



IT'S SHOW TIME! Members of the *Viva Forever!* cast — from left, Lucy Phelps, Hannah John-Kamen (who plays Vivid), Siobhan Athwell and Dominique Provino-Chalkley — with the musical's writer, Jennifer Saunders, and producer Judy Cramer. Hair: Fannoun Hughes. Make-up: Penny Atwood and James O'Reilly. Styling: editor: Suzanne Woodcroft.

Is the world ready for the return of "zig-a-zig-ah"? Absolutely, says Jennifer Saunders, writer of the new Spice Girls musical and avid fan. By Jo Ellison. Portrait by Alice Hawkins

Jennifer Saunders is scrolling through her Blackberry. "Let me show you something," she says, before flashing up a blurry Polaroid of a small girl grinning alongside a similarly cherubic blonde. "That's my youngest daughter with Emma Bunton," she continues. "She was about six at the time."

That era, of shrieking Girl Power, preposterously stacked-soled Buffalo Shoes and more zig-a-zig-ah than you could wiggle a finger at, is one that Saunders looks back at with exceptional fondness. She adores the Spice Girls; was an ardent fan, in fact, from the moment the newly formed quintet charged into a restaurant where she and Dawn French were having dinner one night and announced they wanted to be "as famous as Persil Automatic".

"All three of my girls were completely obsessed with the Spice Girls," says Saunders of her daughters, who are now in their twenties. "And I thought they were great role models. They were sexy without being sexualised. They were cheeky. They created a mantra about believing in yourself and, in a way, that's exactly what they've done. They're amazing women."

Hence, when *Mamma Mia!* producer Judy Cramer announced she was looking for a writer to devise a musical inspired by their oeuvre, Saunders blagged her way onboard. "She pitched me an idea — which she subsequently told me she had virtually made up on the spot — that the show was about a girl called Viva and her friends," says Cramer. The result, *Viva Forever!*, is an original story, interwoven with Spice Girls' songs, focusing on the three tenets of Spice faith: "Who do you think you are, friendship and falling in love," explains Saunders. "It's a contemporary story, but I wanted to recapture how the girls were at the time — that slightly anarchic spirit. Nowadays girls get so many messages from pop videos and magazines and TV shows, and they grow up so quickly. I don't ever want the Spice Girls to grow up."

Cramer and Saunders first started discussing the show in 2009, while Saunders was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer (she is now in remission), but lately they've been lubricating their imaginations with martinis at Duke's Hotel. Both powerful blondes with a penchant for leather, they are a brilliant foil for one another, though Saunders jokes that she lives in fear of being fired. "You're a very good friend," she laughs, as Cramer perches her rangy limbs on the dressing-table. "But you're also quite frightening."

Throw any group of women together and some dynamic of the Spice Girls will soon emerge: on set, the atmosphere is giggly, grabby, glittery and charged with competitive glee. The cast — mostly young, largely unknown actresses whose lives are on the cusp of massive change — bring with them a mix of naive incredulity and killer ambition, just like Posh, Ginger, Scary, Baby and Sporty before them. Someone snaps on the music. "Yo! I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want..." Everyone dances.

*"Viva Forever!" is at the Piccadilly Theatre, W1*

