

Judy Craymer, who made millions producing Mamma Mia!, talks to Nick Curtis about the 'grief

Failure? It's like a badge of honour



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IT'S a kind of grief," says producer Judy Craymer in her first interview since she announced the closure of her Spice Girls musical Viva Forever! next month, a mere eight months after its opening. The 52-year-old is putting a brave face on it – she's all throaty chuckles, skintight leather treads and perky peroxide updo – but the failure cuts deep. "I still feel heartbroken," she says. "In theatre you build a family with the cast and crew and the creative team, and you take for granted that these are people you are going to live with. There's nothing worse than giving bad news ..."

Viva Forever! was supposed to equal the success of Craymer's Abba juggernaut Mamma Mia!, which has been seen by 54 million people on stage and has so far made £1.3billion worldwide. The Spice show followed a similar core formula, weaving familiar songs around a mother-daughter story about love and loyalty – in this case, the duty that a member of a girl band, singled out for solo success on a talent show, owes her friends and her adoptive mum.

With comedian Jennifer Saunders an intriguing (and marketable) choice as writer, the show opened with a £3.5million advance but bookings dropped off a cliff after savage reviews. Viva Forever! was dismissed as lazy, trite, and the Spice Girls' canon too insubstantial to sustain a musical. One critic suggested you'd find more female empowerment "at a Taliban finishing school". By the end of April, Craymer decided to cut her (and her investors') losses at £5million.

After the show on May 1, cast and crew were summoned to a meeting, where Craymer's executive producer Andrew Treagus told them they would not see out their one-year contracts. Craymer herself was in America, phoning the show's creative team and her investors, including Spice svengali Simon Fuller and the five girls themselves – who originally proposed the idea of a Spice musical.

"I spoke to all of them individually, except Victoria, of course – I spoke to her 'peeps'," says Craymer. "They were all great, very supportive, big strong girls: I was a bit tearful, and I think they've all seen me as the kind of mother figure who gets things sorted. I had been to the show with Emma [Bunton] and Holly Willoughby a few weeks before and had a ball. They knew it was tough after those reviews but what I love about the Spice Girls is they have this attitude: they always got bad reviews, but so what?"

Craymer says she expected Scary Spice Mel B to be scary but she wasn't, and lauds Geri Halliwell for revisiting Viva Forever! and meeting the cast backstage before singing the show's praises on her blog. ("I can hand-on-heart tell it's not sh**," she wrote, "it's great entertainment!") Mel C commiserated, mid-tour of Jesus Christ Superstar. "They know

what it's like as performers," says Craymer. "The irony is that if they hadn't become the Spice Girls, they probably would be doing the rounds of [musical] auditions – well, not now, probably. And who knows, they might not have been good enough for a West End show. But they became the biggest band in the world instead." She laughs nervously.

Craymer learned that the worst part of her role is telling people they have lost their job, or a big chunk of money, something she's never had to do on Mamma Mia!'s many international incarnations. "I have a reputation now that people gambled on," she says. "But it is always a gamble in theatre." Her own losses are substantial but sustainable, though she insists estimates putting her fortune at between £62m and £90m are inflated: and in any case, she has employees now, "dependents", whereas when she was struggling to get Mamma Mia! on she had "nothing to lose". She got very annoyed when David Mellor and Ken Livingstone, discussing the closure of the show while reviewing the newspapers on television, suggested it wouldn't affect the Spices' bank balance: "All of them,

of closing her Spice Girls musical, and working with Posh, Scary, Baby, Sporty and Ginger



Losing their spice: Judy Craymer at the Novello Theatre, left, and with Jennifer Saunders and the Spice Girls at the press night for Viva Forever!, above

apart from Victoria, are working women, and mothers."

La Beckham – who actually is a working mum as head of a successful clothing empire – floats on a different level of fame above the other Spices. But on the night I went to see the show, it was Victoria who stalked past me, a wanly pretty wisp of cheekbones and bug-eye shades, to see Viva Forever! for herself, putting the lie to rumours she wasn't behind the show. "When I first spoke to Victoria, and David, and her parents five years ago, they were all big fans of Mamma Mia!," says Craymer. "Victoria said, 'we've got to do a show [together] to give my mum something else to love.'" Apparently Cruz, Brooklyn and Romeo Beckham saw Viva with their gran last week, and persuaded VB to see it again before it closed.

Craymer concedes there might have been a bit of misogyny and schadenfreude from critics towards her second oestrogen-powered musical. "They were just doing their job," she adds. "The problem is, that job goes forward onto Twitter and blogs." Andrew Lloyd Webber may have railed against "juke-box musicals", a term Craymer hates, but he rang her to offer a consoling drink after the reviews came out.

She doesn't blame the cast, much less the songs ("I love Spice up Your Life – and what is Wannabe about?"). She

concedes the Spice Girls are a Marmite act but points to their huge international fanbase. Jennifer Saunders is "not a playwright, and wouldn't pretend to be, but she does understand how to create characters, and she has a sharp eye for the ridiculous and for popular culture". Any weaknesses in the story, Craymer implies, are partly down to her, as she and Saunders developed it "organically" over four years.

True, there's a recession on, "but we're always in a recession" and shows keep opening. Viva Forever! was up against a proven Broadway hit, The Book of Mormon: but Mamma Mia! opened in 1999 against the Lion King, which had all of Disney's battalions behind it. The Piccadilly used to be one of London's "lost" theatres, a graveyard for shows, but it now sits amid the regenerated Café Royal, Brasserie Zedel and a forthcoming Jamie Oliver restaurant. When they opened in November, Craymer thought she'd ride the coat-tails

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of Jubilympic enthusiasm. "There may have been an element of – too ghastly to bear, Judy Craymer, Spice Girls and Jennifer Saunders," she ponders. "I'd still like people to see it and enjoy it."

It is an implication written into every article about Craymer, who is unmarried and childless, that she chose musical theatre over marriage and a family. "Because I'm a woman, if I am passionate about something, it's seen as maternal," she says. "I can't imagine having gone through the last 15 years with a family in tow but I never made a conscious choice: do I have a family, or do I do Mamma Mia!? It's just how life worked out." For the record she does have a partner she chooses not to name: "I do have a romantic life. I have never been short of suitors."

Born in Mill Hill, the daughter of a lawyer father and a mother who was a nurse and a school bursar, Craymer was privately educated at The Mount School and studied theatre production at Guildhall, after the death of her horse, Tarquin, from Navicular disease put paid to her dreams of being a show-jumper. She worked with or for Cameron Mackintosh, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice in the Seventies and Eighties, and met Abba's Benny and Björn when they were working with Rice on Chess. She spent years persuading them to give her the stage rights to Abba's songs, giving up work and her home to bring the musical to the stage. "I had to sell my flat to clear an overdraft in the Nineties, and I was telling this man in Barclays that I was doing this musical and he said, 'why Abba and not the Spice Girls?'," she recalls. "Because of course they were huge then." Now Craymer has taken Viva Forever!'s failure "like a man". All the big producers had flaps: "It's like I've got my badge of honour now." She's turned her attention back to the ongoing behemoth that is Mamma Mia!, but once the dust has settled, Viva Forever! could be retooled for a foreign production, or licensed to schools. "If I do another show, maybe it will be with an original score," she says, then corrects herself. "I mean when, not if."

■ Viva Forever! runs until June 29 at the Piccadilly Theatre, from £25: vivaforeverthemusical.com