which has meant that Abba's songs have to be translated as well – because, as Craymer points out, "part of the fun and surprise of the show is hearing the song in the context of the story". This month sees the long-awaited opening of *Mamma Mia!* in Sweden, Abba's home country. Björn has undertaken the daunting task of translating it for his countryfolk.

Björn acknowledges that the songs are now "half-Abba, half-*Mamma Mia!*". Sadly, he has firmly ruled out the idea of an Abba reunion performance.

So this means that the musical *Mamma Mia!*, endorsed by Benny and Björn themselves, is the closest you'll ever get to seeing Abba. Judging by its rapturous re-



PRODUCER Judy Craymer.

ception worldwide, you're likely to emerge from the theatre saying, "Thank You For the Music".

● *Mamma Mia!* is being brought to SA by Big Concerts, in support of Unite Against Hunger. It runs at the Sandton Convention Centre from February 15 to 27. Book at Computicket.

Mamma Mia! trivia

■ *Mamma Mia!* has already been seen by over 20 million people worldwide.

■ With 11 productions touring the globe (and three new ones opening), it has more productions playing simultaneously around the world than any other musical at the moment.

■ *Mamma Mia!* is seen by over 18 000 people every night.

■ Having grossed over \$1bn (R6bn) in its five years of existence, it generates \$8m (R48m) a week in ticket sales.

■ The international touring production that's heading to SA includes 60 cast members; over 60 cubic metres of props and equipment; 90 sections of custom-built flooring panels weighing over 2.5 tons; 220 metres of trussing; more than 50 motors; 320 lighting units; 22 rails of costumes; 3.5 tons of make-up and 250 pairs of shoes.

