

Say y'all be there

Since the global success of *Mamma Mia!* made Judy Craymer a producing powerhouse, she can afford to pick whatever project she wants. She talks to Nick Smurthwaite about working with the Spice Girls, what inspired *Viva Forever!* and how Jennifer Saunders keeps the cast on their toes

F Scott Fitzgerald's line about the rich being different from you and me comes to mind as I sit in reception awaiting my audience with Judy Craymer, producer of *Mamma Mia!* and the about-to-open *Viva Forever!* There are original artworks on the wall, expensive furnishings and decor all around, beverages on demand and an air of ordered calm.

When we meet, the willowy Craymer is wearing black leather trousers, a baggy silk shirt and killer heels. She is quietly spoken most of the time, answering every question in a considered fashion, but occasionally erupting into a fruity guffaw.

Does she still regard the Society of London Theatre as an old boys' club. I ask at one point?

"Oh, that was a long time ago," she replies, "I think I'm probably one of the old boys now, don't you?" Cue fruity guffaw. "After 13 years of *Mamma Mia!*, I do feel part of the landscape."



Viva Forever! producer Judy Craymer with writer Jennifer Saunders

Indeed Craymer has emerged, along with Sonia Friedman, Rosemary Squire and Nicola Burns, as one of the West End's most dynamic women, every bit as driven and hard-working as Cameron Mackintosh and Bill Kenwright. The Spice Girls' invocation 'girl power' – soon to be revisited in *Viva Forever!* – might have been invented for her.

Since 1999, when it opened in London, *Mamma Mia!* has played in every major city in the world, from Las Vegas to Shanghai, and grossed more than £2 billion at the box office. Craymer is well known for being the 'mamma' of them all – hands-on with every single one of multiple versions of the show. But surely, after five or six years of duplication she learned to delegate to her team?

"I don't think I ever did let go," she admits. "It was full on for years. In the first two and a half years alone, we'd mounted a US tour, productions in Toronto and Australia, and the Broadway run. It was so overworked, I got glandular fever and I thought I was going to die. I never took any time off to be sick because I couldn't stop. I had to keep going."

"Things have calmed down a lot now. We've just reopened the show in Moscow, and we've got Stuttgart reopening early next year. It comes and goes in Korea and Japan."

As a child, Craymer was taken to the theatre a lot by her parents and remembers seeing the original production of *Oliver!* (maybe that's why she shows always with an exclamation mark) in the early 1980s. After a stage management course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, she landed a job with the backstage team of *Cats* before going to work for Tim Rice as a production assistant.

By the mid-1980s, still only 26, Craymer was running the production company that put on *Chess*, in which Tim Rice collaborated with Abba masterminds Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvæus. "It was a very happy time for me, everything was a huge learning curve. If I hadn't met Benny and



Viva Forever! cast members Lucy Pargeter, Deshaune Fennell, Chelley, Hannah John-Kane and Sade Adu

Bjorn and earned their trust, *Mamma Mia!* might never have happened. Somehow the Abba songs made more sense to me after I'd met them. I used to play them over and over to myself on battered old cassettes.

"It was because they knew and liked me that they indulged my dream to make a musical from their songs. By the mid-1990s, Bjorn in particular thought I was on to something. Others were understandably sceptical about it because I had no track record in production."

In an effort to learn more about project and script development, Craymer worked in film and television for several years, and it was on a TV version of Nevill's Island that she met the writer/director Terry Johnson who steered her towards fellow writer Catherine Johnson (no relation) as a possible collaborator on the Abba project.

"I knew by then that it had to be a story involving two generations, with a holiday setting, that worked with the Abba songs. Catherine got

it straight away. We worked on it together, then sent it off to Bjorn and Benny."

Compared to *Mamma Mia!* which took 15 years to come to fruition, the gestation of *Viva Forever!* has been a mere nine years, if you count a chance encounter between Craymer and Simon Fuller, the Spice Girls' former manager, in a London restaurant in 2003.

"The friends I was with introduced me to him and I couldn't think of anything to say, so I blurted out, 'Have you ever thought of doing a Spice Girls musical?'. He now says it he called him thinking about it. He sent me several years later when I was in post-production with the film of *Mamma Mia!*, and I didn't want to get involved at that time."

"Then in 2009 I met up with Geri Halliwell and Emma Bunton, and I came away feeling invigorated by their energy and ambition, what they'd created, girl power and all that. I started to wonder how you'd be affected by having a daughter who

suddenly becomes famous aged 19. "Whatever we did with it, I wanted it to be funny which is why Jennifer Saunders was the perfect choice as writer. She has the ability to look at people's lives and see the comedic power."

Saunders also has fun when it comes to the Spice Girls, having sent up Ginger Spice, aka Halliwell, in a rollicking Comic Relief sketch, with Dawn French (as Posh, Lulu (Baby), Llewella Gideon (Scary) and Kathy Burke (Sporty) in 1997. Craymer says she has been very much involved in rehearsals – "They're always fearful when Jennifer is there, worrying they are not being funny enough" – and keeps her endlessly amused.

One of the many benefits of her affluence is that Craymer has been able to bankroll the new show's development without having to remortgage her house, or go cap in hand to investors. "When I was trying to get *Mamma Mia!* off the ground, I had to raise money to do anything, even to rent an office in which to work."

She has also been able to raise more than a million pounds towards breast cancer research through the sale of *Mamma Mia!* T-shirts, and donated £125,000 to the Theatre Trust for its local theatres refurbishment fund.

Despite the huge success of *Mamma Mia!* or maybe because of it, Craymer refuses to be over-confident about the new show, muttering something about "losing my shirt" as she is showing me out. Whatever its critical reception, the box office advance suggests it is destined to become another worldwide phenomenon. So how does the 55-year-old producer view the prospect of another decade of frantic cloning?

"Yeah, bring it on," she laughs. "The last ten years have been the training – just a practice run. I would love *Viva* to go on half the journey *Mamma Mia!* has been on, only I'd like it to be a bit quicker because I get too old." *Viva Forever!* previews at the Piccadilly Theatre, London, from November 27. Booking until June 1, www.vivaforeverthemusical.com

How the stage was set for girl power

Outspoken, crusading and confident, if the Spice Girls had an unofficial leader then Geri Halliwell was certainly it. She talks about the group's involvement in *Viva Forever!* and how she owes her career to a certain publication

The Stage is seldom inclined to blow its own trumpet, but there are times when even a modest organ such as ours has to pucker up and give it large.

Only this week Geri Halliwell, the artist formerly known as Ginger Spice, virtually attributed her entire career to the good offices of *The Stage*.

"If it hadn't been for an advert in *The Stage* I'd never have met the others and the Spice Girls might never have happened," she says.

The advertisement in question, placed by Heart Management in February 1994, was appealing for 18 to 25-year-old singer-dancers with a view to forming a "female pop act for a record recording deal". Applicants needed to be "streetwise, outgoing, ambitious and dedicated".

Of the 400 who answered the ad, Victoria Beckham and the two Mels were always in contention. Emma Bunton was drafted in much later, while Halliwell very nearly missed the boat.

She explains: "I'd already cut out the ad and stuck it on my bedroom mirror. I had every intention of auditioning. But then I went to stay with my uncle in the Pyrenees and got horrendously sunburnt. My face swelled up like a big, fat tomato to the point where I couldn't even go out."

"I always loved pop music, and I'd dreamt of being a solo artist. As soon as I met the girls I really enjoyed being around them, even though I had no idea where it was going. They talked a musical theatre language I'd never heard before. I was more of a street girl, into



dance music, but I really admire people who work in the theatre, how hard everybody works.

"We decided early on that we'd make it a group of unity and equality, so everybody got a chance to sing."

Halliwell says she and "the girls" first talked about creating a Spice Girls musical 14 years ago, and more recently during their reunion tour. She and Bunton were so fired up about it that in 2009 they approached Judy Craymer.

"We both really admired what Judy had done with *Mamma Mia!* She is somebody with a lot of spirit and determination," she says. "Over lunch we looked at a DVD of *Cover Girl*, an old Rita Hayworth movie, and we talked a lot about love, identity, fame – all the things we'd written about in our songs."

Craymer was happy to include Halliwell and the others in the development of *Viva Forever!* to the extent that they were involved in casting and musical direction.

"I got to the point where we felt we should just let Judy go her own way," says Halliwell. "She has been really kind, sharing the process with us."

"The story Jennifer Saunders has come up with is about friendship and love and finding out who you are, which is very much what the Spice Girls were about. There are different elements of all of us in the five main characters. Jennifer has subtly worked our different character traits into each of them."

"As far as I'm concerned, the whole process has been joyous."

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