



PAUL GROVER

Girl power storms back

A Spice Girls musical? Oh yes, Jennifer Saunders and Mamma Mia! producer Judy Craymer tell Anita Singh

How do you follow a hit like *Mamma Mia!*, the musical that turned Abba's back catalogue into a stage and screen phenomenon and gave us Meryl Streep doing the splits to *Dancing Queen*?

If you're Judy Craymer, you hope to strike gold a second time. The *Mamma Mia!* creator is back with a new show, this time featuring the songs of the Spice Girls. *Viva Forever!* will open in the West End on December 11 and launched yesterday with all five Spices in attendance.

Before you run for the hills, this is not a Spice Girls biopic complete with pouty Victoria and shouty Mel B. Instead, it takes the same feelgood formula that worked for *Mamma Mia!*, weaving a storyline about female friendship and mother-daughter bonding around some memorable pop tunes. The similarities are obvious, right down to that exclamation mark in the title.

Jennifer Saunders is the scriptwriter, taking on her first West End musical. It took her all of 40 minutes from hearing about the project to signing up. "I couldn't imagine anything I would want to do more," she says when we meet in Craymer's London office. Saunders has sent up the Spice Girls over the years, including spoof Comic Relief tribute act the Sugar Lumps, but she regards them with great affection.

"My daughters, who are now in their twenties, were such fans of the Spice Girls when they were growing up, and going to the concerts was quite joyous. And I just didn't want someone to mess it up, because I had a sense of how it should be, and I thought I'd hate to go to it and it not be what I wanted."

The heroine of her tale is Viva, a young woman who lives with her chaotic but loving mother. She enters a television talent contest with three friends

but is made to ditch them and go solo.

Such shows demand a sob story, and when Viva confides that she is adopted, her mentor contrives to engineer a reunion with her birth mother live on air. It's not giving too much away to say that, in the end, love conquers all.

The fictional talent show is a mishmash of *The X Factor*, *The Voice* and their like, and Saunders has an eye for the absurdities – and cruelties – of such programmes. "Like when they say, 'You haven't heard the last of me...' I'm sorry, we have. It's a whole programme full of people you've heard the last of. I watch and enjoy them but I'm more horrified by *The X Factor* now because it's so formulaic and it doesn't allow for any sort of joy any more."

Saunders's work has always celebrated female friendship, from *Girls On Top* and *Absolutely Fabulous* to her partnership with Dawn French. She had never met Craymer before this collaboration, but the two women are now close.

Their friendship was forged in difficult circumstances. In October 2009, Saunders was diagnosed with breast cancer – now, thankfully, in remission – and she began working on *Viva Forever!* two months into her chemotherapy treatment. She credits the work with keeping her going, and laughing, through a dark time.

"It was a great thing for me. Judy used to come over and we'd sit and play these Spice Girls songs endlessly, because the first thing you have to do is listen to the lyrics and formulate a story," Saunders says. "I'd

Two become one: Jennifer Saunders, the show's scriptwriter, with its creator, Judy Craymer, who previously made Mamma Mia!; below, the Spice Girls in their Nineties heyday

“It isn't just an excuse to put the Spice Girls songs on stage



keep saying to her, 'I might look rough but my brain still works!'"

Craymer chimes in: "I used to ignore the fact that she wasn't feeling at her best and was going through this horrendous, intense chemotherapy. I'd just go over every week with my iPod and say, 'Waddaya think of this?'" They dissolve in giggles at the memory. These two laugh a lot. "Who'd have thought a couple of 54-year-olds would be gabbing on about the Spice Girls?" Craymer wonders at one point. "I know," snorts Saunders. "It's ridiculous."

It was the Spice Girls, a decade on from their split, who approached Craymer about the project. As Geri Halliwell tells me later: "I read this article about Judy, about how it had taken her 10 years to get *Mamma Mia!* off the ground, and I thought she was amazing. So I wrote to her saying, 'We love you. Meet us, please!'"

Compared with the bands coming off the Simon Cowell production line or the over-sexualised female singers populating the charts, the Spice Girls appear positively quaint. "Everything now seems so manicured and manufactured, but the Spice Girls would go into a TV studio and run riot," says Saunders. "I think that's what girls really loved – the idea that you didn't have to behave in a certain way or look a certain way or pretend to be lovely."

Saunders has woven in elements of the Spice narrative – the rivalries, the insecurities – but Craymer is at pains to point out this isn't a tribute show. "It isn't just an excuse to put the Spice Girls' songs on stage. It's a beautiful story, properly told. Whether you like the Spice Girls or not, you will love these songs within a

musical." The band certainly agree, with Victoria Beckham opining that the show will "introduce girl power to a whole new generation".

Can *Viva Forever!* match *Mamma Mia!*'s success? That show demonstrated Craymer's Midas touch – 50 million tickets sold, £1.2 billion in worldwide receipts and still going strong in the West End after 13 years. While not counting her chickens, she already has her eye on Broadway and beyond. "A film would be the great ambition, but we've got to get London right," she says.

Saunders chips in: "I'm feeling more confident at each stage that it can be a good

product. As far as business goes, it's so fickle, isn't it? Hopefully there are enough Spice Girls fans for a couple of nights."

If watching the show is half as much fun as these two have had making it, *Viva Forever!* promises to be a good night out. "If someone falls off that stage, I'm up there," jokes Saunders. Craymer says: "If there's ever a problem and the scenery stops – between Jen and the audience and the Spice Girls, we'll never have a problem entertaining people."

Viva Forever! previews at the Piccadilly Theatre from Nov 27. Tickets: vivaforeverthemusical.com

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