

Exclusive

# Gary's GIRLS

New musical *The Girls* has turned the WI into a West End smash. Here's what happened when *WI Life* bagged a backstage pass

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Photography LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER



Gary's *Girls* steal the show (from left): Claire Moore plays Chris, Claire Machin is Cora, Sophie-Louise Dann is Celia, Debbie Chazen is Ruth, and Joanna Riding is Annie



**OPPOSITE PAGE TOP** Joanna Riding as Annie (centre) bares all behind a flower cart, while 'members' (from left) Claire Machin as Cora, Sophie-Louise Dann as Celia, Joanna Riding as Annie, Claire Moore as Chris, and Debbie Chazen as Ruth, wait to disrobe  
**INSET** Gary goes on stage with the cast and the original *Calendar Girls* at the gala performance  
**LEFT** The actual *Calendar Girls* with (from left) HRH The Countess of Wessex, Angela Knowles (formerly Baker), Ros Fawcett, Christine Clancy and Tricia Stewart

**A** glittering sunflower above The Phoenix Theatre heralds the West End debut of *The Girls*, a musical comedy and the latest incarnation of the *Calendar Girls* story. Casting a golden glow over the celebrities posing for the cameras on the red carpet below, it's hard to believe that when Rylstone & District WI received the NFWI's blessing to produce their version of the Pirelli calendar, it was on the understanding that it was a small, local project.

The story of their daring fundraiser back in 1999 took the world by storm. It was made into a hit film starring Helen Mirren and then a phenomenally successful touring play, and to date has raised nearly £4m for the blood cancer charity Bloodwise.

Tonight's gala performance, which follows hot on the heels of a sold-out run last year in Leeds and Salford, has attracted a phalanx of celebrities. HRH The Countess of Wessex and The Duke of Kent are followed on the red carpet by Graham Norton and *Bake Off's* Mel Giedroyc, and inside is a sea of famous faces, including the *Strictly Come Dancing 2016* champion Ore Oduba, and former contestant John Sergeant.

Childhood friends Gary Barlow and Tim Firth (who also wrote the *Calendar Girls* film and play) have reworked the story into a musical comedy that, in Gary's words, will have you 'craffin' – crying and laughing at the same time.

Gary says: 'Music speaks to people like words cannot, and music underpins this story so brilliantly.'

Several of the 11 original *Girls* are here tonight and it seems every star in town wants to grab a selfie. Angela Knowles is beaming with pride. It was the death of her husband John Baker from non-



Hodgkin lymphoma when he was 54, that prompted the making of the calendar, with the aim of raising funds to buy a new couch for the hospital waiting room. The rest, as they say, is history.

After an energetic performance by a stellar cast, which includes Michele Dotrice – who played the put-upon Betty in the 1970s sitcom *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* – they are joined on stage by the *Calendar Girls* and Angela's children Rachel Whyte and Matthew Baker, who until now have chosen not to watch any of the other fictionalised accounts of their family's painful story.

The audience is on its feet applauding and when Gary Barlow bounds on stage to sing *Dare* and is joined by the cast and the original WI members, all standing hand in hand, it sounds as if the roof will blow off.

Speaking afterwards, a breathless Angela says: 'It's just amazing, I can't believe that our story is still going on and it's now showing in the West End.'

In contrast to the glitz of the gala performance, when *WI Life* was granted an exclusive backstage tour five days earlier,

the atmosphere was determinedly workmanlike, with the actors radiating sheer excitement.

The chance to meet the cast as they went through their paces at rehearsals gave us a fascinating insight into the hard work and effort it takes to bring such a production to the stage. It's also proving to be a rollercoaster of emotions.

Ben Hunter, who is making his West End debut playing Danny, says: 'It's ace to see how it's gone from a village hall in Burnsall to the Leeds Grand, to The Lowry and now to the West End. I don't think there are any other shows that have touched so many people. Every night we receive standing ovations. It makes you laugh and it makes you cry.'

Joanna Riding plays Annie, the character based on the real-life Angela Knowles. 'Since the first day I read the script I utterly fell in love with it,' she admits. 'It's an ensemble piece and fundamental to that story is the friendship between Annie and Chris.'

Chris is loosely based on Tricia Stewart, the woman responsible for getting her fellow WI members to strip. 'Annie is 80 per cent me – her enthusiasm and mine are very similar,' confesses Tricia.

She is played by Claire Moore, who is loving her role and the camaraderie the whole experience brings. 'It's wonderful to play a real character,' she says. 'We've got to know the ladies and they've been so friendly, supportive and generous with their stories. They feel this is the truest representation of their friendship.'

Tim Firth's decision to broaden the *Calendar Girls* story and show the effect John's death had on the wider community gets Tricia's seal of approval. 'We think it tells our story well and it's more like it was in real life, with the husbands and children incorporated, and the getting together of the community.'

Claire Machin, who plays the gloriously no-nonsense Cora, says, 'It's been a laugh from start to finish.' This even includes the stress-inducing reality of stripping on stage. 'The first time I met Gary Barlow I was absolutely starkers,' she says. 'We were doing a naked shoot around the piano and he came in and saw a row of backsides. He's mega, and it took me a long time to utter more than two words, but he's so normal and he just gets on with it.'

As a young actor, Sophie-Louise Dann used to skip 'nudity

required' job advertisements but made an exception for this. 'I'll get naked for art or a good cause,' she jokes. 'I did have a moment when I thought "What am I doing, getting my kit off in front of a theatre of strangers?" but it's been liberating.'

When Joanna Riding poses naked for publicity shots behind a flower-filled cart, her modesty preserved only by a pair of gardening gloves and a watering can, the other women close protectively around her when she's finished, showing the truth of Claire Machin's statement that 'this is about family and love and friendship and that's what it's been like in the rehearsal room.'

For the rumpled-looking writer and director Tim Firth, these final rehearsals mark 'the end of a Himalayan trek'. Script in hand, he says: 'It's like pushing your child off into the outside world.' Tim's mum and grandmother were avid 'WI-ers' and his memories of them returning home from meetings roaring with laughter were the inspiration for the characters we see on stage.

'It's an homage to the spirit of Mum and her friends coming back from the WI,' he says. 'It had a rejuvenating effect on her, and there was so much laughter, that's why we made the show a comedy. This story wouldn't have worked without the WI; it absolutely needed that element of surprising people with the boldness and irreverence coming from an organisation that people perceived as conservative.'

It's also, he says, an exploration of not falling into the trap of 'obeying what age expects of you'. Hallelujah to that.

Producer David Pugh, a theatre impresario straight out of central casting, reveals that £3.5m has been invested in bringing *The Girls* to the West End, and that every penny has been worth it. 'They're ordinary ladies who have done something extraordinary and I think that should be celebrated.'

It's fitting that Angela Knowles has the last word. 'The calendar has a life of its own and the money raised has done so much good. It would be fantastic if *The Girls* continues to run in London, with people enjoying the show and raising money for Bloodwise.'

'Fingers crossed, one day we might get to Broadway. Wouldn't that be amazing? We couldn't turn it into an opera or a ballet, or on ice, could we...?'

Photographs MATT CROCKETT, DEWYNTERS; ALAN DAVIDSON

# And a few words from Gary...

The first I knew about the WI was when I went to watch Tim Firth's film *Calendar Girls*. Then about five years ago, I watched the play with him and I thought it was absolutely beautiful – at the end of that performance he said, “Right, I want to take this on and make a musical out of it”.

I could hear the music straightaway, and I was desperate to get started because I knew just what it could be if we got it right.

I naively thought I needed to turn myself into a musical writer. I phoned Tim and asked him “Should I go and see every show in the West End?” and he said, “Do me a favour: don't go and watch anything; I want you to write like you write. I want the audience to feel this authentic music, so what I'm going

to do is feed you titles of songs, maybe some lines from a piece of script and I want you to then represent that in music.”

When we played in Leeds and Manchester last year a lot of the audience did their own reviews, and they had this phrase, ‘craffin’, crying and laughing at the same time, which we loved because we wanted to try and make it that.

Just as you're finding it the saddest thing you've ever seen, you're then laughing, because that's the spirit of the story. Out of something so

traumatic the women fought back with wit by taking their clothes off. It's very Northern and that's why I think Tim and I have connected to this story so much, because we're both from the North.

This show celebrates hope and in these times we live in, when we don't know what's happening with the world, that's brilliant.

What makes me emotional is how unbelievable human beings can be in the face of adversity. I hope you love the show.

## NOW BOOK YOUR TICKET!

*The Girls* is at The Phoenix Theatre, London WC2, and bookings are being taken up until July. Tickets from £29.50 to £69.50. Book online at [thegirlsmusical.com](http://thegirlsmusical.com) or by calling 0844 871 7615 (charges apply).



Gary wears his sunflower buttonhole with pride, as do (inset) Claire Moore as Chris, and Joanna Riding as Annie

Photograph JOHN SWANNELL

## THE STORY BEHIND THE SUNFLOWER

*The sunflower emblem associated with the *Calendar Girls* was chosen by John Baker's daughter-in-law Georgina Logan. John received so many cards picturing sunflowers that she asked family and friends to plant seeds for him to enjoy after his treatment ended. John died before leaving hospital but 100 people grew sunflowers and it became a symbol of positivity.*

