

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
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Bend It Like Beckham, Phoenix Theatre, London — review

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Gurinder Chadha's 2002 film becomes a vibrant, energetic stage musical



'Bend It Like Beckham'

P

henomenal deliberation seems to have gone into this show. Gurinder Chadha's 2002 film was rather a surprise success, but the dozen years since she first mooted a stage musical version have apparently allowed time for meticulous planning of how the work should be shaped and pitched. The story of 18-year-old Sikh girl Jesminder and her countercultural (even for the community in Southall, west London) obsession with playing football is driven with precision, both in narrative terms and as a metaphor for bending the rules like a ball's trajectory in order to follow one's own path. We get a love triangle, a healthy dose of LGBT solidarity largely through byplay and misunderstandings, and of course a spicy base of Anglo-Punjabi mash-up culture. This last is deftly deployed with some sitar and harmonium-based arrangements and an Act Two sequence in which choreographer Aletta Collins smartly represents the football team's climactic match by weaving them in and out of the guests at Jess's sister's wedding which is going on at the same time.

The joy is that, against all expectation, this detailed calculation doesn't stifle the vibrancy of story and characters one iota; rather, it marshals everything in energetic aid of it. Composer Howard Goodall is a master of musical idioms and knows how much or how little exotica to include in any given number without falling into pastiche. Charles Hart's lyrics are clever but never clever-clever, as befits the librettist of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Natalie Dew gives a winning performance as Jess; *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* alumnus Jamie Campbell Bower offers youthful eye candy as coach Joe (and also gets the breakout musical number "More Fool Me"); Sophie-Louise Dann is deftly comedic as Laura, the mother of team captain Jules (Laura Samuels), Jess's best friend and her rival for Joe's affections; Tony Jayawardena deserves more attention than I can give here as Jess's father, trying to reconcile his own bitter experiences with a new world of hopes and opportunities.

The relevant context for the show, I think, is not the burgeoning genre of movie-to-stage musical, but rather the Phoenix Theatre's recent history of hosting slightly left-field, not always feelgood but always affirmative musicals such as *Once* and, for nearly 25 years, *Blood Brothers*. *Bend It* should be right at home here.

★★★★☆

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