

TV & MOVIES

# Thank You for the Music: An Oral History of *Mamma Mia!*

BY KEATON BELL

September 12, 2023



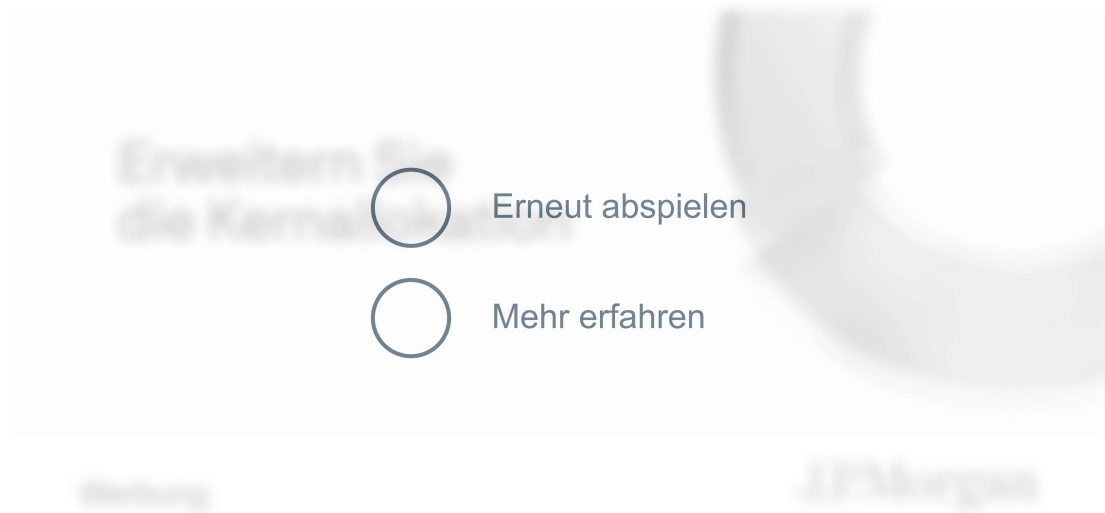
Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

SAVE

When Meryl Streep arrived in Tokyo for the Japanese premiere of *Mamma Mia!*, she was alerted that there may be a surprise guest in the audience. Empress Michiko, the first commoner to marry into the Japanese Imperial family, is revered across that country for her peerless grace and elegance. She is also, apparently, a pretty big *Mamma Mia!* fan; the stage musical premiered in Japan in 2002, becoming the same sensation with audiences there that it had everywhere else. With a film adaptation starring Streep about to hit theaters, the empress, then 74, expressed interest in attending the premiere as a guest of honor.

“We weren’t allowed to know if she was gonna be there,” Streep recently told *Vogue*. “But if she did come, we were all instructed not to talk or look at her as a sign of respect.”

WERBUNG







Meryl Streep waves to journalists at a press conference in Tokyo to promote *Mamma Mia!* Photo: Getty Images

Yet when Streep turned up to Roppongi Hills for the premiere, not only was the empress in attendance, but she was seated right next to Streep for the screening, with her personal security detail—a group of 80-ish men in matching suits and ties—surrounding them. Even the greatest actor of all time couldn't hide her discomfort when the lights went down and the film began: Streep fidgeted in her seat throughout



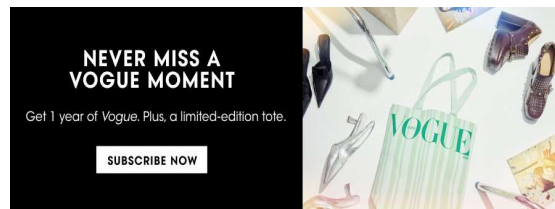
the opening number, in which her onscreen daughter parses the details of her mother's raucous sex life.

"Amanda [Seyfried] is running through the woods, saying, 'I read my mom's diary and she slept with a ton of guys so I have three possible dads!' and I'm absolutely mortified," Streep recalls. "Then the empress leans over, cups her hand next to my ear, and goes, '*Very naughty!*' She's dying laughing, and I'm just sitting there thinking, *Wow, this film really is universal...*"



Streep greets Empress Michiko at the Japanese premiere of *Mamma Mia!* Photo: Getty Images

The brainchild of English theater producer Judy Craymer, *Mamma Mia!* tells the story of a single mother running a crumbling hotel in Greece; her spirited daughter who's about to get married; and the girl's three possible fathers, who pay them a visit. Perhaps more critically, the musical tells that story through the glorious melodies of ABBA, the Swedish pop group made up of Agnetha Fältskog, Bjorn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, and Anni-Frid Lyngstad. Since its premiere in the West End in 1999, more than 65 million people have seen *Mamma Mia!* in the 50 or so countries where it's been performed, raking in over \$4 billion in revenue.



The film adaptation was another triumph. Fifteen years ago this summer, *Mamma Mia! The Movie* danced and jived its way into theaters, led by Streep, Seyfried, and a stacked supporting cast—Pierce Brosnan! Colin Firth! *The* Christine Baranski!—and turning the title *Mamma Mia!* into a shorthand for “campy feel-good escapism.” While Streep and her cohorts didn’t exactly expect Oscar nominations for putting on spandex bodysuits and belting out “Waterloo,” they all consider the film a personal highlight in their illustrious careers.

### Mamma Mia! - Official® Trailer [HD]



“It was just a deliriously happy shoot,” Streep says. “We were all sweaty, hoarse, and exhausted by the end of every day, and it was an absolute dream. I don’t ever remember not having the time of my life.”

To celebrate the film’s anniversary, *Vogue* spoke to members of the cast and crew about the odds-defying success of *Mamma Mia!* on the stage, adapting it for the screen, casting the A-list ensemble, day-drinking in Greece, those infamous party photos, and much more.

---

## *“I THOUGHT ABBA WAS DEAD”*

*The story of Mamma Mia! begins with Judy Craymer. The London-born producer began her theatrical career in 1982, when she became a production assistant to Tim Rice, the lyricist famed for his collaborations with Andrew Lloyd Webber (Evita, Jesus Christ Superstar). At the time, he was in the middle of developing a new musical called Chess with Andersson and Ulvaeus. A lifelong ABBA fan, Craymer eventually came on to the show as an executive producer, and got to know the men well enough to pitch an idea she had.*

**Judy Craymer, producer:** I just felt like ABBA’s songs told a story. They weren’t overly abstract and had a sense of life in the everyday—I’ve wanted to sing “The Winner Takes It All” to every ex-boyfriend I ever had. Long before I had a plot, I knew that song would be the explosive, 11 o’clock ballad that sends audiences into ecstasy every night.

**Björn Ulvaeus, ABBA co-founder:** When Judy became a TV producer later, in the ’80s, she came to us with an idea to make a TV special loosely based around ABBA songs. That never really came together, but the idea of doing something with ABBA’s music never quite died. Judy was incredibly persistent.

**Judy Craymer:** Benny and Bjorn took a lot of convincing. They didn’t see themselves as pop stars anymore and had moved on from ABBA. When the band broke up, they never thought anybody would listen to those songs again.





The members of ABBA—Benny Andersson, Anni-Frid Lyngstad, Agnetha Fältskog, and Björn Ulvæus—after winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974. Photo: Getty Images

**Björn Ulvæus:** I thought the radio might play our music every now and then—perhaps in connection with Eurovision or other disco hits from the '70s. But I thought ABBA was dead. Maybe not into oblivion, but forgotten, like so many other groups of that era. ABBA was frowned upon so much in the '80s that it was almost uncomfortable.

*Despite being one of the most reliable hitmakers of the '70s, ABBA's spandex outfits and sentimental lyrics seemed horrifically passé by the dawn of the MTV era. With the rise of punk and new wave in the early '80s, ABBA spent most of the decade written off by music's gatekeepers: Village Voice critic Robert Christgau once infamously wrote of the band, "We have met the enemy and they are them." Things began to shift in 1992, when Polydor released ABBA Gold, a 19-song collection of the group's most shimmery hits. It was an immediate bestseller, ushering in a reappraisal of ABBA in the culture that was only buoyed by the success of films like Muriel's Wedding and Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.*



**Benny Andersson, ABBA co-founder:** We thought ABBA would never be heard from again when we disbanded in 1982. But then someone in Australia wanted to make a movie called *Muriel's Wedding* using ABBA's music, and we just slowly started to reappear in the culture. Erasure went number-one on the British Hit Parade with an EP covering some of our songs [1992's *Abba-esque*], and *ABBA Gold* was continuing to sell really well, so when Judy approached us again we were a little more open-minded.



**Judy Craymer:** Benny and Bjorn hardly thought [*ABBA Gold*] would be a success, and it has rarely left the album charts since its release. They still needed some convincing, but did ultimately take an interest around 1995. The radio stations were still playing ABBA, and their kids were growing up and becoming interested in their work. The guys finally said, “If you can find the right story, let’s talk.”

**Catherine Johnson, writer:** I got a call from my agent saying, “Would you like to meet the theater producer Judy Craymer? She wants to talk to you about writing a musical centered around the music of ABBA.” We both just laughed. I had a nice career writing these darkly comedic plays about contemporary life for fringe theaters, so an ABBA musical was not in my career trajectory at all.

**Judy Craymer:** Everything was very under-the-radar. I was very unknown and I didn’t have any money, so it’s not like I was going to all the famous writers and directors. I could pay Catherine’s train fare from Bristol with just enough left over for us to have a sandwich and a lager at lunch.

---

## “WHAT IF... THERE ARE THREE POSSIBLE DADS?”

*Unlike Craymer, Johnson had never been much of an ABBA fan. She worked at a record shop at the height of their success, selling endless copies of “Dancing Queen,” but she preferred the scuzzier sounds of two-tone bands like Madness and The Specials. An early play that she wrote for the Old Vic, Too Much Too Young, even wove songs from those groups and more into the plot. Less a full-blown musical than a play sprinkled with music, it gave Craymer confidence that the budding playwright could make something out of ABBA’s catalog.*

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** Around the early '90s, I saw a very tired production of *Grease* with my kids in London. It was a musical for the whole family, with a lot of uplifting songs that everybody in the audience knew, so I thought it might be nice to do something like that. Then Judy came back to Benny and myself with an idea from Catherine Johnson.

**Catherine Johnson:** At our first meeting, Judy talked about wanting to make a story about two generations because of the way ABBA’s songs are set up. There’s the earlier, more youthful songs about falling in love, like “Honey, Honey,” and then the later ones about falling out of love, and we didn’t want those to be one couple. Judy always knew “The Winner Takes It All” was gonna be the showstopper, and so we thought that could be the mother’s big number when she confronts her long-lost love. I’m also a single parent of two children, so I knew I wanted to write about a single mother and her daughter.

## ABBA - The Winner Takes It All (1980)



**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** Something that struck Catherine and Judy was that ABBA's earlier songs, like "Honey, Honey," sound much younger and teenage-oriented, versus later songs, like "Slipping Through My Fingers," that are more mature. That's only natural, because ABBA matured as a group. We became more sophisticated and tried to emulate The Beatles as far as daring to take another creative step with each album.

**Catherine Johnson:** I still had not come up with that key idea that would take me to the next stage. I knew Judy and I had chemistry, but I had to catch my train, so I thought that meeting was probably it for me. No sooner had I thought that, than the creative muse of desperate writers descended upon me and I said, "What if the daughter is getting married but she doesn't know who her dad is—and there are *three* possible dads?" Judy just looked at me and said, "Sit back down."

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** Benny and I really responded to the idea of making a musical about two generations of women. Catherine and I hit it off immediately, and I thought, if anyone could pull this off, it was her. I loved the sense of black humor in her prior work as a dramatist. Once she started working on it, I was involved from the word *go*.

**Judy Craymer:** I still had a day job as a television producer, so this was something I did for the love of it. I really don't think anyone else had the same ambitions as Catherine and I. There were plenty of people who would say, "Are you sure you wanna make a musical of ABBA songs? Aren't they only played in gay bars?" And I was like, "Well, yes! And what's wrong with that?!"

*As the book took shape and Craymer looked for investors, she began to fill out the creative team. Phyllida Lloyd is revered in the British theater world for her work directing everything from little-known plays to Shakespeare to classical operas. Craymer reached out on a whim. She had no reason to believe Lloyd would have any interest in directing a jukebox musical in the West End, and yet...*

**Phyllida Lloyd, director:** *Mamma Mia!* really came out of left field. I never thought I would direct a commercial musical, but not because I didn't think it would be a terrific thing to do. I just felt the stakes were too high in that space. But I had one of those incredible meetings with Judy and Catherine where we just really clicked. We were all very much girls of a certain age who shared an immediate sense of humor.

**Judy Craymer:** I had assumed Phyllida was about 95 because she was so well-known as this big-time opera director. It wasn't until I met her that I realized we were the same age—and she was, thankfully, interested.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** At the time I was working on Wagner's *Ring* cycle, which is all about identity and parental loss: who am I, who's my father, et cetera. When I started working on *Mamma Mia!*, people often said to me, "Wow you've really crossed over to the dark side of commercial theater..." And I would have to explain that it was all still business as usual. I was gonna approach *Mamma Mia!* with the same precision and passion and dramaturgical forensic ambition as if it were Wagner.

**Catherine Johnson:** I wanted to create a musical that felt like a play and had a real core to it, partially because I didn't know much about musical theater. I love older musicals like *Carousel*, but I didn't see many musicals in the '80s and '90s, so I wasn't very up-to-speed. But it became clear early on that the mother-daughter relationship was the heart of the show.

---

## "I WAS READY TO PULL THE PLUG"

*Mamma Mia! is framed around Donna, a single mother who runs a dilapidated hotel on the fictional Greek island of Kalokairi. In the midst of preparing for her wedding, Donna's spirited daughter, Sophie, invites three men from her mother's*

*past who could all potentially be the father she's been searching for. With Donna's girlhood friends—the feisty Rosie and eternally horny Tanya—also in the mix, that was enough of a story for Johnson to flesh out character motivations using the songs from ABBA's eight studio albums (a hundred or so songs) as a guide.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I don't know if Catherine has ever quite been given credit for the very classical framework underpinning all the fun. The genius of *Mamma Mia!* is that it's essentially *A Midsummer's Night Dream*—a group of lost souls coming to a magical Grecian paradise where romance and madness ensues.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** Our original working title was *Summer Night City*, but the “city” always felt wrong once we decided it should be set on an island. We took out a globe and looked at every possible country before we settled on Greece. And because none of the other songs in the musical really worked as a title, we always went back to *Mamma Mia!*—even though it's Italian.

Abba - Mamma Mia (Official Music Video)



**Catherine Johnson:** It was like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Phyllida said she wanted it to feel as if Benny and Bjorn had written these songs specifically for our show. When I really dove into their music, I realized that they wrote lyrics the way I wrote plays. Their songs all read like extremely open and vulnerable conversations. Just look at “The Winner Takes It All”: *But tell me, does she kiss like I used to kiss you? Does it feel the same, when she calls your name?*



**Phyllida Lloyd:** I think people underestimate how tricky it is to assemble a jukebox musical. You can't just take an iconic band's catalog and bang a story out. Not all songs are structured in a way where one person is trying to express something to another. But because Benny and Bjorn were writing these ebullient pop songs about their lives, they were essentially writing soliloquies about the passage of time, falling in love, getting married, having children, the sense of loss when your children grow up, and then the fracturing of those relationships. Their music has history and pain and characters.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** A lot of these songs are very well-known, so I thought it was an interesting experiment to see if a musical could be done backwards. It's no fun to change lyrics to accommodate everything since the whole point was to see where the songs could take you. There had to be rules.

Abba - Chiquitita (Official Music Video)



**Catherine Johnson:** We tried to stay very purist about not changing any lyrics, but we cheated sometimes. With “Chiquitita,” there were some lines that just didn't relate to anything happening to the characters. Bjorn valiantly stepped in and said, “I know I said no lyric changes, but that only applies to you—I'm gonna do it!” And so he changed “In your eyes there is no hope for tomorrow” to “And the wedding is tomorrow.”

**Benny Andersson:** Catherine, Phyllida, and Judy came over to Stockholm with the finished text, and I couldn't understand if it was any good or bad. We had the option to put a lid on the musical if we didn't like it after doing a workshop. So I went to see a

workshop, and I *still* didn't know if it was any good. It's impossible to say, but I certainly enjoyed the music.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** I was ready to pull the plug had I felt at any point during the process that this wasn't good for ABBA or good for the songs. Thankfully, that never happened.

---

## “THE CAST WAS ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN...”



A billboard advertising *Mamma Mia!* on Old Compton Street, Soho—a famous gay district of central London. Photo: Courtesy of Getty Images

*Mamma Mia!* began previews at the Prince Edward Theatre on March 23, 1999. With a projected opening night of April 6, the company had two weeks to fine-tune the show before theater critics from across the globe descended on the West End.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** *Mamma Mia!* never felt like an automatic slam dunk. Most of the successful musicals in London at the time were old-fashioned period pieces, like *Les Misérables* or *Miss Saigon*. There wasn't really anything contemporary, where the audience saw themselves onstage.

**Judy Craymer:** *The Lion King* opened around the same time as us, so Disney was the big show in town and we were sorta the outsiders that season. Tickets were selling reasonably well, but it was our first preview that set the box office on fire.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** It's important in previews not to rest on your laurels just because the audience is on its feet cheering and clapping—which ours were from the very first night. But those of us who wanted this show to be life-changing felt like something still wasn't quite right. The cast was on the verge of a nervous breakdown because they were going onstage every night with new bits of script and choreography written on their hands.

ABBA - Summer Night City



**Catherine Johnson:** *Mamma Mia!* originally opened with “Summer Night City.” It was this big, splashy number set at Sophie’s wedding rehearsal. There were lots of chairs thrown around, every character introduced themselves—and boy, was it slow. The show always ended with an enthusiastic reception, but we kept discussing how the opening still didn’t work.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** When we originally opened with “Summer Night City,” it took a while for audiences to get the gist of it. I believe we ended up doing away with about 10 minutes from the beginning of the show.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** It was a matter of not trying to be anything we weren’t. This was ultimately an intimate story about a mother and a daughter, so we shouldn’t try and be a big blowzy extravaganza. We cut “Summer Night City” so that when the curtain went up, all you saw was a girl staring at three envelopes.

---

## “IT BROUGHT THE HOUSE DOWN”





Bjorn Ulvaeus, Catherine Johnson, and Benny Andersson at the curtain call on *Mamma Mia!*'s opening night. Photo: Getty Images



*Mamma Mia! became an immediate hit. Some critics may have stuck up their noses at an ABBA musical, but audiences were having the time of their lives. The New York Times reported that lines for unclaimed tickets would form outside the Prince Edward hours before curtain, with scalpers collecting hundreds of pounds for prime seats.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** The critics were a bit snotty, but that was to be expected. I think there's a certain assumption when it comes to jukebox musicals that you're tossing something together and cashing in. But there were so many more people who couldn't resist it. You quest for a musical in which there's a blowout song or two, and here we had one where every single number was a much-loved classic.

**Judy Craymer:** *Mamma Mia!* cost three million pounds [\$4.8 million] to produce, and if you don't recuperate your budget in the first year, it can be a sign of trouble. Our box office was suddenly taking in half a million a day, so we ended up recouping in about 27 weeks. We always said, "Wow, maybe the show will run for a few more months," and that was 25 years ago.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** It was a delight to watch crowds react to the ways we used ABBA's music. We'd have a moment like Donna running into her bedroom after seeing the three men. Something is clearly wrong and there's silence in the theater. Tanya and Rosie descend upon Donna, and the first time that Jenny Galloway [as Rosie] sang, "Chiquitita, tell me what's wr-o-o-o-ng?"—to say it brought the house down would be an understatement.



The original Donna and the Dynamos: Siobhan McCarthy (Donna), Louise Plowright (Tanya), and Jenny Galloway (Rosie) during a performance in 1999. Photo: Getty Images

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** We had offers from Broadway straight away, but it was my decision to wait, because I had such a miserable experience on *Chess*. Frank Rich gave us the worst review ever in the *New York Times* and it completely sunk the show. We had to close in three months, and it was so traumatic that I said there was no fucking way we were taking *Mamma Mia!* to Broadway until it was totally critic-proof.

**Judy Craymer:** There was always a push and pull between ABBA's caution and my ambition. Word-of-mouth spread very quickly, and so we decided to try out Broadway via an alternative route. About a year after we opened in London we opened in Toronto, and then shortly after that we put together a US tour that opened in San Francisco and went to all the big cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, et cetera. Taking that route built a sense of excitement around the show by the time we got to Broadway.

“WHY MAKE A MOVIE?”





*Mamma Mia!* is the ninth-longest running show in Broadway history, and the longest-running jukebox musical of all time. Photo: Getty Images

***Mamma Mia! opened at the Winter Garden Theater in New York City on October 18, 2001—the first new musical to open on Broadway after the 9/11 attacks. With advance ticket sales of \$27 million, it was already a highly anticipated hit, but in the aftermath of 9/11, Mamma Mia! became a beacon of joy for New York audiences. After that, it wasn't long before Hollywood came calling.***

**Judy Craymer:** I started getting calls from studios shortly before we opened on Broadway, but at that point a film was the last thing on my mind. I also knew that if we did make a film, it would have to be controlled by us the same way we oversee any *Mamma Mia!* production around the world. My plan was to build the *Mamma Mia!* brand and cement the success of the show in multiple territories so that when it came time to actually sign a contract, it was on my terms.

**Donna Langley, Chairman of NBCUniversal Studio Group & Chief Content**

**Officer:** I've been a massive ABBA fan since I was a kid, and I've loved *Mamma Mia!* since I saw it in London. I inquired about the rights when I worked at New Line Cinema and was promptly told that Judy would never sell them. When I got to Universal I inquired again, and was very happy to learn that Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman's production company [Playtone] were quite far down the road in terms of picking up the rights. They were in conversations with Judy through Tom's wife Rita, who's Greek and was very passionate about the material.

**Rita Wilson, executive producer:** Tom was filming in London and I remember reading about a musical that used ABBA's music. It had only been in performances for about three weeks, so we gathered our family and went to see it in the West End. About 20 minutes in, I had an unmistakable gut feeling that this had to be a movie. Tom and I started looking into getting the film rights the very next day.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** I know that Playtone was interested from a very early stage, but the rule in theater at that time was that you don't make a film until the show is starting to peter out. It was many years between when Playtone first contacted us and when we finally said yes.

**Gary Goetzman, producer:** Benny and Bjorn are very...Swedish in their attitudes. They always said, “Well, the musical is doing fine, so why make a movie?”

**Rita Wilson:** When the film version of *Chicago* came out, people couldn't wait to see the Broadway production and the box office jumped. That really encouraged everyone to move forward, because it showed that film adaptations could actually breathe a second wind into stage productions.



*Chicago* (2002) became the first movie musical to win the Academy Award for best picture since *Oliver!* (1968). Photo: Courtesy of Miramax

**Judy Craymer:** Universal seemed very enthused. They understood we were never gonna sell the rights and that we had to retain a sense of control. I said the only way it'll work is if Phyllida directs and Catherine writes the screenplay. We had to keep the *Mamma Mia!*-factor and retain the qualities that made the show work in the first place.

**Catherine Johnson:** Judy always said, “I'm not doing the movie without you guys,” and as much as I applauded her attitude, part of me thought she'd never get away with it. I had no experience writing a movie, and this was presumably going to have a massive budget. I thought at some point I'd get gently slid off the project, but we were



all so well-protected by Judy. One of my proudest achievements is receiving a sole writing credit for my first big Hollywood movie.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Judy got herself to a point with the studio where she made all of our participation non-negotiable. My terror was matched only by my conviction that I was the one person for the job. I understood the essence of this show and what we used to call the *Mamma Mia!*-factor. You can't quite define it, but it's a certain lack of coolness or pretension that makes the show so special.

**Judy Craymer:** Somebody told me, "You'll never be able to recreate that feeling from the theater at the cinema," and I said, "Just you fucking wait!"

*In the spring of 2006, Playtone Productions struck a deal with ABBA's Andersson and Ulvaeus in addition to Littlestar, the company headed by Craymer. With Universal Pictures onboard to finance and distribute the film, Craymer and Lloyd set about securing the rest of the creative team. Many came directly from the stage production: While Anthony Van Laast was tasked with transferring his choreography to the big screen, Andersson asked Martin Lowe, who had spent eight shows a week directing the musical's orchestra, to serve as the film's music director.*

**Anthony Van Laast, choreographer:** I didn't really have a relationship with ABBA before I worked on *Mamma Mia!* I'm not trying to sound snooty about it, but I'd never bought an ABBA album. I had two kids in school at the time, and so I honestly saw the musical as a way to pay for another term of their education.

**Martin Lowe, music director:** ABBA's self-titled album from '77 is the first album that I ever bought with my own pocket money. There was just something about the way Benny played—record labels used to publish sheet music and I had all of ABBA's, so I could learn to play just like him. Their music touched my soul in a profound way that I can't even describe, and it continues to.

**Anthony Van Laast:** Judy would bring up the movie occasionally, but it all sorta happened quite quickly. It's not common for the same creative team of a stage production to do the film—it's not like anyone from *Wicked* is involved with the movie. It's quite a rarity.

**Martin Lowe:** When the Swedish production of *Mamma Mia!* premiered in 2004, I became the music supervisor and got to know Benny well. He wanted to see how I put the show together musically, and I noticed him paying attention to the way I taught his music to the actors and fixed how it flowed with the dialogue. He knew a film was in the cards, and sure enough I got a call from Benny a few years later saying that not only was it happening, but he wanted me to be his number two in the music department.

**Benny Andersson:** Martin is someone who never gives up until he's happy. You know the music is in safe hands when you work with him. He came over to Stockholm when we did *Mamma Mia!* in Swedish, and we got along very well. I decided that if ABBA did anything in the future, we were gonna ask him to come along.

**Martin Lowe:** This was gonna be the first film I'd ever done—and I've never done one since, because it was so traumatizing. But I knew the process of making ABBA's songs sound dramaturgical, so I just threw myself into it.

---

**“WE GOT MERYL FUCKING STREEP!”**



Meryl Streep as Donna. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*The team behind Mamma Mia! always knew that if ever a movie got made, the only actor right for Donna was Meryl Streep. She was having something of a renaissance in the wake of The Devil Wears Prada, which in 2006 became the highest-grossing film of her career up to that point. Meryl was on top of the world and turning down new scripts every single day.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We were asked by Universal to prepare a list on the off chance that Meryl didn't wanna do it. It was more likely that someone like Nicole Kidman or Olivia Newton-John might say yes, because they had a prior history of singing on-screen.

**Ellen Lewis, US casting director:** We did discuss Michelle Pfeiffer, but I don't believe there were any actual conversations with her team. It never got further than an internal discussion between the filmmakers and the studio.

**Judy Craymer:** There were a lot of names on our list, but Meryl was the only person who Phyllida and I wanted. *The Devil Wears Prada* had just come out so she was having quite a moment, but I also already knew that Meryl had seen *Mamma Mia!* on Broadway and loved it.



For her performance in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Streep received her 14th Oscar nomination for best actress. Her record now totals 21 nods and three wins. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Meryl Streep, Donna Sheridan:** My little kids were all in school in New York in September of 2001, and 11 parents from their school were killed in the attacks. It was an extremely traumatic event for everyone in the city, and *Mamma Mia!* became an important piece for me and my family at the time. When I had five little girls to entertain for my daughter's birthday, I decided to take them all to see the show, and it was just the most glorious thing. People were standing on their seats and dancing in the aisles. It was fantastic, and anything that can deliver that much joy always deserves a place in the world.

**Judy Craymer:** Meryl wrote a beautiful letter to the cast of the Broadway show telling them how much she adored it. I remember it saying something like, "I wanna know what it'd be like to sing those songs onstage just to embarrass my kids!" We hung it up backstage and all took pictures with it like schoolkids.

**Priscilla John, UK casting director:** If Meryl Streep writes an emotional letter saying how much she loves your show, you wouldn't forget that when you're casting the film years later.



**Judy Craymer:** You don't ask Meryl Streep to audition. I was quite naughty and broke some rules when I called her agent without telling the studio. I didn't think anybody was really gonna object if she said yes.

**Meryl Streep:** I remember my agent calling me to discuss three offers that he thought were quite interesting. They all sounded very heavy and serious, and then at the end of the call he said, "Oh, and I almost forgot to mention—you're probably gonna laugh—but the people from *Mamma Mia!* want you. I'll let them know it's a pass." I perked up and said, "Oh, God, no, I wanna do *that!*"

**Judy Craymer:** Meryl's extremely shocked agent called me back, saying that she was interested. Phyllida and myself went to New York to meet with her, and it was maybe the most exciting day of our lives. Meryl was all in. I remember her saying, "I give 100% of my energy to everything I do, but I really wanna do something that's gonna take 150%."

**Meryl Streep:** I was in my high school musical all three years, and had sung in a few things here and there. One of the first pieces I ever performed on Broadway was a Brecht musical [1977's *Happy End*], so I have sung a lot in my career. But I know the limits of my voice, and it wouldn't normally be something that I wanna hang my hat on.

Postcards from the Edge - Meryl Streep Singing "I'm Checkin' Out"



**Judy Craymer:** We already knew she could sing from her fabulous number in *Postcards from the Edge*. But the role of Donna meant singing nine very technical songs—it meant singing “The Winner Takes It All,” for Christ’s sake! But Meryl wanted to take on a new challenge and felt so enthusiastic about the project. She’d never done a musical before and it was something she really wanted to conquer.

**Benny Andersson:** I said, “Sure, she’s the best actress in the world, but can she sing?” I listened to some songs she sang in previous movies, but there wasn’t enough there to prove she could pull off what was required of her for *Mamma Mia!* We rented a grand piano in a basement at Lincoln Center, and I remember Meryl walking up to me with a coffee and all of her sheet music. We just got straight into it, and she sang the entire score all the way through without a single wrong note. She had clearly done her homework. There was no question that Meryl was perfect for Donna.

**Judy Craymer:** Universal made a bit of a fuss because we didn’t go over their list of ideas first, to which I said, “Sorry, but there is no list—we got *Meryl fucking Streep!*”

---

## “WE SAW A LOT OF NAMES THAT YOU’D RECOGNIZE...”

*Now that the film had secured its Donna, the casting team could focus its efforts on casting the rest of the ensemble—namely, Donna’s daughter. Beginning in January of 2007, Lloyd and Lowe worked with casting directors in America and London to audition hundreds of young women for the role of Sophie. With Streep anchoring the film, they didn’t necessarily need to cast an A-lister, and their list of names ranged from complete newcomers to Oscar nominees.*

**Ellen Lewis:** There were a lot of extremely talented young women vying for this role. I heard from so many agents about how their clients were taking vocal lessons before coming in, but I don’t remember that many actual singers auditioning. It was mostly actors who also sang—as well as some who couldn’t.

**Priscilla John:** The music team insisted that whoever played Sophie had to be a soprano or a mezzo-soprano. There were a lot of girls we saw who ended up being altos, and that simply didn't work for a song like "I Have a Dream."

**Martin Lowe:** "I Have a Dream" is one of the most unforgiving songs to sing, because it sits on the worst bits of every woman's voice unless God gave you extraordinary abilities. You have to have a freaky-deaky voice to hit the note in that final, "I belie-e-e-e in angels..."

ABBA - I Have A Dream (from ABBA In Concert)



**Priscilla John:** I'm looking at my lists filled with all of the lovely people we saw... Emily Blunt passed because she had moved to Los Angeles and was doing quite well at the time—this would've been right after *The Devil Wears Prada*. We loved Michelle Dockery, and she could sing because she did all sorts of musicals in drama school. She chose to do a play at the Almeida Theatre instead. I'll tell you who else we adored—Natalie Dormer. But she was filming *The Tudors* at the time and not available.

**Ellen Lewis:** We saw a lot of theater actresses in New York—Tammy Blanchard and Celia Keenan-Bolger were both wonderful. I'm looking at my list of girls we saw in LA, and we saw a lot of names that you'd recognize... Amy Adams... Brittany Murphy... Busy Phillips... Evan Rachel Wood... Jessica Biel... Kirsten Dunst... Leighton Meester... Mandy Moore... Zooey Deschanel...

**Martin Lowe:** Hollywood is not my world. Thankfully, I didn't really know anything about those A-list girls at the time. I've subsequently looked back at my lists of people we saw and been shocked to discover some of the people that I apparently met.

The filmmakers behind *Mamma Mia!* saw a number of established stars and future A-listers for the role of Sophie.

**Priscilla John:** Gemma Arterton was a complete newbie who had just signed with an agent I knew, so I brought her in to meet Phyllida. She's a very strong soprano, but she looked nothing like Meryl. Felicity Jones was adorable but kept telling me she wasn't right for the part because she couldn't sing—even though she could.

**Ellen Lewis:** There was one young woman who auditioned who was kinda known for singing. She came in wearing this big pair of headphones around her neck, and when she started singing it was pure torture. When her agent followed up I said, "You know what, I actually think you should come to my office and watch her tape, because you're probably not gonna like what I have to say." I normally wouldn't do that because I never wanna embarrass anybody, but we were all kinda blown away by how bad this young woman was.

**Priscilla John:** One that stands out is Carey Mulligan—I'd just cast her in a film called *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* and thought she was incredible. She got quite far before we ultimately chose Amanda, who could not only sing but also looked so much like Meryl.



---

# “SHE HAD THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL”

Amanda Seyfried as Sophie. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*Amanda Seyfried had risen to fame playing a lovable ditz in Mean Girls. She managed to steal every scene in a film spilling over with breakout performances—her co-star Rachel McAdams was even in the mix for Sophie at one point. Seyfried auditioned for Mamma Mia! while filming the second season of the HBO hit Big Love, which was also produced by Hanks and Goetzman via Playtone.*

**Amanda Seyfried, Sophie Sheridan:** It’s always terrifying to act in front of a group of people and try to prove that you’re right for a role. But there is nothing in life that makes me more nervous than singing in front of people. And it’s not even that I’m consciously nervous—it’s almost like my body gets nervous. My mouth literally starts to shake.

**Martin Lowe:** Amanda was very nervous—she kept making a mistake during “The Name of the Game” and getting herself all riled up. But an audition isn’t supposed to be a memory test, so it became my job to reassure her that she was doing great and to keep going. I was trying to make sure Amanda left the audition in a good place. It’s

always easy to say no when an audition is flat-out bad, but I was there to sign off on actresses who had the chops to play Sophie, and Amanda absolutely had the chops.

**Ellen Lewis:** Amanda brought her guitar and played “I Have a Dream.” I think she struck all of us as feeling very right for Sophie almost immediately.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** There was an innocence and a sort of unadorned charm to Amanda that felt perfect for Sophie. She had the voice of an angel and this “girl next door” quality that we all fell in love with.

Seyfried (far right) earned widespread acclaim for her breakout turn in *Mean Girls* (2004). Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Amanda Seyfried:** Getting to play Meryl Streep’s daughter was too much to envision while auditioning because I already have such low expectations for myself. But it was such an easy process for me because I was so excited about the music, and then I had all of my *Big Love* co-stars cheering me on at work. Bill Paxton and Jeanne Tripplehorn were so invested in the outcome even though they knew it might mean taking me away from the show for a bit.

**Martin Lowe:** We auditioned Amanda on a particularly long day, when we saw a whole slew of those A-list girls. The cameraman didn’t speak at all that day, but after

Amanda left the room he just turned to us and said “She’s the one.” I looked at Phyllida like, *Holy fuck, did you know he can talk?*

**Amanda Seyfried:** Finding out I got Sophie was the most sparkling moment of my life up to that point—just the proudest, most exciting possible opportunity. I was only 21 and I knew it was gonna change everything.

---

## “HE WAS *SUCH* A NAUGHTY BOY”

Dominic Cooper as Sky. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

*The search for Sophie’s beau was just as thorough, with loads of future leading men up for the role of Sky. The filmmakers most adamantly pursued an up-and-comer named Dominic Cooper, who was then coming off the Broadway run of The History Boys.*

**Priscilla John:** All sorts of names came in for Sky: Sam Heughan, Sam Riley, Joe Anderson—he had just done a musical [2007’s *Across the Universe*] and his audition was fabulous. We were interested in Henry Cavill, but he was in *The Tudors* at the time

and unavailable. We went out to James McAvoy and Tom Hardy but they were both unavailable. I must say, though, that we always loved the idea of Dominic as Sky—I thought he was *such* a naughty boy.

**Dominic Cooper, Sky Ramand:** *The History Boys* had done quite well in New York, and I went off to Glasgow to make a piece for the BBC set at a POW camp [2008's *God on Trial*], which was a really difficult shoot. Then I went off to shoot another movie, called *The Escapist*, that was mostly shot in dark tunnels. I had also just come out of a very long relationship, so there I was, underground for weeks and feeling more depressed than ever, and then I got a call from my agent about *Mamma Mia!*

Cooper (fourth from the right) broke out playing an unruly schoolboy in the West End hit *The History Boys*, which later transferred to Broadway and became a film. The cast—which remained intact throughout—also included the likes of James Corden and Russell Tovey. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Priscilla John:** We really fought for Dominic, because the studio said they thought he wasn't fun enough. They saw him as a bad boy and seemed to want someone a bit more saccharine.

**Dominic Cooper:** I remember thinking not to even bother auditioning, as I thought I was never going to get it. I don't consider myself a musical theater person at all, so I was a bit skeptical. But I remember being persuaded by the lovely Priscilla to suck it up.



**Priscilla John:** He was working in Dublin so we tried to arrange something there, but it felt like his agent kept putting us off. Finally I just called Dominic and said, “What’s going on? Are we barking up the wrong tree?” He started making up excuses and whining about how he loves Phyllida and yada yada, and I just said, “Dominic, I’m not doing this for the good of my health, I’m doing this for you. Get your ass in and sing.”

**Dominic Cooper:** I worked with the guy who did the music for *The History Boys* to learn “Lay All Your Love on Me.” I really didn’t think I sounded very good, and he was even a little concerned for me going into the audition. I just remember thinking there was no hope, so I didn’t try too hard; I really tried to just be as natural as possible. Phyllida later told me that’s part of why she liked my audition.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Priscilla was practically on her knees behind the camera with Dominic, going, “You! Can! Do! This!” We’d fallen in love with these people and we wanted them more than we worried about whether they could hit the proper notes. It was about the sort of beautiful spirit that they brought to the piece.

---

“THERE’S OUR GAL”

Christine Baranski as Tanya. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*Tanya is Donna's best friend, despite being her polar opposite. An extravagantly wealthy, thrice-divorced man-eater—so, maybe not entirely different from Donna—Tanya needed a big personality to bring her charms to life. Christine Baranski was the very first actor that the filmmakers auditioned in New York, and everyone immediately agreed that she was perfect. Best known for her scene-stealing work in films ranging from Chicago to How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Baranski also had an extensive theater background.*

**Christine Baranski, Tanya Chesham-Leigh:** Movie musicals are so hard to produce that the chances of doing one are so far and few between. One doesn't even dare to wish for the opportunity, since they usually wanna cast a big movie star whose voice can be dubbed.

**Martin Lowe:** This was just a few years after *Cybill* had ended, and I was beside myself thinking, *Oh, my God, Maryann is coming in!* When we heard her sing "Does Your Mother Know," Phyllida and I just looked at each other, like, *Well, there's our gal.*

**Judy Craymer:** Finding Tanya was quite a search. I always loved Christine Baranski on *Cybill*, so I knew she had impeccable comic timing. She was on our wishlist from the

start, and the studio of course loved the idea. But they still wanted us to go through the motions of looking into every possibility.

Baranski won an Emmy playing the boozy divorcée Maryann Thorp on the hit sitcom *Cybill*. Photo: Getty Images

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We were putting forth these trios of ideas to play Donna, Tanya, and Rosie, and I think the studio might've been surprised at the age bracket we headed towards. Their reactions felt a bit like, *Well, gosh, that's a demo we hadn't considered for this...* But it was just how we saw these women.

**Ellen Lewis:** I first met Christine through Mike Nichols, when I cast her in *The Birdcage*. She'd already done so many plays and films and television in New York by that point and was just beyond fabulous. We certainly had other women on a list, but once we heard her sing, everyone immediately agreed that she'd make a perfect Tanya.

**Christine Baranski:** I had just done *Mame* on a broken kneecap. I trained like crazy because our choreographer [Warren Carlyle] really wanted a showstopping Auntie Mame. And when you have a broken leg, you have to compensate in different ways. Going down the stairs was challenging, for example, but I could do really high kicks and splits—which ended up serving me very well in *Mamma Mia!*

*To round out Donna and the Dynamos—the girlhood singing group made up of Donna, Tanya, and their other bestie, Rosie—the filmmakers set their sights on Dame Julie Walters. Best known to American audiences for her turn as Mrs. Weasley in the Harry Potter franchise, she exuded the sort of dry, wise-cracking energy that Lloyd thought worked well for the character. Dame Julie politely declined to participate in this oral history due to her commitments with Paddington 3, but the filmmakers were happy to offer up their memories of working with the legendary performer.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** It became a bit of a game in terms of chasing our favorite actors and hoping they said yes. I know Julie is rather famous in America, but here in the UK she's a national treasure. We also knew she had a very strong singing voice.

Dame Julie Walters as Rosie. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Martin Lowe:** When someone suggested Julie, I said I'd kill to work with her. I'd just seen a musical that she had done in the West End [2005's *Acorn Antiques: The Musical!*] and she was a force of nature onstage. I knew she could sing, but I wasn't sure how confident her range was.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Actors like Julie understood that balance where you could swerve from the *Looney Tunes* of it all to the unexpected poignancy of certain moments.

Practically all of the cast had theater backgrounds, so they came in with a certain amount of improvisational spirit needed for this film.

**Martin Lowe:** We offered Julie the role without asking her to audition, but she refused to accept it without singing for me. So, she came in the next day at nine o'clock on the dot to sing "Dancing Queen." I taught her the harmony—which is what she sings best—and within five minutes I knew she could do this. She just insisted that I sign off on her, which is one of the many reasons why Julie is such a god.

---

## “AM I THE GOOD-LOOKING DAD?”

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*The women of Mamma Mia! carry the bulk of the film's musical numbers: Streep had nine songs, Seyfried eight, and Baranski five. That meant there was slightly more flexibility in casting the men playing Sophie's three potential dads: Sam, a wealthy architect; Harry, a kindly London banker; and Bill, a rambunctious travel writer.*



**Judy Craymer:** Those three men had to have huge charisma, be great character actors, and be able to sing and dance—except they didn't *really* have to.

**Priscilla John:** Casting the dads wasn't like casting Sophie, who has to belt multiple big numbers. The three men only pop in and sing a bit every now and then, so it was more about how audiences would perceive those men going into *Mamma Mia!* And the answer was very clear: They are your drunk dad at karaoke, your kooky uncle who thinks he can sing.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We didn't audition any of the men. We joked about how everyone immediately started saying yes once Meryl signed on. Nobody needed to read a script or know anything about what they were gonna have to do. There was a spirit of, "If she's prepared to make a fool of herself, then I am as well."

Stellan Skarsgård as Bill. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Stellan Skarsgård, Bill Anderson:** I worked in the Royal Dramatic Theatre for 16 years, where I had singing lessons almost every week, and I had also sung a bit onstage. My voice is in pretty good shape, but my inability to hit the right notes is overwhelming. I'm not a very good singer, and I know that.

**Benny Andersson:** Phyllida said she wanted to cast Stellan in the film as the Swedish dad, but wasn't sure if he could sing. I knew Stellan a little bit, so I called him and

said, “Can you sing? Follow me: *We can go dancing, we can go walking, as long as we’re together...*”

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I was with Benny when he auditioned Stellan over the phone. He started belting “Take A Chance On Me” slightly off-key, and Benny goes “Yes, I suppose that’ll do.”

**Judy Craymer:** Stellan agreed to do it as patriotic support for Sweden. We knew Colin could sing and that he had a rather beautiful voice, but when we gave him the offer he got a bit shy.

Colin Firth as Harry. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Colin Firth, Harry Bright:** I believe my initial reaction to getting the *Mamma Mia!* offer was, “Are they out of their bloody minds?” If I felt I had the chops for a musical, I would’ve leapt at the chance to do one sooner. There are many musicals that I love, and I envy people who can sing beautifully. But as anyone who’s seen *Mamma Mia!* can understand, I don’t consider myself to be one of them.

**Martin Lowe:** Once Colin’s name came up, there was no one else we wanted for Harry. He came in to meet us and said he’d sung in a punk band when he was younger, but wasn’t sure he could pull off a full-blown musical. He hadn’t sung in ages and wasn’t doing much theater anymore, but he came around the piano and sang “Our

Last Summer” with me. I was just trying to see if he could sing in tune, which he absolutely can.

**Judy Craymer:** There was always a push-and-pull between the dance and music departments. We were constantly having conversations along the lines of “Phyllida, who can act? Martin, who can sing? Anthony, can he put one foot in front of the other?”

**Martin Lowe:** Judy rang me saying Pierce was in, and I said, “That’s cool, can he sing?” Judy said he sang in some Irish film [2002’s *Evelyn*], so I got my hands on a copy and watched the scene. He probably didn’t sing it live but it’s definitely his voice, and he sounded good!

Pierce Brosnan as Sam. Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Pierce Brosnan, Sam Carmichael:** After I got the offer for *Mamma Mia!* I took my daughter to see the show. As the lights went down she asked who I was gonna play, and I realized I forgot to ask. The adventurous travel journalist came onstage and I thought, “I could play that guy.” Then the gay dad came on and I thought, “I could play that guy, too.” And then the handsome dad came onstage, and I hoped it was him.

**Judy Craymer:** Pierce heard “ABBA,” “Meryl,” and “Greek island,” and was an immediate yes. Phyllida and I had dinner with him at the Ivy after he’d just seen the show with his gorgeous family, and the first thing he said was, “Tell me, am I the good-looking dad?”

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Colin, Pierce, and Stellan are fantastic actors, and they all came in prepared to play second fiddle to the women. None of them gave a stuff about that. They have their values straight in terms of what’s worth fussing about. But most importantly, they all had a terrific sense of humor and responded to the joy of the piece.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** I wasn't familiar with the show, so I went to see it shortly after my audition. It was very strange. It felt like a party where the entire audience was invited. It's not exactly *good*, but you feel elevated by it. You immediately become less pretentious when you see something like *Mamma Mia!*

**Colin Firth:** I had some singing lessons in my drama school days. Music has always been very important to me, and if I had the skills, I think being a musician may have been my first career choice. In many ways it was a joy just to be offered this role, but I wondered if Phyllida and her team really understood what they were getting themselves into.

**Pierce Brosnan:** A musical was the last thing I had in mind for my career, so I was completely bowled over by the offer. But I was also over the moon to get to work with Meryl. Then, of course, I realized that meant I'd have to sing.

---

## “ONCE MORE AROUND THE ISLAND, DMITRI”

*In a perfect world, Lloyd would've shot every frame of Mamma Mia! on location, as opposed to just a handful of key scenes. The reality of shooting a large-scale Hollywood musical on a tiny Greek island without the infrastructure to support hundreds of crew members was that most of the film would have to be shot on*

*practical sets—so, Donna’s entire fishing resort and various interiors were recreated at the famed Pinewood Studios outside of London.*

**Maria Djurkovic, production designer:** I’ve never worked on anything quite like *Mamma Mia!* We brought in 30 massive trees, including two olive trees imported from Italy, and cypresses to keep the vegetation alive. It was all real, so the fig trees smelt like figs and the orange trees smelt like orange blossoms. It was quite surreal, because we started the build during a particularly gray and rainy English spring, and then we would walk into this Mediterranean micro-environment.

Photo: Courtesy of Maria Djurkovic

**Phyllida Lloyd:** A lot of what actually looks like exteriors at the Villa Donna are all interiors that we filmed on these massive sets at Pinewood. It was gonna be a 16-week shoot and only four of them would be on location in Greece, so we’d really have to make the most of our time there.

**Maria Djurkovic:** The bits on the Greek islands are where I got to do some of the most fantastic things in my career. One particular memory I have is of Phyllida and I flying over the entirety of Greece. We’d just point at an island and go, “Well, that one looks nice, wanna fly down there?”



Photo: Courtesy of Maria Djurkovic

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We were given a small budget for what looked like a plastic toy helicopter. It only sat four, and the pilot—who was quite ancient—had to hold the stick rather hard to keep it up above the sea. At first I could hardly look out the window, but after a couple of days I got pretty blasé. Soon I was barking out orders like I owned the thing: “Once more around the island, Dimitri, and let’s get in low.”

**Maria Djurkovic:** It took a couple of trips for us to settle on the islands. There are islands in Greece and Turkey that are stunning but quite arid, and we needed a picture-perfect postcard.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Maria and I became very intoxicated by the barren, volcanic landscapes and rock-strewn beaches of Turkey, but at one point our line producer Mark [Huffam] said, “Isn’t this supposed to be a film about sun, sea, sand, and sex?” That slapped us out of our stupor a bit, so we got back to Skopelos, where it’s all beautiful white sand and turquoise water.

Glysteri Beach in Northern Skopelos, which would serve as the filming location for several scenes in *Mamma Mia!* Photo: Getty Images

**Maria Djurkovic:** I had a set decorator go out to Athens and shop for practical items: doors, shutters, balconies, tiles. We filled a big container and shipped it off to Pinewood so the builders could incorporate everything into the sets.

---

## “I KNEW EVERY WORD ALREADY”

*Not many in the cast would have self-identified as an ABBA fan prior to joining Mamma Mia!, but when the actors began to dig into the group’s expansive catalog, many were surprised to realize just how familiar they were with it already.*

**Meryl Streep:** I was listening more to Patti Smith and David Bowie in the ’70s—I was in a different headspace in those days. But everybody knew those songs because they were everywhere: stores, elevators, clubs. That was the days before cell phones, before everybody was everywhere, so ABBA’s omnipresence in the culture felt unusual.

**Colin Firth:** If you were a teen in the '70s, then you had no choice but to listen to ABBA—which is not a bad thing. I watched them win the Eurovision Song Contest live on TV when I was a boy, which dates me rather considerably. But I always felt like I was there from the beginning, in terms of their popularity.



**Christine Baranski:** We *all* listened to ABBA. It was the background music to a certain period of our youth. Those were my New York years where I was fresh out of Julliard, just flitting around the city. I remember walking into the old Tower Records on 72nd Street and just lazing through the store because I heard some music coming from inside that was so captivating. When I asked the clerk what record he was playing, of course it was “Dancing Queen.”

**Phyllia Lloyd:** My generation learned to tuck our ABBA records away whenever anyone came around. They weren't necessarily the coolest name to drop at a social event. But there wasn't a single person who got involved with *Mamma Mia!* who didn't know most of their songs. It was sort of a coming out for those of us who secretly owned all their albums and knew every lyric.

**Meryl Streep:** I was tangentially aware of the licks and certain melodic ear-worms. But when I saw the stage show with my daughters, of course we had to get the soundtrack and all of ABBA's music. They played those records all the time in the car or on their Walkmen, so I knew all of ABBA's songs even though I wasn't really paying attention to them.

*In most movie musicals, the cast pre-record their vocals and lip-sync to a track during the actual shoot. As such, the cast of Mamma Mia! convened at AIR Studios outside of London, with Andersson and Ulvaeus overseeing the recording sessions.*

**Priscilla John:** It was amazing to sit in the studio and watch Meryl, Christine, and Julie sing their hearts out to “Dancing Queen.” At one point Benny paused the track and said, “I have to stop, one of you is singing off-key and I *think* you know who it is. May we start again?” The girls fell over laughing because none of them knew who he was referring to. He never called anybody out, and just sorta made them figure it out themselves.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Amanda Seyfried:** I had never sung onscreen up to that point. I was considered a coloratura soprano, but I’ve always been pretty down on myself about my lack of vibrato and my middle voice not feeling solid enough at times. When *Mamma Mia!* came on my radar, I hadn’t had any training for almost four and a half years. But that didn’t matter, because ABBA’s music allowed for all types of voices to feel comfortable.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** The boys were all shipped out to pre-record our songs, and we were terrified. We were just three scared little boys standing in front of musical giants.

Thankfully Benny and Bjorn were very Swedish in their attitudes, so there was no fuss. They just talked us through the songs and made us sing.

**Pierce Brosnan:** Recording those songs was... a challenge. But also quite exhilarating.

**Colin Firth:** There was a moment where Stellan, Pierce, and I were standing around a microphone like a band recording one of those jingles in the '50s. When you're that close to someone, you can really look up into their eyes, and I could've fallen into a spiraling abyss of fear looking at either of them. Having fun can bond people, but there's nothing quite like fear.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** Benny said, "Don't worry, we can always pitch it," so that made us feel much safer. There were handshakes all around.

**Benny Andersson:** It was a piece of cake with all of the actors—including the boys. People made such a fuss about how they weren't professional singers, but there were no problems at all.

---

## “IT WAS FUCKING PARADISE”

*In May 2007, the cast and company of dancers entered five weeks of intensive rehearsals—a sort of Mamma Mia! boot camp. Baranski would be learning the choreography to “Does Your Mother Know” while Streep and Brosnan blocked “SOS,” then the entire cast would come together to learn “Voulez-Vous.” There were more than 20 musical numbers to teach the actors, as well as dozens of dancers who would be playing assorted islanders.*

**Meryl Streep:** It was a rollicking group. I remember at the first rehearsal, Anthony said, “We’re gonna have a little surprise dance demonstration and see how everybody does on their feet!” I just saw a look of pure terror strike Colin, Pierce, and Stellan. Colin was wearing a three-piece suit that was straining at the seams, so he certainly wasn’t gonna be doing any high kicks like Christine.



**Amanda Seyfried:** It was fucking paradise. These dancers were so in touch with their bodies in ways that were so inspiring to watch. Then here I come with absolutely no idea what the fuck I'm doing, even though I'm supposedly the star of the movie. I've never felt a stronger sense of imposter's syndrome, but it's weird because at the same time I also felt like I had met my people.

**Martin Lowe:** The men were definitely more nervous than anyone else on that set.

**Anthony Van Laast:** We had a hoot with the guys, but Christ. [*Laughs.*] Colin would get frustrated trying to learn a dance and go, "You just want to make me look like an ass!" and I'd say, "Colin, I promise I'm doing everything in my power to make you look great." The men don't do *much* dancing in the film, but I still had to earn their trust. They were a little prickly at the start.

**Colin Firth:** Bless Anthony for saying it was only at the start. I was always a challenge for them, but they were incredibly patient and knew this wasn't something that everybody can do. I was just on a whole other level.

**Catherine Johnson:** Watching Colin and Pierce try to dance was really humanizing. Obviously they're drop-dead gorgeous, heart-fluttering men. But when they try to do choreography....

**Pierce Brosnan:** I knew they didn't hire me for my singing and dancing abilities. They hired me for the actor that I am and the persona that I have created. I thought I could at least bring a sense of humor to that theatrical illusion.

**Christine Baranski:** The men were so humble during rehearsals. Who was gonna quibble with the fact that none of them were perfect singers or dancers? That's part of the fun! I remember Anthony saying to me, "You *cannot* get injured—you're my prima ballerina in this cast!"

**Anthony Van Laast:** By the end of rehearsals the men were having a terrific time. None of them fully nailed it, but we'd all go out and have a martini at the end of the day so all was well. Also, when you're working alongside someone like Meryl, and saw the absolute hoot she was having, it made it easier for them to relax.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** Having not done anything quite so light before, I came into *Mamma Mia!* pretty ambitious. I said I had some thoughts about my role, and I hadn't gotten more than five words out before all these women turned and looked at me with an expression of, *Oh, yeah?* It was then that I realized I shouldn't try and act, I should just be good-looking and funny.

*Dancing aside, the rehearsal time also gave Lloyd the opportunity to build a sense of camaraderie within her ensemble. Sometimes that meant doing acting exercises, but more often it meant grabbing some martinis.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Meryl obviously didn't need rehearsals in terms of the acting stuff, but she went along with it and that really helped create a sense of community. There was a genuine bond between her and Julie and Christine. They all had daughters and were in some way dealing with the very thing that *Mamma Mia!* is about, which is letting go of your children. There was a shared understanding in what Benny and Bjorn wrote about in songs like "Slipping Through My Fingers."

**Martin Lowe:** A lot of that rehearsal time was used to map out the bigger set piece choreography that everyone in the cast would be involved in, like "Voulez-Vous." But

it was also a time for Phyllida to sit down with the cast and just talk to them about their characters.

**Amanda Seyfried:** The first day I met my two girlfriends [Ashley Lilley and Rachel McDowall], we fell in love with each other. We each had a small dressing room, but there was a big one across from Christine's that wasn't being used, so we asked Judy if we could cram all of our stuff into it. That was on our second day, and then we were basically inseparable until September—we even got matching tattoos.

Seyfried, Lilley, and McDowall being directed by Lloyd. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We did some acting exercises with Amanda and her two friends. But with Meryl, Christine, and Julie, we usually just went out for a couple martinis. You don't really need to work out what a character had for breakfast with that level of actor, because they already bring an entire history to the role.

**Anthony van Laast:** *Mamma Mia!* might be considered a piece of fluff, but underneath it there is a spine, and the spine on which the story hangs is built of steel. Nothing is there for an arbitrary reason—every word and gesture was talked through in that rehearsal process.

**Meryl Streep:** I didn't know Julie at all, but I've been an enormous fan of her work since forever. Christine and I had circled each other for years. She's younger than me, as she'll always remind you—but just barely. I knew Christine a little because she was one of Mike Nichols's favorite actors. Once we connected at rehearsals, we became best friends almost immediately.

**Christine Baranski:** I still have my diary from when I was 19 years old and went backpacking. I met my girlfriend in Venice and we took a ship to Greece, and I had my very own *Mamma Mia!* adventure. Meryl and I went to lots and lots of dinners at The Ivy where we had some marvelous martinis and would share stories like that; we'd discuss what it might've been like for these young women to find each other and form a singing group at that time in their lives.

**Meryl Streep:** I had my own Donna era—I think it was between my junior and senior year in college, I took a backpacking trip through Iceland. You used to be able to fly to Europe for \$125 round-trip if you stopped in Reykjavik and bought some sweaters, so I got off there with no plans and just hitchhiked my way through Belgium. I never would've let my kids do that, so I'm shocked that my fairly conservative parents let me. I had some pretty dicey experiences...

**Catherine Johnson:** When the ladies were first rehearsing their scenes in the bedroom together, it really felt like watching three old friends reconnect. They all brought something of themselves to these characters. It was lovely to watch Meryl work with Amanda because she was so nurturing. I imagine it was quite daunting to get thrust into these big emotional scenes with Meryl, but she was so supportive without ever making a big deal of it.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Amanda Seyfried:** I went to [costume designer] Ann Roth's studio for my first fitting and Meryl was there when I showed up. The first thing she said was, "You're very big in my household because of *Mean Girls!*" I'm sure she can imagine how intimidating it would be for someone like me to play her daughter, and I believe she said that with every intention of making me feel more comfortable. She took herself off the pedestal that I created for her in one sentence, and it meant the world to me.

**Meryl Streep:** *Mean Girls* and *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* are pretty much religious texts in my house. Those are the movies that I rewatch with my girls the most to this day, so I was very familiar with little Amanda going into *Mamma Mia!* She became like another daughter to me.

---

**“THE STUDIO WAS A PUNISHING  
EXPERIENCE...”**



A portion of the Villa Donna set at Pinewood Studios. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*Production began in the summer of 2007 at Pinewood Studios. The sets were built on the same soundstage used for every James Bond film since 1977's The Spy Who Loved Me, including the ones Brosnan had recently worked on. While the filmmakers made the most of their limited time in Greece—more on that later—any scene where you don't see the ocean was shot at Pinewood during one of the grayest and gloomiest summers on record in London.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** My first day walking onto the 007 Stage, I saw about 150 men all mock-saluting each other: “Good mornin’ sir! Good mornin’ gov’na!” Then I walked through, and all the men just sorta sheepishly looked down—they didn’t even know how to greet me because clearly a lot of them had not worked for a woman director before. It was the first time I almost realized I *was* a woman director.

**Pierce Brosnan:** When I said yes to the film, I hadn’t thought about the fact that I would be shooting on the 007 Stage. I had just spent a decade walking in and out of these gates, and there I was back again for *Mamma Mia!* I went to my dressing room and when I pulled the curtains back, there was the 007 logo, painted on the soundstage right outside my window.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** In many ways the studio was a punishing experience for everybody. The biggest challenge was trying to conjure the warmth of Greece in the tin shed that we were filming in. It’s very long hours and it’s very hot under all the LED lights. It

also rained endlessly so we'd always have to stop filming because the sound team kept picking up rain on the roof.

Lloyd directing a portion of the "Dancing Queen" sequence at Pinewood Studios. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Meryl Streep:** Everyone thinks we were at this glorious Greek island, but most of *Mamma Mia!* was shot in Oxford when it was underwater. It was the absolute rainiest year in British history that summer—just the beginning of the climate mood swings that we now regard as normal.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We'd shoot half a dozen takes and Meryl would offer something different each time, even if it was as simple as the way she emphasized a word. Then she'd go, "That's about as much as I can think of. What do you want?" I would either say we got it or something like, "What you did in take two—where you had a bit more momentum and played it slightly more alarmed—can you try that but with what you did in the final take, where you did that one thing with your hands?" I'm very precise, but that's exactly what Meryl likes. She can do anything you ask of her, and she takes great pleasure in that.

**Catherine Johnson:** Phyllida would allow the actors to play. It wasn't a case of, *This is what's in the shooting script and this is what we have to do*. Julie was always saying,

“What if I did this here?” and escalated everything just a bit further.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Meryl so understands the cost of time on a set. I remember her assistant saying to the crew at Pinewood one day: “I’m gonna ask you once, I’m gonna ask you twice, I’m gonna ask you three times—are you ready? Because I’m going to call her, and when I call her... [dramatic pause] *She* will come. So by God, you better be ready.” That was quite an amazing contract between the artist and the studio floor. It was leadership by example.

**Catherine Johnson:** It was Meryl’s world, and it felt pretty great to be there.

*You may not know Ann Roth’s name, but you’re definitely familiar with her work. Across her storied career designing costumes for stage and screen, Roth has become a trusted collaborator for filmmakers ranging from Nora Ephron and Mike Nichols to Noah Baumbach and Steven Spielberg. She’s the person who put a \$19 pink wig on Natalie Portman in Closer, talked Nicole Kidman into wearing a fake latex nose as Virginia Woolf in The Hours, and whipped up Melanie Griffith’s Wall Street makeover in Working Girl. She’s also the woman Margot Robbie talks to on a bus stop bench in Barbie, directed by her “dear friend” Greta Gerwig (“I’d do anything for her”). She’s a walking piece of film history, and even though she asked*

*me not to refer to her as “91-year old legend Ann Roth” in this oral history, you can see why I’m tempted to.*

**Ann Roth, costume designer:** I got a phone call from the producer Mark [Huffam], who said: “How would you like to do a movie in Greece with your best friend Meryl?” Next thing I knew, I was sitting in the first row of the Winter Garden with Meryl watching *Mamma Mia!*, and I absolutely loved it. There were two tourists sitting next to us and they were in the aisles dancing to every song. I thought, *My God, that’s what I wanna do!*

Ann Roth won her first Oscar for her costumes in *The English Patient* (1996), and recently tied James Ivory as the oldest winner in Academy history when she won again for *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (2020).

Photo: Getty Images

**Phyllida Lloyd:** When I arrived at Pinewood at 5:30 in the morning, I used to have my driver drop me off two miles from the gate so I could run the rest of the way. When I got to our soundstage, I’d always hear rock-and-roll blasting from somewhere, and it would be Ann in the wardrobe station eating her corn flakes and sewing away.

**Ann Roth:** I was probably listening to Elvis or Fats Domino. I would get there early because I dressed every person on that set—the leads, all those Greek ladies, the kids on the beach. I handmade everything Meryl wears.

**Meryl Streep:** One thing I must say about the brilliant Ann—who has never met a bangle or a sequin that she didn’t like—is that she dressed every dancer and every extra

with the same individual care she gave all the leads. And that's why it looks like a place and they all look like people who know each other.

**Ann Roth:** When I think of *Mamma Mia!*, I think of those crowds of kids. The way I saw it, they were all European or American kids who hung out on the beaches in the very Southern tip of Spain or Croatia. Most of those kids have probably been to boarding schools somewhere in England, and they're in that time of life where everything is casual and you can just sorta bum around. Some of them carry their aunt's Vuitton bag, and some of them use an old duffle bag. Laundry is not a consideration, so they may wear a bathing suit and wrap a scarf around their waist that they got in Bali on a backpacking trip. I wanted those kids to look like they wore whatever they picked off the floor of whatever room they're shacking up in.

Roth has conjured Streep's costumes across 13 films, including *Silkwood*, *Heartburn*, *Postcards from the Edge*, and *Julie & Julia*. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Ann has a very spiritual approach to costuming. It wasn't simply a matter of choosing this or that, but talking through the character and why they might be wearing a certain garment.

**Ann Roth:** I never give clothing options—"option" is not a word in my dictionary. It's just the one. We do discuss it, but when I show them my idea, I always say, "This is

the way I see you, so give me a chance: close your eyes, get into it, and we'll spend the afternoon staring at the bear until you get it." If they don't get it, then we'll start all over again.

---

## “MY FEET WERE IN RUINS”

*Most of the cast and crew's memories of their time at Pinewood are a blur of singing and dancing under blazing hot lights. But one scene that everyone remembers shooting, for better or for worse, is “Voulez-Vous.” During Sophie's bachelorette party, things take a turn when her three dads crash the festivities and each expresses his desire to walk Sophie down the aisle. This then prompts what can only be described as an ABBA-induced panic attack.*

**Amanda Seyfried:** “Voulez-Vous” was a real motherfucker.

Mamma Mia! (2008) - Voulez-Vous Scene (6/10) | Movieclips



**Judy Craymer:** “Voulez-Vous” was very complicated to shoot. At one point Phyllida had something like 900 Post-It notes on her office door, trying to map out every shot she wanted to get. She got them all in the end, but it was quite the process.



**Phyllida Lloyd:** I did quite a bit of prep work for “Voulez-Vous” on my video camera with some of the London theater cast. That was a pretty amazing feat of handheld work, but then it came to the actual day at Pinewood, where there were six cameras and an entire company of dancers waiting for my cue.

**Amanda Seyfried:** “Voulez-Vous” was the absolute bottom of the barrel for me because it was so tedious to shoot, but the scene itself is so madcap. I’m getting pulled around and there’s a Greek circle twirling around me. I was acting, singing, and doing this incredibly difficult dance—well, difficult for me. I also wore these beat-up Converse, so my feet were in ruins.

“‘Voulez-Vous’ was tough because it was a lot of people having to do a lot of steps with a lot of repetition,” says Van Laast. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Pierce Brosnan:** Martin was helpful because he would be standing right beside the camera moving his arms to the beat and helping keep us on track.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** “Voulez-Vous” is probably the only ABBA song that I can’t bear to hear to this day. We had to listen to it every day for hours because we rehearsed for over a month and a half, and then it took a week to film. The men worked really hard to get it right, but Phyllida ended up mostly cutting around us in the end.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** That was probably the first time where I started to feel the pleasure and power of being in control. I was sitting up on the roof of the Villa Donna on one of the cranes, and I remember watching it move up over the dance floor and experiencing a wave of testosterone. I thought, *Christ this is actually good fun...*

Lloyd directing the “Voulez-Vous” sequence. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Colin Firth:** The men would often huddle between takes, trying to figure out what our alternative career options might be once the film came out.

---

**“I HAVE NEVER HAD FUN MAKING A  
MOVIE—EXCEPT FOR *MAMMA MIA!*”**

*“Voulez-Vous” aside, it was all good vibes at Pinewood. The days were long but the material was light, there were no significant production delays, and the cast got along swimmingly.*

**Meryl Streep:** Pierce had a little studio set up in his dressing room at Pinewood. When he wasn't filming he'd be dreaming up these astonishing paintings. I asked him if he always painted on set, and he said, "Oh, goodness no, I just thought it might be a nice way to pass the time." Outside was incredibly dreary, and here he was painting scenes of his life in Hawaii. It was so dear.

**Ann Roth:** Whenever I meet somebody and they ask what I do for a living and I say I'm a costume designer, they go, "Oh wow, the movie business, what fun"—I have never *not* had anybody say, "What fun." And then I have to say that I have never had fun making a movie—*except* for *Mamma Mia*! It was just a wonderful, wonderful experience.

**Colin Firth:** It's very difficult to simulate fun in a movie. It's one of the hardest things to do in terms of acting, actually. There are so many movies with terribly cringe-inducing scenes of people "having a good time" where it looks forced. Spontaneity is very hard to fake when you're doing take after take and waiting around. But the spirit of the community we were in meant the fun was real. We weren't being asked to take ourselves too seriously, so that really led to a certain freedom.

"I ripped open Pierce's shirt and he was genuinely surprised," Streeps says of the climactic scene where "Aphrodite's fountain" erupts. "Ann didn't have another shirt, so that was the shot we had to use—but nobody was mad because they got it!" Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Stellan Skarsgård:** I don't think I've ever felt more relaxed on a movie set, except with Lars von Trier—which I know sounds strange. But his films are very arthouse, to where I always felt like I could take risks, and it was the same with *Mamma Mia!* The thing you want to achieve in a film is real life, which is hard to capture and cannot be done without you feeling safe. You can be skilled and elegant, but the charm of the film is that we were all enjoying ourselves immensely.

**Amanda Seyfried:** The whole experience was so enveloped into this warm bath, where I felt like I could be appreciated for my singing and dancing even though I'm not particularly strong at either. Even though the stakes were pretty high, it didn't feel like they were.

---

**“EVERY DAY WAS LIKE LIVING OFF OF  
OUZO AND BLACK COFFEE”**

*By the time the cast and crew of Mamma Mia! packed their bags for Skopelos, they had spent more than 12 weeks dancing in a fake Grecian paradise. Now, they would actually get to feel the sand between their toes and squint at the beaming sun while the cameras rolled. The shooting schedule would be a bit cramped to make the most of the production's time in Greece—a little under five weeks—but nobody was complaining about departing Pinewood.*

**Judy Craymer:** Every day at Pinewood was like living on vodka and black coffee, then in Greece it became ouzo and black coffee.

**Meryl Streep:** These weren't the sun-baked Grecian islands you might expect. They were extremely green and covered with gorgeous olive trees. Skopelos smelt of thyme and rosemary and wild strawberries and pine. It was just a beautiful place to wake up every morning and soak in the morning dew. I got to walk out on the dock and watch the sun come up every morning before hopping in the car to go to work.

**Catherine Johnson:** The lovely thing about Skopelos is that in addition to the gorgeous beaches, there was so much vegetation. It's quite remote and it wasn't a particularly tourist-y destination like it is now, so it felt very unspoiled.

**Dominic Cooper:** We were staying in this beautiful white stone villa with a pool in the middle. Everybody was in close proximity and we would all meet for breakfast every morning. It was one of my first experiences being on a proper film set with that amount of money. Those days you got per diem as well, so I always had a little bundle of cash to go mess around with. I rented a jeep and was always off having a good time with the dancers.

**Amanda Seyfried:** One of my favorite things about Greece was having a moment to myself after work each day. They had a hill behind the hotel we were staying at that went to the top of the mountain, and it was a perfect view of the island. The run up there took about 40 minutes, so I would always go up there at the end of work every day to watch the sunset, and then I would run back down and meet the cast for dinner. It really didn't even feel like work most of the time.

---

# “I WORK ALL NIGHT, I WORK ALL DAY...”

*Most of the musical numbers in Mamma Mia! were choreographed the way they were staged, though certain modifications helped to expand the action. For example, instead of having Sophie perform “Honey, Honey” in front of a plaster wall standing in for the Villa Donna, Lloyd could shoot Seyfried singing it in front of the glistening Aegean Sea. That freedom would prove to be mildly overwhelming in the case of “Money, Money, Money,” an early number in the show where Donna mills about her crumbling villa and fantasizes about a life free from financial burden.*

**Catherine Johnson:** In the musical, Donna sings “Money, Money, Money” while she’s cleaning up the villa and surrounded by her staff. Her friends glide in and are slightly patronizing, so she basically has to say, “Look, girls, this is my life! It ain’t glamorous, but it is what it is!” With the movie we had the opportunity for this number to be a glorious explosion of what Donna really wants out of life.

**Anthony Van Laast:** “Money, Money, Money” was the hardest number in the film because we had about 100 different ideas.



If Streep's eyewear in the "Money, Money, Money" sequence look familiar, that's because they're the same Gucci sunglasses she wore as Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (it's the one costume piece she kept from the film).

**Catherine Johnson:** One of the challenges was that asking me to envision some glamorous fantasy was not my forte at all. We came up with this Busby Berkeley concept with a bunch of dancers jumping into a pool, but that got vetoed because it would've looked ridiculous.

**Anthony Van Laast:** At one point I was talking to the British synchronized swimming team, and even met with them to discuss the film. That was never gonna work because I have no idea how synchronized swimming works.

**Judy Craymer:** Benny happened to be visiting the set with his family, and he'd rented a beautiful vintage yacht from the '30s. He invited some of the ladies onboard for lunch, and by that time we had already started to look for a yacht for this nautical fantasy idea.

**Benny Andersson:** Meryl came onboard and said, "I don't think Donna would want a boat like the one we found in Croatia—she'd want a boat like this!"

**Catherine Johnson:** Quite literally overnight, we invented the scene where the women frolic around Benny's yacht. Anthony had to come up with the choreography in something like an hour. And of course Meryl, Julie, and Christine threw themselves into making it work.



**Phyllida Lloyd:** We made up “Money, Money, Money” completely on the spot. Maria had to suddenly find fabulous Swedish fabrics to drape around Benny’s ship, and Ann had to figure out what the ladies would wear. I suggested throwing Christine and Julie on a pair of jet-skis and just letting them improvise.

**Christine Baranski:** There was no real dance choreography. It was one little thing here or there and then a lot of skipping around the deck. It was certainly thrown together, but it was a lot of fun. Poor Ann had to make our costumes at the 11th hour, and she was falling asleep in the middle of the day.

**Meryl Streep:** I wanted to be Kate Winslet on the prow of the Titanic, so then it became a question of what I would wear. Every dress we tried to put together just seemed meager for this moment, so Ann got about 30 yards of the most hideous Dionysis white polyester fabric and wrapped it around me with gaffer tape so it wouldn’t blow off. Then she just let the wind do the rest of the work. It was very half-assed, and I don’t think any designer other than Ann would have the guts to do it.

**Ann Roth:** That was certainly a first.

**Anthony Van Laast:** If I was being self-critical, I think “Money, Money, Money” is the one number in the film that doesn’t land as well as it should. I don’t think we came up with the best idea. I think we could’ve gone further towards the wild Esther Williams-style fantasy, with rainbows and waterfalls.

**Catherine Johnson:** “Money, Money, Money” works perfect because Donna’s idea of a fab, glamorous life is pretty limited. She doesn’t dream of swirling around in diamonds and furs and men in Vegas. She’s just thinking, “Oh it might be nice to have a day off,

sit on a sun lounger, drink a cocktail, and have someone do my nails”—because most of the rest of the time she’s making beds and running a taverna.

---

## “I CAN STILL RECALL...”

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*It was always important to Johnson for Sophie and her dads to have a musical number that spotlights the growing bond she feels with each of them. It comes much earlier in the stage version of Mamma Mia!, where Sophie sings “Thank You for the Music” as they first arrive on the island. Johnson cut that number for the film and decided to swap in “Our Last Summer,” which was originally staged as a duet between Harry and Donna. For the film, Harry would sing it to Sophie, with the dads joining in as they reminisce about their youthful adventures.*

**Martin Lowe:** “Our Last Summer” came together as a montage in the workshop process. I think we always thought of it being a bit more literal, where the guys would sing and it would evolve into a day out with Sophie and her dads. Colin was very scared about having to play the guitar live.

## Mamma Mia! (2008) - Our Last Summer Scene (4/10) | Movieclips



**Colin Firth:** Playing the guitar is a hobby of mine. I'll noodle away at home, but I rarely play in front of people. That was all a little new to me. But I also didn't have to do the musical theater thing where my dialogue suddenly morphs into a song. I didn't have to bend the terms of reality. I got to play a guy who just happens to take out his guitar and sing. It's also a gentler number and not something I really had to belt out. Thankfully I only had to sing a couple of verses before I got some help from the other guys and could hide in the chorus.

**Amanda Seyfried:** I hate boats—*fuck* boats. But I don't remember being that seasick on the boat for "Our Last Summer." That montage was super fun to shoot because we just got to hang out on the ocean all day. "Honey Honey" was similar, because we mostly just got to run around and giggle. Every day felt like our own little movie depending on what musical number we were filming.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Pierce Brosnan:** I vividly remember jumping off the cliff for “Our Last Summer.” One day Phyllida said, “Do you wanna go see where you have to jump off the rocks tomorrow?” So she took us over and I saw that it was a 40-foot drop. You could see right through the water, so the depth was intensified. Stellan and Colin and Amanda and myself stood there in absolute fear the day of the shoot. I had my sons down on the rocks egging me on; Paris was about six years old and he yelled, “Come on, Dad, you were James Bond!”

**Stellan Skarsgård:** The least favorite day of filming for all the men was probably the jump from “Our Last Summer.” We were all shaking out of fear, and Phyllida forced us to do it four or five times. The first time everyone chickened out at the last minute. I was flailing in the middle of the air and then I looked up and saw everybody looking down at me. I was screaming, “You motherfuckers!” as I hit the water.

---

**“DON’T GO WASTING YOUR  
DEVOTION...”**

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*As the act one finale of the stage musical, “Lay All Your Love On Me” had to be appropriately splashy onscreen—the troupe of shirtless dancers in swim flippers clip-clopping onstage brought down the house every night. Now Lloyd could have them magically emerge from the ocean, steal Sky away from Sophie, dance across a jetty, and jet ski off into the sunset for his stag party. The number also gives Sophie and Sky a rare moment of intimacy ahead of their impending nuptials. Given Seyfried and Cooper had struck up a real-life relationship by the time they shot the number, Lloyd didn’t have to do much to spark chemistry between the young stars.*

**Amanda Seyfried:** Dominic and I were madly in love with each other straight from the get-go. He turned into a longtime boyfriend-turned-friend to this day.

**Dominic Cooper:** Amanda and I had both just come out of big relationships. I know the obvious narrative of two co-stars getting together on a film set, but it wasn’t just a flash in the pan for either of us. We were very good for each other at that point in our lives, and she’s the main reason I have so many fond memories of *Mamma Mia!*

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Meryl may have been more onto those two than I was. She would nudge me and say, “Those two are smooching in the corner again.” They were trying to hide, but it was a bit of a giveaway to everybody. I certainly wasn’t mad about it—if anything I thought it was great for the film! It was much better than if they hated each other.

**Anthony Van Laast:** “Lay All Your Love On Me” was hard because the weather had deteriorated so much by then. It was absolutely freezing and the pier where all of those young men were supposed to do the flipper dance was on the verge of collapsing. The sky was gray and gloomy and the sea was raging. They changed the sky blue in the edit, but it was really rough when we were trying to shoot it.

**Amanda Seyfried:** “Lay All Your Love” was not fun because it was freezing. At one point Dom lays me down in the sand and I wanted to cry. You can see my body contort in agony.

Lay All Your Love On Me (Amanda Seyfried) | Mamma Mia (2008) | Scree...



**Anthony Van Laast:** There are some things in that number that I probably wouldn't do nowadays. I'm not sure I'd have Amanda crawling around the ground so seductively.

**Amanda Seyfried:** I just didn't wanna look like a stripper, since we were playing kids.

**Catherine Johnson:** Anthony dreamed up the flipper dance for the stage show, and it's always been one of my favorite moments. It was always gonna be in the movie, but I also wanted there to be an epic moment where the guys ride off into the sunset on jet-skis. It wasn't just those guys hoisting Sky on their shoulders and carrying him offstage. Because it's a movie, they could vanish into the sunset like young Greek gods going off on a mission.

**Anthony Van Laast:** We found out one of the boys didn't know how to swim right as we were about to film the number. Thankfully, there were a lot of safety divers underwater, so we just placed a few extra divers around him. Thankfully, nobody drowned.

---

**“LITTLE BOYS WHO PLAY WITH FIRE  
GET THEIR FINGERS BURNED!”**



Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

***“Does Your Mother Know” is the rare ABBA hit to emphasize a male perspective. With Fäلتskog and Lyngstad on backing vocals, Ulvaeus sings about rebuffing the advances of a much younger woman—a gender dynamic which Johnson chose to flip-flop when she incorporated the song into her text. With Sky’s immature friend Pepper relentlessly pursuing Tanya, she has no choice but to turn him down in the only way characters in the world of Mamma Mia! know how: through the power of song and dance.***

**Judy Craymer:** Christine really worked hard on her big number. She almost went into a sort of training for it. There were no gyms of any sort in Greece, so I’m sure she was lifting a couple rocks to prep.

**Anthony Van Laast:** “Does Your Mother Know” was a challenge because it’s impossible to dance on sand, so we poured some concrete on the beach and put a small layer of sand on top. That was very unforgiving on the dancers’ bodies.

**Christine Baranski:** I don’t think the choreography was complicated. It’s more that by the time we get to a location, you have to deal with the elements. Instead of an air-conditioned set there was an actual landscape with boys grinding their knees into sandy concrete. It was quite challenging. Although I did have the pleasure of spending

an afternoon on that little dingy with Colin in my red bathing suit. I thought, *Okay, things could be worse...*

**Anthony Van Laast:** The entire beach was also covered in wasps. The next time you're watching "Does Your Mother Know," just know that crew members are being stung right out of frame. It was deeply unpleasant. We couldn't eat outside because they would attack the moment they smelled any food.

**Martin Lowe:** I got stung on my first day in Greece. I lost a lot of weight during that shoot because every time I took out a piece of food, the wasps would swarm me.

Mamma Mia! | "Does Your Mother Know?" in 4K HDR



**Christine Baranski:** Apparently by autumn, the wasps come out in full force in Greece. Dancers and crew members were getting stung by wasps during that number. Fortunately I was not—can you imagine if I'd been stung on the face? Whenever you watch a movie, it's easy to assume the actors are working under ideal conditions. One almost wants a little pop-up at the bottom of the screen that says, "This scene was shot under extreme duress."

**Judy Craymer:** Christine was very nervous about doing her number—she was kind of a bookworm getting ready behind the scenes. But she lived and breathed the character. She definitely enjoyed chatting up that group of dancers.

**Catherine Johnson:** Christine totally embodied Tanya. I was on the island quite briefly, but she always seemed to be surrounded by a gaggle of young men in a very Tanya-esque fashion. Those strapping young dancers all adored her.

**Christine Baranski:** I loved all those guys. We really had a wonderful time on set. After we finished the scene, all those dancers had a party at a taverna a couple of days later, and I showed up to thank all of them because I knew how hard they worked. It was really challenging, and they gave 100%.

---

“I DON’T WANNA TALK...”

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures   Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*Ulvaeus has clarified that “The Winner Takes It All” was not explicitly inspired by his split from his bandmate, stating that “Neither Agnetha nor I were winners in our divorce.” Nevertheless, it’s lived on as the break-up song to end all break-up songs, as well as the explosive 11 o’clock number that Craymer always envisioned when she first conceived Mamma Mia! As Sophie’s bridal party walks toward the*

*wedding chapel, Sam intercepts Donna, who reveals the pain she still feels over losing him all those years ago.*

**Martin Lowe:** I was worried about “The Winner Takes It All” as much as one can worry about Meryl. But I knew that was the “big day” that she was working towards since it’s such a centerpiece moment of the musical. We shot it first thing in the morning, at sunrise, so it would look like sunset, and I remember Meryl being very stoic. You hear about actors being method-y, but this was nothing like that. She was just doing a big scene and it was not the time for me to be asking about *The Devil Wears Prada*.

**Catherine Johnson:** Phyllida hadn’t totally nailed what she wanted to do with “The Winner Takes It All” because it’s a very long scene with Donna singing at Sam, and we need to linger in that emotional impact. Meryl said, “Just keep the camera on me,” and everything happened really organically.



**Meryl Streep:** The number I was most worried about was “The Winner Takes It All” because it’s such a difficult song to sing and one that everybody loves. But it ended up being the most thrilling number to shoot, and the one I’m probably the most proud of.

**Pierce Brosnan:** The song itself is already so full of yearning and lament. When one first heard it from ABBA, you could imagine that something was going on with that

quartet of lovers. Those songs were cleaved straight from Benny and Bjorn's hearts. In the hands of a magnificent actor like Meryl, pouring her heart out in this beautiful location, it gave that song an entirely new life.

"The only part of the shoot that wasn't fun was when I had to run in heels," Streep says. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** I went to Skopelos for about four days and had a wonderful experience when, high on a cliff with the Aegean Sea below and the blue sky above, Meryl sang "The Winner Takes It All." I remember standing behind the monitor and thinking how surreal it felt to watch Meryl on a beautiful Greek island singing words that I wrote. I will never forget the sight; it was so strange and wonderful and humbling.

**Meryl Streep:** It was just one of those moments where you're really transported by the moment and really feel every word you're singing.

While there is a real chapel on top of the hill where Sophie's wedding is set, Djurkovic's team built a larger chapel at Pinewood and shipped it over to Skopelos once the time came to shoot "The Winner Takes It All." "*Mamma Mia!* fans are always so disappointed when they get to top of the steps and see a teensy, tiny chapel instead of the one from the film," she says. Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Phyllida Lloyd:** The most difficult shot to get in the entire film was the one of Meryl running up the steps to the chapel after "The Winner Takes It All." It was 100 degrees and she had to actually run up hundreds of steps in high-heeled shoes and her beautiful wedding outfit. The helicopter was meant to go up the steps with Meryl and then over the top of the mountain, but we couldn't make it over because the wind was too strong. We failed twice and would have to fly around the side of the mountain. Our pilot was shouting in Greek and one of the assistants told me he said, "The sea is trying to drag us down and kill us!" But we eventually got it.

---

**"EACH NIGHT WAS SOME DIFFERENT PARTY"**

*One thing that was made abundantly clear to me over the course of researching this oral history is that the people behind Mamma Mia! worked very hard in Greece, and played even harder. Sequestered on a Grecian paradise for five weeks with limitless supplies of ouzo—a Greek spirit with an alcohol level of 38%—drinking and partying became a favored activity. The populations of Skopelos and neighboring Skiathos were under 10,000 people combined, and they were all eager to show the cast and crew of Mamma Mia! a good time during their stay on the islands.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** The people who weren't being called to set daily were having an absolute blast—I think the men especially were having a good time. They had quite light duties compared to the women. They were always off fishing on boats or drinking in taverns.

**Dominic Cooper:** The women had to work much harder than us. They're in makeup and hair for hours and dealing with wasps flying at your food all day. But if you were one of the guys, you were doing very little before going off to have a little exercise and then go drink beers on the beach. I mostly swam and rode jet skis, and then occasionally I'd pop in to work for a few hours.

**Pierce Brosnan:** I had my family with me, so I cherish that time with them. Everyone had partners or spouses, mothers and fathers that would come out and visit. These were idyllic days, and everyone was aware of it.



**Stellan Skarsgård:** Shooting at Pinewood was very difficult, but Greece was very relaxing. Even when we had to work, we were on a beach lying in the sun and jumping in the water in between takes.

**Meryl Streep:** There was a lot of time off. What's that wine they drink in Greece? Retsina? There was a *lot* of that.

**Colin Firth:** There were some incredible little monasteries we would visit on days off. Nights out were fun, because by that point we all enjoyed each other's company enormously. We experienced many, many bottles of the local Picaro, which was kinda like ouzo, where you're still buzzing the next day, and if you try to drink water you get drunk again.

**Christine Baranski:** We would get together after shooting and either go swimming at those beautiful stony beaches, or we'd go sit at these wonderful taverns and share some wine and seafood. Pierce wanted to take us all to dinner one night, and then we went to hear jazz music somewhere. We started drinking something called Tsipouro—none of us knew what it was, but we were downing glasses like it was really good tequila. It gives you a hangover the next day where if you have even a sip of water, it reactivates the effect of this drink. It was powerful stuff.

**Amanda Seyfried:** Everybody in the town wanted to throw a party for us. Each night was some new party at a different bar or restaurant, and then we'd all migrate since everybody had their favorite spots.

Rachel McDowell, Amanda Seyfried, and Ashley Lilley in Greece. Photo: Courtesy of Amanda Seyfried

**Meryl Streep:** I remember Colin taking us to some hole-in-the-wall on Skopelos. He had taken us down a dark alley and into this fabulous little restaurant, but then no one could find their way home given the state we were in.

**Colin Firth:** There are many days and nights that have been forgotten. There were many nights of just barely making it home, and then waking up for your call-time, thinking, *Okay, I might be just a little roughed up*. And then we wound up right back at all those places around 2:00am.

**Amanda Seyfried:** All of the club owners in Greece were also our drivers. They would party all night and then come straight from the clubs to pick us up at six in the morning and drive us to set. I remember always thinking, *Is that guy high, or am I just nervous because we're driving along the edge of a cliff?*

**Dominic Cooper:** For someone my age from South London, who had never been in a boat before, I distinctly remember going onboard Tom Hanks's yacht when he visited the set. *Big* and *Forrest Gump* were two of my favorite films growing up, so it was a little maddening to be there with him and Meryl and all those other amazing people.

There was literally a gold toilet seat and a full staff—I had sushi for the first time and it blew my mind. It was all so overwhelming, as it should be. No one should ever be used to that type of stuff!

**Amanda Seyfried:** I probably cried a couple times because I fought with my boyfriend or just felt overwhelmed. But for the most part I was riding around the island with Dom in his jeep or playing guitar with Colin and jumping into the ocean. I was also supposed to look natural and sun-kissed, so there was no pressure to look a certain way. I just got to flop around in a one-piece and sing ABBA.

---

**“IT WAS PURE CARNAGE...”**

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

*One particular party has lived on in infamy among Mamma Mia! fans, with the surviving photographs showing the cast looking—there’s no other way to put it—absolutely sloshed at what appears to be a wrap party. I had to know: What did everyone remember from that infamous night?*

**Meryl Streep:** Not a single thing. I remember seeing Benny at the piano but I don't even remember singing. I hope I sounded alright.

**Dominic Cooper:** The photos make it look like such fun, but I remember absolutely nothing.

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

**Amanda Seyfried:** I can only slightly recall that party... I think there was a cat? Was that the wrap party? Where were we?

**Maria Djurkovic:** I can assure you that the amount of partying we did on *Mamma Mia!* is not common for a film set. Judy just knew how to treat her crews unbelievably well. At one point she threw a party for everybody where Benny played the piano and Meryl sang "Mamma Mia!" I don't even think it was a wrap party, I think it was just a regular Saturday.

**Martin Lowe:** That famous party was actually in the middle of the shoot. It was on Skopelos, probably around the end of week two or three. The party was on a Saturday night so we had the next day off, and thank God, because it was pure carnage. We

took over this fabulous outdoor bar, and Judy told me that Benny was gonna play the piano.

**Benny Andersson:** If there's a piano around, I'm gonna have to play it at some point.

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

**Colin Firth:** I had to kick off that infamous party. I was enjoying myself in a corner and then Judy came over: "Benny is at the piano and he wants you to come sing." I thought somebody was pulling my leg, but then I got handed a microphone. I wasn't sure whether to feel nervous or honored. In the back of my brain I thought, "Well, I guess I'm singing with ABBA?" I seem to remember Meryl rescuing me pretty quickly;

I started “Our Last Summer” solo, but then Meryl saw that I needed some help and turned it into a duet. The party just grew from there.

**Martin Lowe:** My job was to stand next to Benny and tell him what key every song was in, because he couldn’t remember. I was so nervous that I didn’t have a single drink, so there I was incredibly sober and watching Meryl Streep belt “The Winner Takes It All.” I just didn’t wanna make Meryl look stupid at a party, and I didn’t want Benny to be cross with me if I messed up the key.

**Christine Baranski:** We were all sorta in love with each other by that point. It was like that feeling of being in a high school musical in your final year, where you’re all singing your favorite songs from *Brigadoon* and everybody is crying because you don’t want it to be over. There was something very high school about it all in terms of the joy and innocence.

Brosnan with his son Paris. Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

**Pierce Brosnan:** It was a rip-roaring night, I know that much. The wine flowed, songs were sung, hearts were broken, and hearts were mended. Both my sons were at that party break-dancing and jumping around. They were having as much fun as the adults.

**Christine Baranski:** We were all sorta in love with each other by that point. It was like that feeling of being in a high school musical in your final year, where you’re all singing your favorite songs from *Brigadoon* and everybody is crying because you don’t want it to be over. There was something very high school about it, all in terms of the joy and innocence.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I'm so glad that I can only remember some of that evening. I probably had as much ouzo as anybody else. I do remember at one point singing "Dancing Queen" with Meryl and Christine—I think Julie had to go home that weekend, so I got dragged in as a replacement Dynamo. Thank God everybody else was so drunk they can't remember anything.

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

**Maria Djurkovic:** I remember at one point the bar ran out of glasses, so they were just giving out massive bottles of brezina to everyone.

**Martin Lowe:** I think the cast did "Voulez-Vous" because I have a photo of them all doing something that resembles a Greek circle.

**Amanda Seyfried:** Everybody knew we were never gonna get this opportunity again, so they really just let loose. I know there's some pictures online of Meryl and I singing, and I'm still not sure how they got out there. We were all really having a moment.

**Christine Baranski:** Damn those stupid camera phones.

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

**Pierce Brosnan:** The next day was a glorious hell of recovery. It's funny you bring this party up, because my son Paris recently said, "Have you seen those photos of you singing karaoke?" He said they're all over the internet and have become quite iconic.

**Anthony Van Laast:** I was there, but I don't remember how I got home.

**Maria Djurkovic:** I seem to remember a lot of the crew fell asleep in fishing boats on the beach. I heard stories about some of our people getting kicked out of boats by local fishermen the next morning.

**Amanda Seyfried:** There were kittens *everywhere* in Greece, and I remember taking one home when Dom and I stumbled back to our room. It ended up peeing all over the bed, and the next morning I was so confused, like, "How the fuck did a cat get in our room?"



---

# “YOU CAN DANCE! YOU CAN JIVE!”

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*As if their time in Greece wasn't joyous enough, the filmmakers got to cap off the shoot with ABBA's signature hit. Onstage, "Dancing Queen" begins and ends with Tanya and Rosie consoling Donna in her bedroom after she's been confronted by three ex-lovers. Lloyd knew from the moment she signed on to the film that "Dancing Queen" deserved a much more elaborate set piece than what the physical constraints of live theater allow.*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Not every musical lends itself to a film location—*Rent* wasn't necessarily improved by expanding into the streets of New York. But the one thing I knew about *Mamma Mia!* was that it would absolutely fly on location. There was no way we were ever gonna keep "Dancing Queen" in a bedroom like we do onstage. That song has to travel—I wanted these women to move from the bedroom, slide down the banisters, run through olive groves, and skip through Greece.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Anthony van Laast:** When you have actors as inventive as Julie, Christine, and Meryl, you have to include them in the process. We rehearsed every beat of “Dancing Queen,” but we also left a lot of space for the actors to add their interpretation. There was a trampoline underneath the mattress so Meryl could really jump on the bed, but we had no idea she was gonna touch her toes once Phyllida started filming.

**Martin Lowe:** “Dancing Queen” was the gift that kept on giving. We started in Pinewood and shot the parts in the bedroom for about five days. Then, the very last scene we shot in Greece was the second half of “Dancing Queen,” with Meryl and all the women dancing down to the dock.

**Priscilla John:** We had an open casting call for all those Greek women. Anthony and I went to the mainland with one of the assistant directors who could speak Greek, and I brought along my copy of *ABBA Gold*. We played “Dancing Queen” in this community hall in the middle of the mountains for all these women—and for the most part they seemed to be familiar with it!

**Anthony Van Laast:** I think “Dancing Queen” was my favorite number to choreograph for the film. We were going around Greek villages every Sunday, casting

the women for that scene, and they would all bring these lovely picnic lunches while we auditioned everyone. We ended up with 150 Greek women who couldn't speak English, so we taught them to sing "Dancing Queen" phonetically.

Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

**Priscilla John:** Anthony would go, "FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT—YOU can dance! YOU can jive!" We taught them choreography all morning, and all those ladies really committed to it. It ended up working really well because they were the real deal, and they had the time of their lives. Plus, they got paid well!

**Meryl Streep:** Every single scene was fun to shoot, but the one that obviously sticks out the most is "Dancing Queen." There was so much energy pulsating on set because we knew it was the end.

**Christine Baranski:** It's one thing to be dancing around a soundstage, but there we were skipping through Greece with our glorious crew of dancing queens.

**Judy Craymer:** Film crews are tough—they work long hours and they're slightly cynical. But everyone just had a good time. I think having the music playing non-stop helped. Even the uber-tough transport guys were singing along by the time we got to "Dancing Queen."



**Martin Lowe:** We had to shoot it four times. And because all the ladies jumped in the water in the end, we shot at eight o'clock in the morning and and five o'clock in the afternoon so we could dry their clothes in between.

**Christine Baranski:** Meryl pushing me into the ocean was not scripted, but she so badly wanted to do it. I'd say, "No, we're supposed to all jump in because it's joyous!" But Meryl pushed me in every time.

**Meryl Streep:** Once we started shooting it was like getting shot out of a cannon. We were all heartbroken to leave because it was so much fun, and filming "Dancing Queen" felt like the culmination of this joyful experience we'd all had together.

---

## "DO YOU WANT ANOTHER ONE?"

*And it wasn't over quite yet. When the production decamped to Greece, they still didn't quite know what the film's ending was gonna be. In the stage musical, Sophie and Sky opt to delay getting married in favor of traveling the world. The newly married Donna and Sam wave goodbye from the dock as Sophie and Sky sail away to the tune of "I Have a Dream," followed by an extended encore of "Dancing Queen" and "Waterloo" that leaves audiences on a fizzy high note. When it came*

*to recreating that feeling on screen, the answer was obvious: Craymer and Lloyd simply staged the encore over the end credits.*

**Martin Lowe:** It's very tempting to look at a film and assume that every number was carefully thought out ahead of time. But most of my time in Greece was spent asking Judy if we were gonna get money from Universal to shoot the end credits. I had no idea until those last few days.

**Judy Craymer:** The one big fight I had with the studio was about the ending. We hadn't really written the ending, and so it hadn't been budgeted for. It originally ended with Sophie and Sky taking off on the jetty with "I Have a Dream" in the background, but it needed that extra fizz.

**Martin Lowe:** The stage show originally ended with all the young kids coming out to sing a reprise of "Mamma Mia!" The audience loved it, but we eventually brought Donna and the Dynamos back out to sing "Dancing Queen," followed by the men singing "Waterloo" with the entire company. Once we did that, the audience went absolutely mental. We realized that for a show we thought was being driven by the two young characters, all the audience wanted were those women to come back and sing ABBA to them. When we brought them back out for an encore, it changed how the audience left the show and their entire perception of it.

The original West End cast of *Mamma Mia!* performing “Waterloo” during the encore. Photo: Getty Images

**Judy Craymer:** Cinema audiences are not theater audiences, so our big challenge was getting them to stay. They would already be picking up their coats and walking towards the bus, but not if we recreated what we do in the theater—not if we captured that feeling.

**Colin Firth:** I think all of us thought it was a real pity that we might not get to do “Waterloo,” because it’s such an important song in ABBA’s story. And it would’ve been such a wasted opportunity not to put the men in spandex.

**Judy Craymer:** Everyone in the cast had a hard out after we finished shooting in Greece, but the studio said, “If you can get everyone to stay an extra day, you can have money for the ending.” I went around to each cast member’s Winnebago in Greece, knocked on their door, and asked if there was any chance they’d be willing to stick around and sing “Waterloo.”

**Meryl Streep:** Judy didn’t have to beg very hard. We all thought it sounded like a blast.

**Judy Craymer:** I think the studio thought more of the cast would say, “No way, we’re going home,” and that they wouldn’t have to pay for it.

---

## “GET YOUR ASS IN THE SUIT!”

Mamma Mia! (2008) - Waterloo Scene (10/10) | Movieclips



*With the entire cast onboard, Universal gave the filmmakers enough money to pay for two additional shoot days back at Pinewood Studios. The finale came together as the production wrapped up in Greece, with Roth squeezing in costume fittings while Van Laast whipped up some last-minute choreography.*

**Judy Craymer:** The ending had to be shot the day we got back to England, so we had very little time to rehearse. Anthony was desperately trying to prep the men behind the bike sheds between takes in Greece.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** The finale is basically an ode to Ann Roth, who had to pull some insane costumes out of the bag in no time at all. She went into turbocharge mode.

**Judy Craymer:** Ann got the men’s boots from the Soho Market but they were all several sizes too small. The men could barely walk in them and they were constantly falling all over the place.

**Ann Roth:** Those guys would stomp into the fitting room and go, “I’m not gonna wear this!” And I know them all very well, so I would just say, “You most certainly *are*—now get your ass in the suit.” I remember putting Colin in a leather jacket at our first fitting, which made him feel extremely tough and butch. He was so thrilled, and then here I was sticking him into a girdle for “Waterloo.” But those little bastards warmed up eventually.

**Dominic Cooper:** When you wear those suits, you don’t look very impressive *down there*, so it became a competition in terms of what we could use to make ourselves look more provocative. All the guys were trying to have the biggest codpiece, so Colin and I just kept asking for things to stuff down the front of our costumes.

**Pierce Brosnan:** We had dressing rooms right by each other, so when the men came out and took a good look at each other, I just said, “Well this is where the career is at, fellas. Let’s go—it’s showtime.” And it did not go unbeknownst to me that this was all happening at the home of Bond.

**Meryl Streep:** Everybody loved “Waterloo,” but those boys—talk about being game. Pierce’s biggest nightmare was to cross the lot and see Daniel Craig walking by in his little grey James Bond suit.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** Pierce said, “I really hope I don’t see Daniel Craig.” I said, “Don’t worry, Pierce, you could just always say, ‘Hey, Daniel, this is your future!’”

**Dominic Cooper:** My whole family was there when we filmed the ending. I’d been bragging about my serious career and this movie I’m doing with Meryl Streep, and then they got to see me walk out in this spandex monstrosity.



**Colin Firth:** I was very much hoping that I'd get to keep my costume. I adored it. My kids came down and took so many photos of me in it. I was trying to smuggle it out and Ann said, "Don't even think about it." They were going back to the studio to be used for some charity auction, so I sadly didn't get to keep my grubby hands on it.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Meryl was in wrecking ball mode at the shoot. She was an absolute rock star. She did a couple takes and one of the Hollywood producers sitting by the monitor said, "Do you think you could get her to do it a bit more pussycat?" He was finding Meryl's vibe a bit ball-busting.

**Meryl Streep:** That was my Janis Joplin moment!

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I never give notes to actors that other people have given me and try to pass them off as my own. But there were literal minutes to go before the end of the shoot, so I thought I would just lightly pass along that suggestion. I went up to Meryl and said, "Can you do one that's a bit less... aggressive?" Meryl had a look on her face that said, "Either you've lost your mind, or that note hasn't come from you." I yell action, and Meryl struts up to the camera, grabs the thing, and starts shaking it while screaming, "DO YOU WANT ANOTHER ONE?!"

---

“IT WAS LIKE WATCHING PICASSO  
PAINT”

*Mamma Mia! officially wrapped production at the top of October 2007. With a release date projected for the following summer, the filmmakers immediately got to work on what was going to be a layered post-production process. Editing the film is one thing, but the imperfect sound conditions on set meant that the cast would have to re-record a lot of their dialogue. Most of the musical numbers you hear in the film are a mishmash of vocals that the cast pre-recorded, a live vocal or two from the set, and bits that the cast re-recorded after filming.*

**Martin Lowe:** I didn't think I was doing post-production because I'd never done a film before—I still don't even know what post-production means. That's typically where the music editor is supposed to come in, so I thought between him and the rest of the sound team, they would be fine without me. But they brought me in because they felt I was a good go-between with the film and Benny, who really trusted me to cut underscores and move things around.

**Amanda Seyfried:** We had so much ADR [automated dialogue replacement] in those days. It used to be four or five 10-hour days per movie. But I saw a lot of the film doing my ADR, because we had to re-record so much. It was a little bit out-of-body because I thought I sounded so weird.

**Christine Baranski:** The challenge with movie musicals is that you record everything well in advance of shooting—before the cameras have even started rolling. By that time we got to Greece I was much more into the character, and I told Benny that I didn't think my original take of “Does Your Mother Know” was hot enough. That's a real hot rock and roll number, so my vocals had to be way fiercer.

**Martin Lowe:** Meryl is the queen of post-production. A good case in point is “Mamma Mia!” When she recorded it live at Pinewood, we used a combination of a small radio embedded into her ear and a boom directly over her. It's very different from being in a recording studio with a big, expensive microphone. So, after filming, Meryl came back into the studio, looked at what she was doing onscreen, and then effortlessly re-recorded it with all of the actions and pauses. She would alter her voice like she was pretending to climb the goat house, and it was truly like watching Picasso paint.



**Benny Andersson:** Meryl originally came to Stockholm to record “The Winner Takes It All.” She went into the studio with my band, we played together with her, and she did it perfectly in one take—that’s the one you hear in the film. Later she called me during the edit and said, “There’s something I’m not happy with...” She said her breathing didn’t sound as it looked and she wanted to re-record “The Winner Takes It All.” I said she couldn’t because it was such a great take, but she insisted on coming to Stockholm and giving it another shot. She came in and said, “It’s *this* place, *this* place, and *that* place,” so she re-recorded those little bars and exchanged them on the track. She knows what she’s doing.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** When we were back in England, we decided we wanted to use “Thank You for the Music” over the end credits of the film. Amanda offered to record it even though she would have to fly to Stockholm. There was a sort of disarming charm to Amanda. She looked like someone who was gonna have no technique at all, but she was an absolute natural.

**Amanda Seyfried:** When I did “Thank You for the Music,” I got to sing it with Benny at his little studio on an island in Sweden. I had bronchitis, but I wasn’t gonna pass up the opportunity. It was just him at the piano with me singing, and he ended up really liking the first take. I explored the property around the studio and found two four-leaf clovers—the only two I’ve ever found in my life. I gave one to Benny and I kept one that I still have to this day.

*Part of the reason Universal Pictures agreed to fund additional shoot days for the ending is that they were impressed by the footage they received from the set. There were certainly naysayers at the studio who were still skeptical of ABBA's appeal outside of Europe, as well as the film's general appeal beyond children and young women—not a core demo in the eyes of many executives. But with Donna Langley championing the film internally as Lloyd finished her cut, Mamma Mia! inched closer and closer to completion.*

**Donna Langley:** I would say for the most part we were pleased by what we were seeing, but I should note that we hadn't made a musical in a long time. I think [2002's] *8 Mile* was technically the last musical Universal put out [Ed note: Universal released *The Producers* in 2005]. The decision makers at the time were really divided on *Mamma Mia!* I was probably the loudest advocate. Other people at the studio around that time didn't have the same affinity for ABBA that I did.

**Judy Craymer:** I don't think Universal quite knew what the film was as we were going through the edit. It also felt way too long.

**Martin Lowe:** We did everything we could to tighten up that middle section of the movie, and so "The Name of the Game" was one that had to go. And when we took it away, nobody missed it.

Deleted Musical Number: "The Names of the Game" || Mamma Mia! Spec...



**Judy Craymer:** There was a version of “Honey, Honey” with Meryl—we filmed a whole dream sequence where you saw Donna back in the ’70s, wearing a Stevie Nicks look. It sorta felt like a hat on a hat, so we decided to save her big introduction for later.

**Donna Langley:** I saw the final cut in the Brill Building in NYC. I sat with Benny and Bjorn and the producers, and I had what I can only describe as an out-of-body experience. I remember calling my boss from the room and saying, “It worked! We’ve done it!”

*The moment of truth came in early 2008, when Universal screened a rough cut of the film to its first preview audience in San Diego. Test screenings are always a nightmare for filmmakers: The feedback from a randomized audience can determine whether a studio decides to enforce certain tweaks. What if they didn’t laugh? Or, even worse, what if they didn’t sing along?*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** The test screening was a really critical moment in the process. The studio flew a load of us in from England, and they clearly had invested a lot in this moment. Meryl really wanted to come, but the studio didn’t think that was a good idea. If the audience knew she was there, it might be hard to get rational scores since she would be such a distraction. I texted Meryl back in New York: “Here we go! Wish us luck!” I pressed send and put my phone down, and before I could switch it off, I saw that Meryl had texted back: “I’m sitting six rows behind you in the Sharon Osbourne wig, baseball cap, and shades.”

**Gary Goetzman:** Meryl really did look exactly like Sharon Osbourne. I kept her hidden in the back and she had a blast experiencing it with a crowd, who pretty much went crazy from the very first song. We felt quite pleased with ourselves.

**Michael Moses, Universal Pictures chief marketing officer:** You just got a goosebump-y feeling that everybody in the theater was having a great time at that first test screening.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** They had a special focus group stay behind at the end and asked, “Which of you thought this film was excellent?” Hands go up. “Which of you thought it was very good?” The rest of the crowd’s hands go up. There were a lot more

questions, but Gary came up to me and said, “Come on kiddo, we’re in the clear and going for a martini!”

---

## “IT WAS THE ORIGINAL BARBENHEIMER”

*Universal slated Mamma Mia! for release on July 18, 2008 in the US. The studio had high hopes for the splashy movie musical, but even higher hopes for the more costly films on their summer slate: The Incredible Hulk and Hellboy II. Regardless of how well Craymer and her team thought Mamma Mia! could do, nobody anticipated it opening at #1—especially after the studio decided to release it opposite a little film called The Dark Knight.*

**Michael Moses:** I think conventional wisdom at the time was that those two movies felt like they had the least potentially overlapping audiences. You had the gravity and seriousness of *The Dark Knight* on one side and the frivolity of *Mamma Mia!* on the other—it really was the original *Barbenheimer*. We never had any delusion that *Mamma Mia!* would open at number one, but it felt like we could get a good foothold and then continue to play for the remainder of the summer.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** Maybe Judy was freaking out about *The Dark Knight*, but I wasn't. I'd already done my job by that point.

**Donna Langley:** The counter-programming strategy wasn't seen as an overly risky venture. As we just saw with *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, counter-programming can be a powerful thing. You can get every demographic into the theater over the course of a weekend. Plus, by the time we released the movie, there was no more trepidation from anyone at the studio. They'd all seen it play with audiences and understood it was infectious.

**Judy Craymer:** It was ultimately Universal's call, but we just knew it needed to be a summer opening. It wouldn't have made sense for *Mamma Mia!* to open at Christmas. We were certainly the smaller film going up against *The Dark Knight*, but the early screenings went really well so there was a lot of faith that we could still make a buck or two.

**Michael Moses:** Sometimes when you see the marketing materials for musicals, you get the sense that the studio is almost trying to fool the audience into thinking that there won't be much singing. We decided to go all in. People knew what *Mamma Mia!* was, so what was the point in trying to disguise it?

---

## “I WAS ABSOLUTELY GUTTED”

*Nobody associated with Mamma Mia! expected the film to receive the kindest reviews. The stage show may have been a commercial phenomenon, but it didn't exactly sweep the Olivier Awards. And yet, the cast and crew of the film were still*

*caught off guard by the level of vitriol thrown their way once the embargo lifted. There were plenty of critics who “got” the film—USA Today praised its “good-natured silliness,” while The Hollywood Reporter declared it “the most fun to be had at the movies this or any other recent summer.” Others weren’t nearly as enthusiastic.*

**Martin Lowe:** I’ve never done anything as narcissistic in my life, and I won’t ever do anything as narcissistic again, but I set a Google alert for *Mamma Mia!* right before it came out. *The Incredible Hulk* had come out a few weeks before we did, and Peter Bradshaw gave it a one-star review in *The Guardian*, calling it the worst movie of the summer. I remember reading it and thinking, *Well, whatever happens, at least we’re not those guys.* Cut to three weeks later and the first news alert I get is for *The Guardian*, and it’s Peter’s one-star review of *Mamma Mia!*

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian* (2008):** *Mamma Mia!* ties itself in knots trying to shoehorn in every single famous number, and each time, the beginning of an ABBA song triggered in me a Pavlovian stab of pleasure, canceled after a millionth of a second by a backwash of rage that this soulless panto has done nothing to earn or even understand the good feeling.

**Martin Lowe:** The Google alerts started pouring in every five seconds, and each one was a nastier review than the last. It took me about two days before I couldn’t take it anymore, and I turned off the alert. I thought we’d committed a crime against humanity.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** We definitely took a bit of a critical beating. It didn’t do very well on Rotten Tomatoes, that’s for sure. I did read some reviews when it came out, and I can’t say I expected them to be great. I expected critics to be quite snippy.

**Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker* (2008):** The legal definition of torture has been much aired in recent years, and I take *Mamma Mia!* to be a useful contribution to that debate.



The cast and crew of *Mamma Mia!* at the London premiere in Leicester Square on June 30, 2008. Photo: Courtesy of Getty Images

**Colin Firth:** The first film was treated with some unkind reviews. When it came out, there were people passionately devoted to ABBA and there were people who still felt it was still deeply uncool to enjoy their music. ABBA was still seen as a guilty pleasure, and *Mamma Mia!* was seen as equally uncool.

**Martin Lowe:** I left the theater and spent 20 months of my life on this project, only to be greeted by the worst reviews I've ever had. They felt personally scathing, and so I felt like I let everybody in the cast down. I was so upset, just absolutely gutted.

**Catherine Johnson:** Even recently, I was reading something that made an offhand dig at *Mamma Mia!* I thought, *Well damn, why are people still being so mean?*

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I got quite vilified for my clunky filmmaking, and some of that is definitely warranted. A lot of people said I was just chasing Meryl Streep around Greece with a handycam for two hours, but I always wanted the film to feel sorta rough-house. My favorite musical is *The Blues Brothers*, so I was never gonna make a traditionally glossy MGM musical. I always wanted there to be something quite naturalistic and British in its kind of clunkiness. It was partly a fuck-up on my part, but I wanted the film to feel quite earthy.

**Colin Firth:** When my number came on during one of the premieres, Benny was sitting behind me and I got a pat on the shoulder, which really meant the world. I

decided any critics out there—whether mainstream or on social media—will one day realize that this isn't bad singing, it's misunderstood greatness. Maybe that'll be recognized in 200 years' time.

---

## “GIRLS MAY LIKE IT, BUT WHO ELSE IS GONNA CARE?”

Thousands of fans gathered for the London premiere of *Mamma Mia!* Photo: Getty Images

*Firth didn't have to wait that long—Mamma Mia! opened to \$27.8 million at the American box office, the best opening weekend for a live-action movie musical of all time up to that point, besting the record set by Hairspray the year before (\$27.5 million). The Dark Knight may have been the undisputed champion of the summer, but Mamma Mia! became a phenomenon in its own right.*

**Meryl Streep:** We were really under-estimated. We had a much smaller budget than a lot of other big movies that summer—I mean, we cost a fifteenth of what a *Mission: Impossible* movie costs to make nowadays. But I always knew *Mamma Mia!* was gonna be a mega-hit, just like *The Devil Wears Prada*.

**Michael Moses:** The opening was very good, but the longevity of it is what really defied expectations. The film kept chugging along and building and building through the end of the summer.

**Judy Craymer:** It was still going strong in September and running in theaters into October. I remember hearing stories about struggling cinemas that managed to stay open because *Mamma Mia!* carried them through the year.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** It was amazing to hear stories about people getting up and dancing in the cinema the same way they had in the theater. People identified it really quickly as a festive night out and a fun thing to experience as a big group, so there were also many repeat visits: “I’ve gotta bring my mum! I’ve gotta bring my mates!”

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

**Meryl Streep:** In those days, movies like *Mamma Mia!* were relegated to “chick flicks.” I heard, “Well girls may like it, but who else is gonna care?” a lot. My agent is a

wonderful guy, but even he said I shouldn't do *Mamma Mia!* I had to tell him, "You don't have any idea how great this is and how many people are gonna love it." They were all shocked when it became this enormous global phenomenon—which was *very* satisfying.

**Judy Craymer:** There were people at the studio who said the soundtrack would only be successful if we had a hit single with a major pop star—sorta like they do for each of the Bond films. But then the soundtrack went to number one! Meryl was very tickled that she was at the top of the charts.

**Martin Lowe:** Judy called me in October and said, "Darling just so you know, we're about to beat *Titanic* to become the highest-grossing British film of all time!" I'd turned my Google alerts off and nobody had bothered to tell me the movie was a hit. My friends had all told me they liked it, but I thought they were just being nice.

*Against a production budget of \$52 million, Mamma Mia! ultimately grossed \$144 million stateside and \$611 million worldwide. By comparison, 2002's Chicago—often credited with reviving the movie musical in the early aughts—grossed \$306 million, and more recent adaptations of Dreamgirls and The Phantom of the Opera had cost upwards of \$80 million each, both capping out at around \$155 million. Based on numbers alone, Mamma Mia! wasn't just a hit, but a bona-fide sensation. Even the DVD broke records—by the end of 2008, the Official UK Charts Company declared it the biggest-selling DVD ever in the UK. Approximately one in every four households owned a copy.*

**Judy Craymer:** We were one of the last big DVDs before streaming took over. There were still a few Woolworths in the UK, but most of the big DVD retailers were closing down. I think we sold something like two million copies in the first week. People were leaving the supermarket with a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs, and a DVD of *Mamma Mia!*

**Martin Lowe:** That Christmas I remember getting a lot of texts from friends saying that their five-year-old got a *Mamma Mia!* DVD and had been watching it all day. Kids love watching adults make fools of themselves.

**Meryl Streep:** The average age of my fanbase dropped by about 20 years overnight. A lot of little kids weren't watching *The Deer Hunter* or *Sophie's Choice*, but they were

obsessed with *Mamma Mia!*

Streep with a young fan at the New York premiere of *Mamma Mia!* Photo: Getty Images

**Catherine Johnson:** People always tell me, “You know, I was feeling really depressed so I just put *Mamma Mia!* on.” And I think back to the beginning, when Phyllida and I spoke about what our ambitions were for this musical in the first place. I always told Phyllida I’d love for people to watch it when they need a bit of escapism.

**Martin Lowe:** About a year after the film came out, my husband and I walked past Tower Bridge one night and I saw that they were playing *Mamma Mia!* in the outdoor amphitheater. It was sold out, but two people had already left—not the best sign—so they let us in. I just wanted to see what the vibe was. We came in around the scene where Donna and the Dynamos sang “Super Trouper,” and the entire place was on its feet singing and dancing. We ended up staying to watch the rest of the movie, and the energy stayed at that level the entire time. It was truly one of the most cathartic evenings in the arts I’ve ever experienced, and it was only then that I understood we made something really lovely.

*Besides making the people involved exponentially more famous and wealthy, Mamma Mia! also landed everyone from ABBA to Baranski\*\* a new generation of fans. To this day, ABBA's original music—as well as versions from the film—regularly go viral on TikTok, while the “Mamma Mia” hashtag has over 5.4 billion views. The film cemented Streep as a box-office force in her late 50s, and gave Ulvaeus and Andersson the confidence to reunite ABBA for 2021's\*\* **Voyage**, their first album of new material in nearly 40 years. To celebrate 25 years of the stage musical, Craymer is also launching a reality competition series, Mamma Mia! I Have a Dream, this fall to find the West End's next Sophie and Sky. With digital avatars\*\* of ABBA currently selling out performances in London every night, their music has arguably never been bigger than it is today.\*\**

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** *Mamma Mia!* certainly made *Voyage* possible, because it carried the music into a new generation. Those who enjoyed *Mamma Mia!* eventually discover the original, you know? Producing a new project as mammoth as *Voyage* was such a huge risk. We would never have even contemplated it had it not been for the fact that we knew our music had reached millions of new fans through the film and stage show.

**Benny Andersson:** We have over 3,000 people coming to see us every night, and we don't even have to show up! A lot of people take the train just a few hundred meters from the venue. Each night, when the crowd goes home, a big group forms at the platform and everybody ends up singing "Mamma Mia!" together while they wait for the train. It's hilarious, but also wonderful. We're very grateful to still have an audience like that.

**Amanda Seyfried:** The magic that has come from this movie is crazy. I'll be the first to admit that *Mamma Mia!* has a ridiculous plot, but it also has so much joy and emotion to give. And the God's honest truth is that there was nothing but joy in spades while we were making it.

**Dominic Cooper:** I wasn't as proud of the film back then as I am now. I didn't know who I was at that point in my life, and I had convinced myself that I only wanted to do arthouse films and heavy-hitting dramas. I took myself really seriously and didn't fully understand what entertainment means. I have to hold my hands up and admit that I wasn't fully grown enough to understand the effect that a film like *Mamma Mia!* can have.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** I have been absolutely amazed by the stamina of this film. I went to give a lecture at Oxford University a couple years ago that was quite serious—something with the Film Society discussing film noir. We got to the Q&A portion, and when a young woman put up her hand, I thought, *Here comes some high-minded question about German cinema...* And she says, "Miss Lloyd, I've gotta ask you: Do you think it's okay that I watched *Mamma Mia!* every single day for a year?"

**Catherine Johnson:** It's always fun to sit in a taxi and be asked what I do, and when I say I'm a writer the driver will inevitably ask, "Oh, have you written anything I may have heard of?" And I say, "Oh, I *know* you've heard of it..."

**Christine Baranski:** There's nothing like making a movie that children or teenagers appreciate. The director of *Cruel Intentions* had to practically beg me to do it because I would have to film during my hiatus from *Cybill*, when I really didn't wanna work. But I did it and now it's become one of those cult movies that young people still bring up to me all the time. *Mamma Mia!* similarly opened up my world in so many ways. I get stopped all over the world when I travel by people who love that movie.



A brochure rack in Skopelos advertising *Mamma Mia!*-themed tours around the island. Photo: Getty Images

**Colin Firth:** It was one of the most uncomplicatedly pleasurable experiences I've had in my career

**Pierce Brosnan:** *Mamma Mia!* will forever hold a special place in my heart. It's one of the greatest joys of my acting career, and one of the most magical times in my life.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** Nowadays, I get more comments from people about the bigger films I make, like Marvel or *Star Wars*. But people always look very happy when they see me and say, "I saw you in *Mamma Mia!*" Nobody ever says I gave a great performance, but they always have a big smile on their face. That always feels special.

**Dominic Cooper:** I've heard so many stories from people who say the movie helped them through a difficult moment in their life, or they watched it with someone who's no longer with us and it's become a happy memory of that person. I lost my mum quite unexpectedly at the beginning of this year, and looking back I have so many glorious memories of her from when she'd visit the set—I took a photo of her with Pierce where she's smiling harder than I've ever seen before. *Mamma Mia!* has become a comfort for me the same way it has for so many other people.

---

# “I DEFINITELY PICTURE *MAMMA MIA!* AS A TRILOGY...”

Walters, Brosnan, Seyfried, and Baranski in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again!* (2018). Photo: Courtesy of Universal Pictures

*It was a bit of a gamble when Universal greenlit a sequel to Mamma Mia! Aside from Grease 2, can you think of another live-action musical sequel—much less one that matched the success of the original? It took over a decade for someone to come up with an idea that satisfied all parties, with The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel filmmaker Ol Parker taking over directing and writing duties. Released in 2018, Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again follows Sophie as she prepares to reopen the Hotel Villa Donna in honor of her recently deceased mother—a creative choice made out of necessity, since Streep has an unofficial “no sequels” rule. The film instead acts as more of a prequel, flashing back to Donna’s youth in 1979 and showing how the Dynamos came together, where she met Sophie’s three dads, and how the single mom first ended up on Kalokairi. It was also another hit, earning over \$400 million worldwide as well as some surprisingly enthusiastic reviews—even Peter*

*Bradshaw was a fan. By incorporating hidden gems from ABBA's catalog—as well as recycling some hits used in the first film—Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again proved there might still be some juice left in the franchise. Perhaps enough for a third film?*

**Judy Craymer:** If I had my way, *Mamma Mia 3* would be in the can already. There has to be another one because people want it. The trouble is we're all getting older, and in the world of *Mamma Mia!*, things take their time. But we couldn't be in a better place as far as having a cast who are eager to do it.

**Amanda Seyfried:** I dare you to show me one person who doesn't want a third *Mamma Mia!*

**Colin Firth:** I'd be there like a shot for all of the reasons I've given about the joys of making the first two films. There just has to be a good enough idea to reunite us. It doesn't have to be a good idea in any lofty sense, but it just has to be a good enough script to give us another go.

**Pierce Brosnan:** Judy knows where to find me if they wanna have a third go around. I think everybody would feel the same way if she said, "I have a story, I have the script." We'd all do it in a heartbeat.

**Dominic Cooper:** I text Judy every other day, "Number three when?" I know we're all dying to do it, and Meryl was definitely bummed about not being in much of the second one. She understood that was where the story goes, but I remember her saying, "Well, I didn't wanna be *dead*."



**Judy Craymer:** I was chastised on social media for killing off Meryl, but I promise I didn't do it on purpose! She was hesitant about doing another film because she doesn't typically do sequels. But I know she loved coming back to film her scenes for *Here We Go Again!* She felt the love around her and the joy of reuniting with those people, so I think that made her more open to the prospect of a third.

**Meryl Streep:** I'm up for anything. I'll have to schedule a knee scoping before we film, but if there's an idea that excites me, I'm totally there. I told Judy if she could figure out a way to reincarnate Donna, I'm into that. Or it could be like in one of those soap operas where Donna comes back and reveals it was really her twin sister that died.

**Judy Craymer:** We went back and forth in time with the second one, so now we have the creative license to explore this world further. We still don't really know what happened to Lily James's version of Donna in those middle years. Or what happens to Donna and Sam after the first movie? Will Harry ever settle down? I think we have to bring a certain closure to these characters. All of their odysseys lead them back to the island, because that's where they all want to be in their older years.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** As of now we haven't heard any ideas. I would like to see another one only if I'm really excited about the script. It's much easier to buy into a second film than a third. This time I have to be even *more* convinced.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** I doubt any of us would shy away from doing another one. It's just a matter of finding enough songs to come up with a new story.

**Bjorn Ulvaeus:** Never say never, but I just don't think there are enough songs for a third *Mamma Mia!*

**Judy Craymer:** Benny and Bjorn always say there aren't enough songs, but the joy of *Mamma Mia!* is how you reimagine some of those classics that we already did in the other films. Plus, ABBA have just put out a brilliant new album—"I Still Have Faith in You" and "Don't Shut Me Down" would be perfect in a *Mamma Mia!* movie.

ABBA - Don't Shut Me Down (Lyric Video)



**Anthony Van Laast:** *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* proved that there's a way to reframe these songs in new ways. The challenge with the second film was making "Dancing Queen" even bigger than the first, so we put hundreds of dancers on boats and staged this massive party on a dock. The question now is how to do "Dancing Queen" even bigger and better a third time.

**Benny Andersson:** Part of the reason *Mamma Mia!* works so well is because the songs are all familiar. I personally think the first *Mamma Mia!* is really good. The music in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* is good, but I'm not so keen on that story because there *was* no story, and there was no Catherine Johnson.

**Judy Craymer:** I think Catherine would love another one but she doesn't wanna write it. And I think Phyllida appreciates what *Mamma Mia!* has become but wouldn't want to direct another.

**Phyllida Lloyd:** *Mamma Mia!* has done so much for my life, but I felt like I needed to get on and let someone else breathe life into it. I wasn't sure at the time where the story could go, but I think they did a great job with *Here We Go Again!* I'm sure they'll find a way into the third, but I don't think I'm the right person to do it. It's funny, though: I read some reviews of the second film and a couple of the same critics who really hated the first film were now saying, "I don't know what happened to me but I found myself weeping!" People like Peter Bradshaw and Mark Kermode really fancied the second film, and I just thought, *Thank God they're allowing themselves to finally have a bit of fun.*

**Amanda Seyfried:** Nobody is saying no, but nobody is saying yes either. The powers that be probably can't afford us to be honest. I hate to say it, because would I do *Mamma Mia 3* for free—of course I would—but that's not the business we're in. What's fair is fair, and I feel like a third film is gonna come down to something stupid like whether or not Universal wants to pay the money.

**Donna Langley:** Universal would love to make a third movie, and I'll leave it at that.

**Michael Moses:** We're all just waiting to hear from Judy and Gary on what the idea would be. It felt impossible to sequel-ize the first movie but they did it extremely successfully, so we already know there's an audience for it. There's definitely enthusiasm at the studio about doing *Mamma Three-a*, as we like to call it around here.

The extended cast and crew of the MMCU (*Mamma Mia!* Cinematic Universe). Photo: Getty Images

**Gary Goetzman:** We're definitely gonna do a third *Mamma Mia!* We already went through this with the second one—everybody was a little hesitant and then the big idea came along. There've been some conversations and it seems like every actor is dying to put their spandex back on again, so I really think it'll happen.

**Christine Baranski:** I told Judy that another *Mamma Mia!* might be hard to do seeing as we're all getting on in years. But wouldn't it be fun to do a special about the "making of" that shows scenes from both movies, and the actors doing a roundtable talking about their memories? Fly us all to Greece, shoot it by the water, and we can all sing some of our songs.

**Judy Craymer:** People always comment on my Instagram: "Come on, you coward, give us *Mamma Mia 3!*" Now that *Voyage* has opened, I think I may get my way. I definitely picture *Mamma Mia!* as a trilogy.

**Stellan Skarsgård:** I will be in an urn by the time there's a script for *Mamma Mia 3*, but I will gladly participate as a pile of ashes.

**Meryl Streep:** We may have to call it *Grand-Mamma Mia!* by the time we make it!

Photo: Courtesy of Shutterstock

*These interviews were conducted prior to the start of the SAG-AFTRA strike.*

## Vogue Daily

The latest in top fashion stories, editor's picks, and celebrity style.



SIGN UP NOW

By signing up you agree to our [User Agreement](#) (including the [class action waiver and arbitration provisions](#)), our [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#) and to receive marketing and account-related emails from Architectural Digest.. You can unsubscribe at any time. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

---

READ MORE

---

MUSIC

The 13 Best Movie Soundtracks to Cue Up Now

BY GIA YETIKYEL

## TV & MOVIES

What's It Like to Write the Biggest Rom-Com of the Year? We Asked *Anyone But You*  
Scribe Ilana Wolpert

BY EMMA SPECTER

## ARTS

British Theater's Coolest Power Couple Is Set to Take the West End by Storm

BY KATE LLOYD

## MUSIC

Margaret Qualley on Crafting a 'Love Letter' to Jack Antonoff With Her New Bleachers Music Video

BY LIAM HESS

## TV & MOVIES

How Glen Powell Charmed Hollywood

BY ILANA KAPLAN

## MAGAZINE

Homeward Bound: A New Revival of *The Wiz* Eases Its Way Back to Broadway

BY MARLEY MARIUS

### Sponsored Links by Taboola

**Kampf gegen Neurophatische Symptome? Versuche Sie dies sofort**

Deutsche Neuro

Mehr erfahren

**Erleichtern Sie Ihren Tinnitus, indem Sie dies einmal täglich tun - es ist genial**

Tinnitus Research

Mehr erfahren

**Dieser Heizungsbauer revolutioniert den Wärmepumpenmarkt**

thermondo

**Top-Ärzte: Wenn jemand Tinnitus (Ohrgeräusche) hat, sollte er dies sofort tun**

Tinnitus Research

Mehr erfahren

**Hausbesitzer aufgepasst: Die Revolution auf dem Wärmepumpenmarkt**

thermondo

**Faltenfrei in 2024? Dieses "Die Höhle der Löwen" Trendprodukt solltest du kennen**

glow-beauty.club

NEVER MISS A VOGUE MOMENT



Get 1 year of Vogue.  
Plus, a limited-edition tote.

SUBSCRIBE NOW