

VIVA
FOREVER!

SPICE UP YOUR LIFE

WEST END



Brainchild of the Mamma Mia! producer Judy Craymer and written by Jennifer Saunders, the Spice Girls musical Viva Forever! launches next month. **Giles Hattersley** goes backstage to discover if it's what the band want, what they really really want

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



Baby, 36 Emma Bunton had a successful solo career before moving into radio presenting (she has a show on Heart).

She's also been a recurring character on *Absolutely Fabulous* and has two sons with Jade Jones of the boyband *Damage*



Ginger, 40 After quitting the band in 1998, Geri Halliwell had four solo British No 1s, sold 12m records globally, and had a stint as a UN celebrity ambassador. She lives in London with her daughter, Bluebell



Scary, 37 Living in LA and a judge on the Australian *X Factor*, Melanie Brown has never been far from the tabloid spotlight.

In 2007 she made the actor Eddie Murphy take a paternity test to prove he was the father of her second child



Sporty, 38 Melanie Chisholm has been making her name in musical theatre, with an Olivier award-winning turn in *Blood Brothers* and as *Mary Magdalene* in a tour of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. She has a three-year-old daughter, Scarlett



Posh, 38 Thanks to endless press fascination, four children and marriage to David Beckham, Victoria is perhaps the most successful former Spice Girl. Now living in LA, she turned her back on music and launched a high-end fashion label

looks well, wrapped up in scarves in the mid-afternoon gloom of the theatre bar. She says taking on the gig has been a no-brainer, even though it coincided with the chemotherapy she was undergoing for breast cancer. Her daughters were massive Spice Girls fans and she loved the feminism lite that was a positive influence on them while growing up. Girl power, she reckons, is neither ephemeral nor complex. It's just the idea that being a girl is good, and girls can do anything. End of.

"That's the great thing the Spice Girls had," she says. "You could be whoever you wanted to be. You could just be a girl — a tomboy girl, a pretty girl, a busty girl. I love them because they were never sexualised. They could be sexy, but were never ➤➤➤"

me just before the film of *Mamma Mia!* came out [in 2008]. I sent Simon an email, saying I had to concentrate on the movie. Obviously, you don't write letters like that to Simon," she laughs, "because I didn't hear from him again. But I did hear from Geri in 2009. She wrote a sweet email, so I met her and Emma [Bunton]."

In fact, the girls had wanted to do a musical for years. "It was an idea that was talked about all the time," says Halliwell, but Craymer hadn't been looking to do another jukebox musical (a term she hates). "I don't think people understand how these shows really work. I don't know if I really understand," she laughs, "but you couldn't just listen to a catalogue of songs on a Friday and have a show by Monday. You need a lot of time to make them work." She went round to Ginger Spice's for tea and was bamboozled — Halliwell was charming but persistent. "She wasn't going to let me out of the front door. You don't not commit to Geri." Unless you're one of her boyfriends, apparently.

"More than anything, I listened to the songs, so I got the boundaries and structure. Then Geri would call from a ski lift or somewhere and we'd chat away. That was October, and by December I'd met Victoria. I took her and her mum, Jackie, to see Mel C in *Blood Brothers*." It turns out that Posh is much keener on Viva than her dour appearance at the press launch suggested. "When we opened *Mamma Mia!*, Victoria came about 18 times," says Craymer. "She told me she had always wanted to be the White Cat in *Cats*. I thought, if these girls hadn't become the Spice Girls, they would have been auditioning for West End shows."

But become the Spice Girls they did. It's curious, looking back, to recall just how outrageously successful they were. The biggest British band since the Beatles, their reign on global charts makes you wonder if we all went temporarily insane. And yet they stood for something. Ask any woman who was playground age in the late 1990s and she'll probably tell you girl power was no bad thing.

"The world has changed," says Craymer. "Now you have to explain why you like the Spice Girls, but they are part of our landscape. They were pre-Blair, pre-9/11 and pre-talent shows as we know them now, when you really had to push the door down to get into record companies — and they did. The songs are about friendship and fame. What drives friendship? What destroys it?" She didn't want the show to be their story, but wanted a "strong essence" of that moment in time. But who would write it?

I meet Saunders at the Piccadilly Theatre, where the show opens in four weeks' time. She



PAGE TURNER It was a 'no-brainer' for Jennifer Saunders to write the script. Top right: models of the show's set. Bottom right: Hannah John-Kamen (left), playing Viva, and Sporty Spice (right) get stuck into rehearsals



soundbite ("We can spread the message of girl power to a whole new generation"), then pegged it back to LA as if she were being chased by a swarm of bees. But perhaps even Posh — whose £190m marital fortune is more than four times that of the rest of the girls' put together — can't turn her nose up at the money. After all, the Spice Girls sold more than 75m records in their short career. For anyone who feels queasy at the words "girl power", there are still plenty of fans to delight, including a lucrative trifecta of mums, daughters and gays. A bit like Abba, really.

Just as well. *Viva Forever!* needs to be a monster hit if it's to become a cash cow for the Spices. It will have cost a bomb to stage. "I don't know what the budget was. Nobody ever told

me — until they told me I'd gone over," jokes Peter McKintosh, the production designer. The show could earn the girls £3m a year each, but most musicals play to packed houses for between six months and two years before they turn a profit. Craymer will be hoping to take her extravaganza around the world, pronto. Luckily, the Spice Girls were never just a British phenomenon — their debut single topped the charts in 31 countries, including America.

But how does one begin to translate the likes of Wannabe, *Spice up Your Life* and *Stop* into a theatrical experience capable of raking in millions while maintaining a *souçon* of integrity? I head to Craymer's Mayfair office to find out. I am led into an elegant white room,

with fashion illustrations on the walls and pricey gluten-free chocolates on the coffee table. Craymer is similarly well put together, in black Céline. In fact, the only bits of tat in the place are five Spice Girls dolls, which she rearranges on the shelves above her desk in line with how they're currently getting on with each other.

It was nearly a decade ago that the idea for a Spice Girls musical came to her. "In 2003 I was at dinner [at Bibendum], and Simon Fuller [the all-powerful manager who looked after the girls in their heyday] was at another table. We went over for coffee. I didn't know what to say to him, so I blurted out, 'Have you ever thought of doing a Spice Girls musical?' He smiled sweetly, and I didn't think any more of it. But he called

'IF THEY HADN'T BEEN THE SPICE GIRLS, THEY'D HAVE BEEN IN THE WEST END'



overtly for a male audience. They never played on sexiness.”

Saunders thinks that since the Spices ruled the charts, the fame game has got “shoddy”. TV talent contests have taken over, and a negative, bullying vibe permeates. Also, whatever you think of their songs, it’s hard not to concede the Spices were good at being famous: pinching Prince Charles’s bottom, hanging out with Nelson Mandela, wearing flag-based couture. “What have we got now — Little Minx, Little Mix? Is that what they’re called?” she tuts about X Factor 2011’s girl-band winners. “They look a bit dull already. Too much hair.”

But what would it be like for a group of more interesting girls with big dreams and short skirts trying to make it today? The story took shape as Saunders typed away. Meet Viva, a plucky upstart who lives on a houseboat in groovy Camden in northwest London, who is auditioning for telly’s biggest show (a thinly disguised X Factor) with her mates. Naturally, the judges, a cynical coven of manipulative media ghouls, offer her a chance to go to the next stage without her pals. Gasp! What will she do? Toss in maternal guilt, adoption issues, love stories and an Arlene Phillips-style struggle with ageing, and you gotta show, folks. It does sound a bit flimsy on paper — but then so does Mamma Mia!, and more than 50m people have sat down in a theatre to watch it. But Mamma Mia! had Abba’s classics as its bedrock. Can the Spices’ gossamer-thin radio pop really work as song-and-dance numbers?

The Spices — always shrewd judges of how far they could stretch their talents — thought so. “We had a hilarious first meeting,” says Craymer. “Jen was just coming through her chemo and I’ve got this powerful air-conditioning unit that had to be on or off, depending. Both of us were hot anyway with the Spices in here, and it was midsummer. So I’m on the iPod while we’re telling them the story, so if Jen lost her way, I’d just press a button.” Craymer and Saunders have laughed a lot during the process, which is just as well.

“She’s always minxy about her delivery,” says Craymer of Saunders’s attitude to deadlines. “I set her a delivery day — usually a few days before she really had to deliver — but then I get the phone call. Then the email. Then the agent going, ‘Any minute now.’ Then Jen will be on the phone going, ‘I just need to print



SHE’S GOT TALENT Judy Craymer with the dolls that she arranges depending on how the real Spices are getting on

it out.’ This would go on for two days, and she’d say, ‘I’ll bring it round tomorrow personally.’ So the bell goes the next day, she comes in and hands me the envelope. We have a drink, she goes, I open the envelope — and it’s not the script at all. It’s the old script without any changes that she gave me with a straight face.” Thankfully, she says, the result was worth it.

Watching rehearsals is certainly a gas. In the packed dance studio, Sally Dexter (in the “Arlene Phillips” role) takes the empty stage as the piano starts up. “Look at me,” she sings, as if it’s 4am and she’s well into the merlot. “You can take it all because this face is free... I can even do reality.” On the word “reality”, two dozen performers dressed as talent-show cameramen and make-up artists swarm the stage. To the strains of Halliwell’s 1999 solo hit Look at Me, they begin administering Botox and fake tan in time to the music, as the face-lifted judges warble “Real plastic! Fantastic!” and “My little white lies tell a story!” Camp doesn’t cover it, though the satire is pinprick sharp.

The Spice Girls are glad Saunders’s script has a bit of bite. “The culture has changed so dramatically in 16 years,” Mel C — aka Sporty — tells me when she stops by rehearsals later in the week. “Sometimes I think, are the Spice Girls to blame? Were they the catalyst for what celebrity culture would become? But I think there was a naivety about us — an innocence. I feel that’s a bit lost now.”

Ginger, gloriously barking as ever, is on a more explicit mission. “[The show] is about

‘IF THIS MUSICAL ISN’T A HIT, I’LL HAVE TO RETIRE SOMEWHERE VERY FAR AWAY’

bringing the Spice legacy to a new generation,” she gabbles happily. “Spice Girls is about unifying the world — every age, every gender, everyone. It’s woman power, people power, it’s an essence, a tribe.” Scary says the show “reminds you that your best girlfriend — you want to be there for her more than anybody else”.

Which begs the question, are there still strong friendships among the girls today?

“It’s like a family,” says Halliwell. “Families are never perfect, but there is always that foundation of love.” Craymer has seen it up close. “We went out for dinner — Jen and I, Mel B, Mel C, Emma and Geri — and it was like squabbling sisters. ‘Oh, don’t start!’ ‘Here she goes!’, but in a good way. The launch was the first time I’d been a room with all five of them. I remember Simon saying, ‘Just wait till you get all five in a room’ — and it is quite powerful.”

“I’m really proud of the Spice Girls,” Fuller emails from LA. “They are a force of nature. What they achieved will probably never be achieved again in the modern music industry.” Thoughts such as these weigh on Saunders as she faces the looming spectre of opening night. “Are Spice Girls fans going to be disappointed? Are comedy fans going to be disappointed?” she frets. This being her first musical, she feels less sure than she is with TV audiences. “I can’t figure out what it will look like because I’ve been so involved in the process. But I think it’s OK... if not, on the night it will be ‘Taxi! Taxi!’”

Perhaps the pressure is even greater for Craymer, with all theatreland wondering if she can pull off a second mega-hit that goes on to Broadway and Hollywood. “I’d probably have to retire somewhere very far away,” she says, at the thought of it being a dud. Not one to panic, though, she says it will still all be worth it so long as Posh brings her husband to the opening. “I just want to meet David Beckham. Three years of hard work finally pays off.”

“Ha-ha,” laughs Saunders when I tell her this. “I think that’s probably true. It’s a very expensive date.” ■

Viva Forever! opens for previews at the Piccadilly Theatre, London W1, on November 27. To book tickets, visit: vivaforevertbemusical.com



See Jennifer Saunders and Mel C behind the scenes at the Spice Girls musical at: thesundaytimes.co.uk/vivaforever