

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
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In a league of their own

BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM: Natalie Dew stars as football-mad Jess in this East versus West culture clash

BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM ★★★★★
Phoenix, London WC2
(Tickets: 0844 871 7615; £15-75;
benditlikebeckhamthemusical.com)

LUNA GALE ★★★★★
Hampstead, London NW3
(Tickets: 020 7722 9301; £18-28;
hampsteadtheatre.com)

HERE at last is a home-grown musical I can heartily recommend! Regular readers will know I have had to sit through more than my fair share of dire new musicals, but **Bend It Like Beckham** is a premier league triumph.

It is based on Gurinder Chadha's 2002 film about Jess, a west London Asian girl with a passion for football, who defies her strict Sikh parents to join the local Hounslow Harriers. The familiar clash of East versus West is given added spice by the suspicions in both cultures of "girls who like playing like boys".

Chadha herself helms this exhilarating stage version, which sticks closely to the original, as Jess struggles to reconcile differing views of what it is to be "Girl Perfect", the title of one of the most rousing songs, when she is accused of "doing shame-shame" in the market and required to place duty over dreams.

Jess is played with a winning mixture of charm, humour and vulnerability by Natalie Dew (she also has great ball control). There are excellent performances from Tony Jayawardena and Natasha Jayetileke as her parents; Preeya Kalidas as her sister; Jamal Andreas as her gay best friend; Jamie Campbell Bower as Joe, her coach; and Lauren Samuels as Jules, her teammate and rival. Sophie-Louise Dann steals

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By Michael Arditti



every scene as Jules's lustful mother, and the entire cast plays with the "animation, motivation and dedication" that Joe demands of his team.

Charles Hart's lyrics are elegant and witty and, in *People Like Us*, pack a political punch the equal of Oscar Hammerstein's *You've Got To Be Carefully Taught* from *South Pacific*. The triumph of the evening is, however, Howard Goodall's melodious, passionate score, where East meets West in a perfect reflection of the show's theme.

Since his first work, *The Hired Man*, Goodall has laid claim to being our finest stage composer; here he has found a subject to match his talent. The result is the best British musical in years.

"It's not the hand you're dealt, it's how you play it" is the lesson that Jess has to learn. By any standards, the hand dealt to the titular character of Rebecca Gilman's *Luna Gale* is a cruel one. Her parents are feckless and addicted to crystal meth; her grandmother is an Evangelical Christian with a belief in the Rapture; her social worker is willing to lie and cheat in what she sees as the child's best interests. Gilman's play, in Michael Attenborough's accomplished production, is worthy but wordy, at times resembling a case conference itself.

Sharon Small gives a powerfully committed performance as the social worker, ably supported by a cast including Alexander Arnold and Ed Hughes.