

“People said Mamma Mia! would never be on Broadway, would never be a film”

Judy Craymer

Producer of the hit Abba musical and films

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Twenty years ago, the curtain went up on Mamma Mia!, the stage show that spawned two hit movies and proved to the world that Meryl Streep could sing (and Pierce Brosnan could not). The show's creator, Judy Craymer, risked everything including the roof over her head to make it happen. The gamble paid off. It's been seen by 60m people worldwide, has grossed more than \$2bn and is still going strong. It's in the top five longest-running musicals in West End history.

In the early 1980s, Craymer was working as an assistant to Tim Rice on the musical Chess, for which Abba's Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson had written the music. She spent many years trying to convince anyone who would listen that Abba's own songs had all the drama, the loss, the love, the tragedy and the triumph of a hit musical. She saw it. No one else did.

"There was no master plan," Craymer, 61, says with a smile as we settle in for lunch (Swedish herring, in deference to Abba). "People always said it will never play Broadway, that there will never be a film, but it ran on Broadway for 14 years. It became its own little industry. Well, a big industry."

She remembers when she first met Ulvaeus and Andersson. "One of my first jobs was to collect Bjorn from the airport," she says. "That's when I fell in love with the songs. But they'd moved away from Abba. They were doing something else. I'd worked on several musicals — Cats, Rocky Horror, My Fair Lady — all quite traditional. And there's the thing with musicals, we often get the story right but not the music, or the music right but not the story."

After Chess, she stayed in touch with Andersson, who had moved to nearby Henley-on-Thames.

"Somehow, I or his wife, Lena, had persuaded him to buy a horse, so I'd drive to Henley, ride the horse and stay with the family," she says. Her idea for the musical "was always in the background". Eventually she shared

her vision, and asked the British playwright Catherine Johnson to write the story.

Craymer had long imagined the song The Winner Takes It All as the emotional core of the show. "On Broadway, they call it the '11 o'clock number,'" she explains. "I call it the Don't Cry for Me Argentina moment, because every musical has the big end ballad and that song had the power. It has the high emotional drama. Bjorn had written those lyrics for Agnetha and Frida, and they were very much a look inside a woman's head. I've always felt that Abba songs have a female consciousness running through them."

That song was also to prove one of the most memorable moments in the 2008 film adaptation. "When Meryl Streep's character sings that song to Pierce Brosnan before her daughter's wedding, Pierce said the hairs on the back of his neck went up."

She says it was surprisingly easy to get Streep on board. "Early on, we decided we weren't going to be casting a 35-year-old," she says, reminding me that it's still perfectly normal in Hollywood for 55-year-old men to play the romantic lead opposite women half their age. "This character is a real woman with history and substance. I had seen Meryl in New York doing [the Brecht play] Mother Courage, and I saw something in her portraying this woman with a tough life. So I went to Meryl's agent, slightly under the radar because at the time the studio had to approve casting, and they were, 'Shouldn't we go for the younger generation?'"

With Craymer and Johnson as producer and writer, and Phyllida Lloyd directing, the film was a female triumvirate. "It was unusual at the time, although I think it's no longer so unusual," says Craymer a little too optimistically — this year's best director nominations at the Oscars and Golden Globes were once again made up entirely of men.

Johnson and Lloyd were absent for last year's sequel, Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again. "We'd all moved ➤



ALEX LAKE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

PHOTOGRAPH
ALEX LAKE



I HAVE A DREAM
Right: Craymer
(second from left)
with the cast of
Mamma Mia! Here
We Go Again,
including Cher and
Meryl Streep.
Above: the West End
musical. Below:
Streep as Donna in
the 2008 film

into different areas of our lives,” Craymer explains. “I talked to both of them about doing another film, but it never worked, which is a shame because it would have been great to keep the family together.”

Instead, “the lead singer found another band”, she says. “I phoned Richard Curtis [who shares the writing credits with the film’s director, Ol Parker]. It needed someone who could distance themselves... I don’t think anyone would have been brave enough to kill off Meryl if they were on the inside track.”

The second film weaves from past to present. Streep’s character, Donna, has died and only appears in flashbacks. This time, the star quality is brought by Cher, who plays Streep’s mother, Ruby.

What a coup, I exclaim. “To have two of the biggest legends that are only a few years apart in age play mother and daughter — I think Meryl found it hilarious and so did Cher. And Cher had always liked Mamma Mia! — I heard she went to see it on Broadway.”

In fact, they had approached Cher for the first film to play the role of Tanya, Donna’s best friend. At the time, Craymer was a little sad it didn’t work out, but now agrees Cher took a much better part as the grandmother. “She loves singing Fernando and she got to choose Andy Garcia.”

Really? She cast her own love interest? Craymer nods. “We had a list and she definitely had approval and was very pleased with him. We’ve never had a problem with casting, really. Pierce, all you had to say to him was ‘Abba, Greek island and Meryl Streep’ and he was in. Andy Garcia heard ‘duet and Cher’. It’s empowering, Cher as the grandmother who gets Andy Garcia.”

Craymer says Cher made all the decisions about what her character wore. “Cher’s look in the movie is more fairy godmother than grandmother. The platinum wig, the sequins, the make-up were all her decisions. It took her character to a whole other level. Cher’s great concern was that she didn’t want to be seen as a bad mother. No one says her character is bad, just not very hands on.”

Cher was so inspired by her Mamma Mia! experience that she recorded an album of Abba cover versions called *Dancing Queen*. Now she and Craymer have become good friends, with the producer visiting the star in California. I can’t help but wonder if the purple ostrich jacket she’s wearing today might even have been inspired by the singer.

“Great friendships have been formed on the back of this movie. In the film world, you make friends, but you may not see them all the time.”

It was 10 years between the first and second films. Fans on social media are already demanding a third movie. There’s still plenty of Abba songs to be rediscovered, but as of yet it’s not been signed off.

“Even Pierce said, ‘We can’t leave it another 10 years,’” she laughs.

There have been various men in Craymer’s life, but these days she has eyes only for her grey stallion, Hector. She lives in London, has an apartment in New York and keeps her horses in Warwickshire.



“I’ve always had horses. I’ve got nine now. As a teen I worked as a groom, but when I was 22 I started my career in theatre. Now the horses have come back.”

She rolls with some big international riders, including the Rio 2016 Olympic gold medallist Nick Skelton.

“I was one of the first people to buy a racehorse from his son Dan, and now I have four National Hunt racehorses. I love seeing them. I’m always tempted to ride them, but it would be a risk. I became fascinated by the racing world. It’s the psychology of the training.”

She bought Hector to get back into riding, taking up dressage as a safer option than the showjumping she favoured in her youth. “But in my first year of having him [in 2016], he bucked me off and I broke many bones down my right side. He thought he was being playful with me. Stallions are like men. Also, I’ve learnt never to wear perfume around him. It frightens him. Anyway, I’m under his thumb.”

A permanent man doesn’t seem to feature in her vision of the future. “Men are the coolest people, but we don’t necessarily want to live with them. That definitely applies to me.”

Of course, it would be easy to think that everything she turns her hand to is vastly successful, but *Viva Forever!*, the 2012 Spice Girls musical written by Jennifer Saunders and produced by Craymer, had a very short run. “It was a rough time for me,” she admits.

Did she know at the time the show wasn’t going to be one of her big successes? “No, you try your best. In the beginning I had a certain level of naivety that got me through. I believed there was something there. Obviously the Spice Girls had a huge fan base, but it wasn’t the story of them. It was another mother and daughter story, really.”

Craymer doesn’t have children. I wonder if there is something about her relationship with her own mother that she is keen to explore through the shows she makes.

“No, I loved my mum very much. She passed in 2002. I was probably closer to my dad. She didn’t see the films, but she’d have been there for every show and my dad as well.” In fact, it was Johnson, a single mother, who came up with the mother-daughter theme for *Mamma Mia!*.

While we’re at lunch the nominations for the Golden Globes come in. The *Mamma Mia!* sequel is not on the shortlist. She pauses, wondering what to think about it. “I’m sad for Lily James [who plays the young Donna]. I wanted her to get a nomination,” she eventually says. “Actually, I’m fine. It means I don’t have to worry about going to the event and not winning.”

And who knows, there might still be a next time ■

Mamma Mia! celebrates its 20th year.
 For tickets, visit mamma-mia.com



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