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Q&A: "Mamma Mia!" Producer Judy Craymer on Harnessing Girl Power in the Spice Girls-Inspired "Viva Forever!"



Photo by Matt Crockett

Judy Craymer (back right) with Jennifer Saunders (back left) and the Spice Girls.

by Patrick Pacheco

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After ushering the ABBA musical "Mamma Mia!" to phenomenal success, the redoubtable British producer Judy Craymer is back with another roll of the dice: "Viva Forever!" a new musical featuring the songs of the Spice Girls, the quintet who raised the flag on "Girl Power" in the late '90s, selling 75 million albums in over 30 countries. "Mamma Mia" is a tough act to follow. After all, it's still minting money — \$2 billion at last count — in its 13th year on London's West End and 11th on Broadway, not to mention productions around the world, and the high-grossing movie starring Meryl Streep.

As one of Britain's richest women, Craymer certainly doesn't need the tsuris that putting on any major musical invites. But the 54-year-old producer says she has been "re-energized" by assembling a team which she feels will help her strike gold (again) when "Viva Forever!" opens at London's Piccadilly Theatre on

December 11th. Writing the libretto is Jennifer Saunders, whose comedy stints include not only the TV classic "Absolutely Fabulous" but skits involving the Spice Girls-parodying "Sugar Lumps." Directing is Paul Garrington, who apprenticed at the Royal Shakespeare Company and has helmed numerous productions of "Mamma Mia!"

Impressed with Craymer's bona fides, the Spice Girls approached her about a musical, spurring the producer to concoct with Saunders a story which would fit into the pre-existing framework of the group's biggest hits. What emerged after nearly three years and a couple of workshops is the story of young Viva, who, with three friends, enters a TV talent show. When she is catapulted to fame, leaving the others behind, the bonds of friendship are tested, as are Viva's relationship with her loving but chaotic mother. Craymer recently spoke to us about "girl power," humiliation, envy, and being lured into what she laughingly calls "the Spice Girls coven."

What the hell is "girl power," anyway?

I think it's a kind of go-for-it confidence that you can be yourself and can achieve for yourself whatever it is that you want to achieve. That's what attracted me to the project and why they warmed to me. It was a meeting of minds. I was fascinated by the Spice Girls' music and how they defined an era. Moms and daughters would come to see their shows and feel empowered by their message of ambition. They were incredibly ambitious and they achieved those ambitions and I think that legacy of confidence still resonates today. And yet they never took themselves too seriously. There was lot of sass that was non-threatening.

You mean the nicknames they gave themselves — Posh, Scary, Sporty, Baby, Ginger?

Yes. At their peak, in 1997, the fun about them is that you could be a different one every day of the week. Today, I feel like Sporty, tomorrow, I might feel Scary, and then later, Posh.

How has that "girl power" message affected you personally?

From school days onward, I admired women who achieved their best in whatever field, whether they were writers, sports figures, or even politicians. I'd probably be drummed out of the business if I told you who —

Would you be thinking of Maggie Thatcher?

I do admire her, actually. She is an extraordinary woman. Long before "girl power" existed, we had this prime minister in a profession totally dominated by men. I was a show jumper when I was younger, horse mad, and some of the top riders were women and I was very admiring of them, realizing just how tough it is to be competing at that kind of level. Even now, I think there's only one woman on Britain's Olympic [Equestrian] team. I don't want to sound like a feminist — *quelle horreur!* — and I don't think it's a drum to be banged, but the Spice Girls in their own way came into a world of boy bands and were told, repeatedly, that a girl band, especially with five [members], will never work. And they broke all the rules!

I understand that Jennifer Saunders was two months into chemotherapy for breast cancer when you began to collaborate in October of 2009.

Yes. I'd make her meet once or twice a week and I'd come over with my iPod and "torture" her with these songs. She was really enjoying it and I knew that she'd respond to putting them into a modern-day story of women. Jennifer is great at writing about female friendship and she also has a tongue-in-cheek sense of irony. She's an actress who knows the television world well and the cast responded to that. Besides, she has a slightly competitive streak and the idea of humiliation would be too much for her to bear. But she gets it. She's very musical.

"Viva Forever!" sounds like it deals a lot with jealousy and envy.

I think that's an interesting element. The dynamics of friendship are such, whether it's men or women, that you go on a journey together and everybody wants everything to be okay and it's a bit like that moment in the

show ... Well, not to give it away ...

You mean when Viva gets picked by the talent show, but as a solo act?

Yes. She says, "I'm doing it for us." And then someone responds, "Yeah, well, we didn't think they were going to pick *you*!" The feeling of "not being needed" is part of that, that fear of becoming "invisible." Friendship does win out but you become very vulnerable. I have to keep saying that this musical is not about the Spice Girls but when they were together and then Geri [Halliwell] left the group? That was a huge thing. And I remember her talking about it and she said she didn't feel "needed" anymore. And we've all lived through those moments whether we're six years old or whenever. I mean, there can't be anything worse than jealousies when you're about to be pensioned off!

Does that play into the mother and daughter relationship as well? Viva is adopted and the TV producer proposes an on-air reunion with the birth mother.

The heart of the story is the anxiety of adoption and fear of what could happen if your daughter is spun into the spotlight. The mother-daughter thing is resonant because the Spice Girls are now women who are all approaching 40. They're great working women and mothers — there are eight children among them. They are still working very hard, still achieving things. They just didn't disappear after 1999.

What's up with you and exclamation points? "Mamma Mia!" "Viva Forever!"

Oh, it's just a sense of excitement. Of enthusiasm. [Laughs.] Of calamity!

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