

'GERI SAID IT COULDN'T
ALL BE NICE — GIRLS
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POWER COUPLE

The Mamma Mia! phenomenon has made over £1.5 billion, but its creator Judy Craymer knew past success alone wouldn't be enough to turn her Spice Girls musical into a hit, so she called on the funniest woman in the UK, Jennifer Saunders, to help her out. By Liz Hoggard

Photograph by Charlie Gray

Jennifer Saunders and Judy Craymer at the Piccadilly Theatre, October 2012

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AHMED AT NEVILLE'S AND PENNY ATTWOOD USING ARMANI BEAUTY



Woman power: Jennifer and Judy with Mel B, Mel C, Geri, Emma and Victoria at the musical's press launch at the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in June 2012

'WE ENTERED THE SPICE GIRLS COVEN. THEY ARE HILARIOUS AND TALK TEN TO THE DOZEN, SO WE SPLIT THEM UP'
JENNIFER SAUNDERS

The scene is a red velvet box at the Piccadilly Theatre. Two fifty-something blondes are discussing their drinking habits, their love of showjumping and a weakness for Booja-Booja organic chocolates. 'Geri Halliwell introduced me to them,' says one. 'They're gluten-free, dairy-free... probably chocolate-free.' It could be a sketch straight out of *Ab Fab* – hardly surprising when one of the blondes is Jennifer Saunders, 54, arguably the most powerful woman in British comedy, and the other is Judy Craymer, 55, producer of Abba musical *Mamma Mia!* and the most powerful woman in the West End. They met three years ago when Judy invited Jennifer to write the script for her new Spice Girls musical *Viva Forever!* It took Jennifer all of 40 minutes to sign up: 'I just really, really wanted to do it. I didn't want someone else to mess it up, although that's a very risky thing to say.'

They've since become great friends. 'I don't think you can collaborate to that level unless you have a friendship,' says Judy. 'Men seem to be able to,' laughs Jennifer, who was initially worried that Judy would hate her – because 'Dawn [French] and I mercilessly took the piss out of her with a Comic Relief send-up of *Mamma Mia!* But she's a proper person, so it was cool.'

In fact, writing *Viva Forever!* would prove more poignant than either of them realised. Jennifer had just been diagnosed with breast cancer – now in remission – and she began working on the musical two months into her chemotherapy treatment. It proved surprisingly therapeutic. Once a week for five months Judy would go over to Jennifer's house and the pair would endlessly play Spice Girls songs and watch clips on YouTube. 'I used to ignore the

fact that she wasn't feeling at her best,' says Judy, 'and was going through this horrendous, intense chemotherapy. I'd just go over every week with nice things to eat and my iPod and say, "Waddaya think of this?"'

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

Viva Forever! takes the same feel-good formula that worked for *Mamma Mia!*, weaving a storyline about female friendship and mother-daughter bonding around the Spice Girls' hit songs, but it is not a tribute show. The Spice Girls don't appear (the four young leads are unknowns) but there are echoes of their early career. 'It dawned on me that you could use the songs to create a modern story,' explains Judy. 'They emerged pre-9/11, pre-Blair, Princess Diana was still alive, everyone was watching *Sex and the City*. They defined an era.' And, of course, their songs drive the narrative. Jennifer loves 'Wannabe' – 'their manifesto'. Judy plumps for 'Say You'll Be There' – 'because it's written like a conversation' – and '2 Become 1', 'their safe-sex song'.

Before writing the script, they entered the 'Spice Girls coven' and interviewed all five

ex-bandmates. 'I joke it all started in Geri's kitchen,' recalls Judy. 'I gave them homework and sent them 1940s Rita Hayworth movies about fame and fortune, rivalry and friendship.'

'They are hilarious and talk ten to the dozen, so we split them up for the treatment explanations,' recalls Jennifer. 'We saw Emma and Mel C together. Mel B flew in. Judy saw Victoria.'

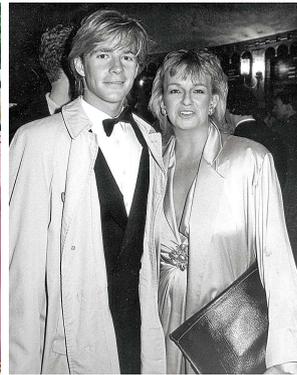
'When Victoria was in London, I took her and her mum to see Mel C in *Blood Brothers*, and we all had supper afterwards,' says Judy. Then, when the first draft of the musical was ready, Judy met Victoria at home in LA. In fact, Judy already knew her parents. 'I met Jackie and Tony Adams when they were living in Madrid. We had the Spanish premiere of *Mamma Mia!* and they came along and were very supportive.'

Although they had no creative control, the Spices invested in the show (each of them is predicted to make £5 million a year from royalties), and Judy was keen to show them the script as it developed. Geri was especially involved. 'She was very keen on getting the dynamic of the girls right,' explains Jennifer.



Jennifer with (from left) Ruby Wax and Adrian Edmondson, 1989; Dawn French, 1985; daughter Ella, 2009

Thank you for the music, from the cast of *Mamma Mia!* at its UK film premiere, 2008; Judy with Sean's actor son Jason Connery at the premiere of *Chess*, 1986; Meryl Streep in *Mamma Mia!* (2008)



'Who was whose best friend? How were they going to fall out? She stressed it couldn't all just be nice – girls can be very mean as well – and that two friends out of the group are usually closer than the others.'

Ah, yes, the famous feuds (Geri walked out on the group at the height of their fame in 1998). But Jennifer insists that today the Spices are one big family: 'It's like you fall out with your sisters but you know you're going to have to spend Christmas with them, which means you never really fall out, you just go off in a huff for a bit. They really love and support each other.' Mel C breaks up arguments; Mel B would get out the knuckledusters if you disrespected her bandmates. Jennifer does a great Mel B impersonation. 'She's hilarious. She'll say to Geri: "You went off, and you left us, what was all that about?"' Victoria is the planner. 'With her fashion career she is the brand,' says Judy, 'so obviously she likes to control things.' And Posh is a big fan of musical theatre. Growing up her dream was to play the white cat in *Cats* – 'That figures,' says Judy. 'You can see that fragility' – and at the Spice Girls audition she sang 'Mein Herr' from *Cabaret*.

The idea of a Spice Girls musical came from the girls themselves. Judy had met Simon Fuller, the Spice Girls' manager, at lunches over the years, but it was Geri who approached her directly. She'd read an article about Judy's epic struggle to get *Mamma Mia!* off the ground, and thought she was amazing. Geri sent her a letter saying, 'We love you. Meet us, please!'

The daughter of a lawyer, Judy grew up in Mill Hill. She loved showjumping and dreamed of going professional, but when her horse died she switched to drama school. She subsequently got a job at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, alongside her childhood friend, a theatre producer called Cameron Mackintosh, and moved to London to work on the musical *Cats*. A year later she assisted lyricist Tim Rice, which is when she first met Björn and Benny of Abba, who were writing the music for Rice's musical *Chess*. It took her years to persuade them to give her the rights to their songs and ten years to raise the finance to stage *Mamma Mia!*. She ran up a £20,000 overdraft, lived on handouts from her parents and had to sell her flat. 'I had nothing to lose and I think that was a huge part of the tenacity,' she says.

Since it opened in 1999, *Mamma Mia!* has taken £1.2 billion worldwide and is still going strong in the West End. The film version, starring Meryl Streep, Pierce Brosnan and Colin Firth, grossed over £375 million.

Jennifer is the daughter of an RAF officer and remembers being a sullen, shy child. 'My mother says that I'd have to be taken away in restaurants because I'd be standing in front of tables, just looking – and I had quite a cross face.' To the horror of her mother (a teacher), she failed to get into university, but then met Dawn French at the Central School of Speech & Drama and together they answered an ad for female acts to join an experimental sketch show called *The Comic Strip*, where Jennifer met her future husband Adrian Edmondson. They then landed their own BBC series and the rest is history.

Today, neither woman needs to work. Judy is one of Britain's richest women (her net worth is £62 million), she lives in Belgravia and has a flat in New York overlooking Central Park. But *Mamma Mia!* has been her whole life for the past 14 years. Unconsciously, she says, she has been lining up a new project to fill any sense of emptiness. Single (despite being called 'the most eligible spinster in the West End'), she would have liked children but never met the right man. 'I was always falling in love and thinking, "I want to have his children," but it had to be a big romance. And yes, I was quite busy. I had a boyfriend at 23 who was killed in a car accident and I'm sure that made me think: "Right, I'm going to get out there and get on with it." Friends looked after me and I got through it. On the other hand, I might be living a very different life. I'm sure some protection goes up inside you.' Today she has a busy social life and several 'honorary adoptive daughters'. 'My friends'

daughters call me their London mummy. There comes a time when you're finally quite hip.'

Equally, Jennifer could easily put her feet up. When she and Dawn ended their 30-year partnership four years ago, and her daughters left the family home (a farmhouse near Chagford in Devon), she and Edmondson bought a house in London. Living in Paddington means they can walk to the theatre or a nice pub. Now a grandmother (her singer daughter Ella, 26, gave birth to son Fred in August), she adores looking after the baby and lolling about watching episodes of *The Great British Bake Off*.

But Jennifer and Judy are on a mission to write something that will resonate with an older female audience as well – there is a subplot in the musical about the invisibility of older women. 'Every film poster you see has a man with a gun on it,' says Jennifer. 'There's a great rant in the script about 15-year-old girls thinking it's the height of fame to dance at the Playboy Mansion. "You want to say to them, "You've got to f*** a 90-year-old man at the end of the day. Have you forgotten it's not all little bunnies and swimming pools, it's some old guy with Viagra and his mates!"'

Yes, the Spices were gobby and fallible, but their message of solidarity was unique. Judy recalls: 'When Victoria was asked, aged 21, "What are your ambitions?", she said she wanted to be as famous as Persil Automatic.' For Judy, the appeal of the Spice story is that they were 'ordinary girls who lived at home with Mum and Dad, and did their own hair and make-up. Geri's famous Union Jack dress only came about because she sewed a tea towel on to a black Gucci dress. If anything, they have got sexier – and more complex – as they approach 40. They have so much energy, get them in a room and it's silly.'

So how did they deal with a room full of excitably Spices? Judy laughs: 'We would get all hot and bothered telling them about new script developments and then one day Geri said: "Do you know how intimidating you two can be?" We were like: "Oh my God, we frightened the Spice Girls!"' **ES**

Viva Forever! previews at the *Piccadilly Theatre* from 27 November (0844 871 7627; vivaforeverthemusical.com)

'AGED 21, VICTORIA SAID SHE WANTED TO BE AS FAMOUS AS PERSIL AUTOMATIC' JUDY CRAYMER

Wannabes: the Spice Girls in 1997

