



Mamma Mia!

Tony Watkins

The Winner Takes it All

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Film title: Mamma Mia!

Director: Phyllida Lloyd

Screenplay: Catherine Johnson

Starring: Meryl Streep, Amanda Seyfried, Julie Walters, Christine Baranski, Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth, Stellan Skarsgård, Dominic Cooper

Producer: Judy Craymer

Score: Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus

Distributor: Universal Pictures

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Certificate: PG (UK); PG-13 (USA)

[Image]

Mamma Mia! is uplifting, exhilarating and irresistibly joyful. The story is silly, but I still haven't had so much fun watching a film for quite some time. Based on the hit musical which has been performed in 170 cities and seen by more than 30 million people, it was bound to be a winner in cinemas. The film version is a different kind of experience, of course, but it benefits in a number of ways: Its setting on a sun-soaked Greek island creates a wonderful context that theatre can never reproduce; the stellar cast is, on the whole, excellent (especially Meryl Streep and the irrepressible Julie Walters); and cinema is able to focus audience attention and show reactions in close-up, avoiding the need for the dialogue to carry all the emotion.

The task of constructing a story to act as a vehicle for around twenty ABBA songs must be extremely difficult. Writer Catherine Johnson has, however, cleverly created a context for many of the biggest hits. Having 'Waterloo' during the final credit sequence is completely gratuitous, but it clearly couldn't fit anywhere else, and by that point, the audience want nothing more than a chance to clap – or sing – along. Many of the songs, written by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus tell, or at least suggest, a narrative, and it was this theatricality that first inspired producer Judy Craymer to make a musical around them. The result was a story that Craymer and Johnson, along with director Phyllida Lloyd, believed '*had universal resonance, with an appeal that crossed age, gender and national boundaries.*' Judy Craymer remarks, '*Whoever the audience is, whatever age the audience is, they see themselves up on the stage in some form. They seem to totally immerse themselves in the experience. The songs have a magical and timeless quality.*'

Turning this theatrical box office success into a movie was an obvious move. But it wasn't until 2003 that Craymer felt the time was right, and the trio of women set to work adapting it for the big screen, working closely, as before with Andersson and Ulvaeus. The cast all appear to be enjoying themselves immensely. Stellan Skarsgård commented on his first time dancing in a film, '*I enjoyed it enormously and tried to have as much fun as I could. The whole experience has been totally liberating. All you can do is enjoy it and go for it.*' The end result has been one of those few films that draw the audience into some kind of active participation: clapping, singing, even dancing.

The film is a love story, but it's about family love and close friendship as much as romance. Sophie (Amanda Seyfried) is about to marry Sky (Dominic Cooper), the love of her life. They plan to stay on the Greek island where she lives with her mother, Donna (Meryl Streep) who struggles to run a small hotel on her own. However, Sophie has one regret: her father won't be walking her down the aisle as she doesn't know who he is. So she sneaks a look at her mother's diary to find out, and is taken aback to discover that her mother had slept with three different men around the time she was conceived: any one of them could be her

father. She secretly sends invitations to the wedding to Sam (Pearce Brosnan), Harry (Colin Firth) and Bill (Stellan Skarsgård), ostensibly from her mother. She is naively convinced that once she sees them, she will instantly recognise her father.

Nothing is that simple, naturally, and once the three potential fathers have arrived, Sophie realises that she may have opened up a can of worms. Her attempt to keep the men hidden from her mother fails, and Donna is, unsurprisingly, disturbed to see all three of them turn up together after twenty years on the day before her daughter's wedding. Donna doesn't guess that it's Sophie's doing, and confides to her old friends, single writer Rosie (Julie Walters) and wealthy divorcée Tanya (Christine Baranski), about the secret that she's kept for two decades and has now come back to haunt her.

Both Sophie's deception, and Donna's more serious, long-standing deception of Sophie have the potential to create a rift between them. But the bond between mother and daughter is a strong one, and they are quick to forgive. Sophie is surprisingly unfazed by the discovery she makes in the pages of her mother's diary. She is clearly very surprised, but she seems to view her mother's sexual antics as bohemian, romantic and rather exciting. There is no sense that Donna's behaviour had been inappropriate. It's evidently acceptable, though still a little shocking, to have unprotected sex with three different men within a matter of days, two of which were one-night stands. After all, it resulted in a beautiful, well-adjusted daughter who has made her mother's life complete (Donna reflects at one point that she hasn't had sex in years and doesn't miss it). At one point, Sophie tells Donna, *'I don't care if you've slept with hundreds of men.'*

On the other hand, Sam is censured for walking away from his relationship with Donna because he was already engaged. He had leapt onto the horns of a dilemma by leaping into Donna's bed: he had fallen in love with Donna and compromised his relationship with his fiancée, yet felt he still had a commitment to her and would inevitably have broken one heart or the other. It's hard to know what the right thing to do is when one has created a moral mess. At least Sam eventually apologises.

There is no sense here of the need for working at the life-long exclusive commitment that marriage entails. Tanya's three divorces are a source of amusement (and of her wealth, it seems) and Sophie is encouraged on more than one occasion not to actually marry Sky. At one point Sophie has a little outburst, saying that she doesn't want to repeat her mother's mistakes. Maybe she won't, but I wouldn't hold out much hope. We all know that in the contemporary world, marriage is often not the lasting thing it should be, as Tanya shows. But UK statistics show that those who only live together are likely to stay together for a significantly shorter period than those formalise their commitment and get married. In a society where commitment is such a short-lived and fickle thing, there is little incentive for anyone to take the long-term view and work to resolve the difficulties that inevitably arise. Unfortunately, *Mamma Mia!* seems to suggest that in the area of romantic relationships, you should just do whatever feels right at the time, and sort out the consequences twenty years down the line.

Although sex, romance and love are largely what this story revolves around, I think there are other profoundly significant themes being explored. Perhaps the most fundamental is that of identity. It is, of course, bound up to a large degree with our relationships with others, but not only romantic attachments. Sophie believes that, *'everything will fall into place when I meet my dad,'* because, *'it's about knowing who I am.'* While she does seem wonderfully well-adjusted, she clearly feels that something vital is lacking through not knowing her father, and her imminent wedding brings this into sharp focus. It's hardly surprising, since the relationships with our parents are almost always the most decisive in making us who we are. Of course there are many, like Sophie who miss out on knowing one or even both parents as they grow up, and they turn out just fine. But that doesn't mean that it's not hard for them, or that they don't feel the lack. Psychologist Oliver James argues in his book *Britain on the Couch* that what he refers to as *'broken attachments'*, fractured or non-existent significant relationships, is one of the two biggest causes of unhappiness in the western world. It's no surprise that director Phyllida Lloyd says that, *'The story is the ultimate fairy tale. It touches something really fundamental in the audience about identity, about*

lost parents, lost children. It's an epic story.'

Lloyd's comments are a reminder that it's not only Sophie who has identity issues. Rosie describes herself as a 'lone wolf', but that seems to be as much because of her lack of confidence in herself as a genuine desire to be independent. Bill is also a loner, but what drives him to seek adventure on his own rather than in the company of others? Harry, once evidently capable of great spontaneity, has become a restrained, up-tight businessman. Sam has spent two decades lamenting a lost love and is now the wrong side of a marriage. And Donna, left to bring up a baby alone, not knowing which of the three men she loved and lost is the father, struggling to make ends meet and to look after the hotel. Now she is about to lose, at least in some extent, the daughter who has also been her closest friend through some difficult times. Meryl Streep says that *Mamma Mia!* is, 'all about past mistakes – your big fat regrets, your dreams, your hopes, your happiness – right there where you live.'

It is inevitable in a film like this that everyone lives happily ever after, and of course problems are overcome. Colin Firth remarks, 'There's a real tenderness about the notion of these three grizzled, middle-aged men who find out there's more to their lives than they thought.' This joyful overcoming of obstacles is a large part of what makes *Mamma Mia!* such an uplifting film: they are all winners. The audience needs to rejoice with these characters discovering their happiness. When life, for many of us, is burdened by difficult circumstances, personal hang-ups or unrequited affection, we need stories like this that celebrate resolution, fulfilment and true love.

Once again, the message seems to be that you need to go with what feels right, discover who you really are, and go for what you really want. The problem is that this puts the emphasis on each individual doing whatever is necessary to achieve his or her personal happiness. It is ultimately self-absorbed and individualist, and while there are no losers in *Mamma Mia!*, there are in real life if we follow this course. In the real world, our personal happiness doesn't magically coincide with the happiness of everyone else. Maybe personal happiness isn't actually the best thing to be seeking; it can be a very fickle thing, after all. Paradoxically, we often find our deepest

satisfaction in bringing happiness to others. And ultimately, happiness in this world will always be tainted and compromised because life is hard, bad things happen and people easily slip into selfishness. This life will always disappoint. Total happiness, complete fulfilment and the perfect expression of love will only be found in relationship with God in the new heavens and the new earth. We can begin to experience it now, however, through Jesus Christ, and it radically changes our perspectives on ourselves and on others. It deals with our past mistakes and our 'big, fat regrets', and it clarifies our dreams and our happiness. It makes us seek the best for others, brings us real satisfaction, and gives us the clear sense of identity we long for. This really is an epic story.

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