

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
25 June 2015

London
**Evening
Standard**

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Bend It Like Beckham theatre review: bursting with exuberance

Inspiring, funny, fresh – this joyous hymn to Girl Power won Henry Hitchings over, despite a few flaws



Full of warmth: it's impossible not to get swept up in the fairytale story

Critic Rating ★★★★★

This is a joyous feelgood show. A musical version of the hit 2002 film, it's a hymn to Girl Power and the vitality of multicultural London. And you don't need to have seen the movie, or even be keen on football, to appreciate its warmth and freshness.

Shy but determined Jess is a teenager from a Sikh family in Southall, who's obsessed with David Beckham and has serious promise as a striker. A chance encounter with the equally football-mad Jules (the lean and purposeful Lauren Samuels) leads to her getting involved with

rising local team Hounslow Harriers. But her love of the game doesn't please her parents, and conflict is inevitable.

Natalie Dew brings exactly the right mix of vulnerability and gutsy commitment to Jess, who's weighed down by a sense of duty but aspires to do more than learn her mother's special recipe for aloo gobi. As she juggles her desires and obligations, she falls under the spell of her new coach Joe, who's just as smitten with her. Although in the film Joe is Irish, here he's very English and is infused with charisma by Jamie Campbell Bower, an actor who pulls off the unusual feat of being achingly cool and immensely likeable — if not a stellar singer.

Director Gurinder Chadha, who shares credit with her husband Paul Mayeda Berges for the script, has crafted a production that bursts with exuberance. Howard Goodall's score is irresistibly romantic — sometimes poppy and sometimes bubbling with Bollywood verve, but also laced with melancholy — and Charles Hart's lyrics combine wit and an appealing frankness.

Back of the net, then? Not quite. The show has flaws — it starts sluggishly and is too long. Some of the attempts to convey the wonder of kicking a football with Beckham's particular finesse are clumsy. But there's a rich humour throughout, and it's impossible not to get swept along by Jess's fairytale. At the same time, there's an inspiring message here about the rewards of a more equal and tolerant society.