

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
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Bend It Like Beckham The Musical review

By Paul Heath -
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Bend It Like Beckham The Musical review: Gurinder Chadha brings her 2002 movie to the West End stage in a new production at the Phoenix Theatre in London.



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It was a film that was the sleeper hit of 2002, opening to pretty much universal acclaim and a very healthy box-office of \$76 million worldwide. It was also the film that launched the career of **Keira Knightley**, propelling her to the international stage and celebrity. Now, 13 years on and **Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*** makes it to the London stage. Featuring music by **Howard Goodall**, lyrics by **Charles Hart**, and a book by Chadha and **Paul Mayeda Berges**, *Bend It Like Beckham The Musical* has its world premiere in the West End's legendary Phoenix Theatre.

Set in Southall and its surrounding areas, *Bend It Like Beckham The Musical* focuses in on wannabe footballer and **David Beckham** fanatic Jess Bhamra and her deeply religious Sikh family in turn-of-the-century west London. On the eve of her sister Pinky's wedding, Jess forms a relationship with local white girl Jules who notices Jess's rather good soccer skills. Jules encourages Jess to try out for local female football team the Hounslow Harriers, and when she's accepted as one of their own and the team starts to

progress to the top of the league, Jess has to deal with her strict mother and father, who have forbidden her to play the beautiful game.

Bend It Like Beckham was not the obvious choice for a screen-to-stage adaptation, particularly in musical form, but following the success of enduring shows like the brilliant ***Billy Elliott*** and Phoenix alumni ***Once***, it's not surprising producers have chosen to bring this popular screen property to theatres. It has to be noted however, that Chadha and writing partner (and indeed real-life husband **Paul Mayeda Berges**), have been wanting to bring 'Beckham' to the West End since shortly after the film's original release, and now a decade on, their dreams are realised in this stunning, well-crafted gem of a musical that theatre-goers have been unknowingly crying out for.



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Like the film that preceded it, ***Bend It Like Beckham The Musical***'s book tackles many issues that are still relevant, including teenage angst, homophobia, racism and Indian culture. As with the film, the script is extremely funny and not afraid to poke fun, and with near-perfect performances from its central cast, particularly break-out stars **Natalie Dew** as Jess, who is a revelation, and Somewhere Over The Rainbow finalist **Lauren Samuels** who has to fill those ample shoes, or should we say football boots, left behind by Knightley. The supporting cast is also fantastic, with particular mentions going to actress **Preeya Kalidas** as Jess's bride-to-be sister Pinky (who also appeared in the original movie in the role of Monica), **Tony Jayawardena** as Mr Bhamra, Jess's father and the brilliant **Jamal Andréas**, who lends a heartfelt, and funny portrait as Jess's in-the-closet friend Tony. Also a stand-out, and the source of most of the musical's laughs is the exceptional **Sophie-Louise Dann** as Jules's mother Paula, who, unlike in the film, is a divorcee here.

The biggest asset to this glittering production however, is the stunning music by **Howard Goodall** with lyrics by **Charles Hart**. The duo's original songs are top-notch, from classical to bhangra with a mix of street-hip hop and show-stopping ballads. They are big, grand and surprisingly catchy, and will have you whistling your way out of the auditorium.



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The sets are fabulous, ranging from the Indian stalls in Southall market, to a German nightclub and even the departure lounge at Heathrow airport, all seamlessly changed with revolving panels and platforms.

Gurinder Chadha has lovingly crafted a sincere, warming, hilarious, heart-felt, dazzling and inspirational adaptation of one of her best works. It is born to be on the stage, and I would say is even better an experience than the superb original film. It will have you laughing from kick-off to the final curtain, during which you will have invested your heart and soul into these wonderful characters which you'll want to spend time with again, and again. Yes, it is that good.

Bend It Like Beckham is, quite simply, London's best new musical. Bend it as soon as you possibly can.

Bend It Like Beckham The Musical theatre review by Paul Heath, June 2015.

Bend It Like Beckham The Musical is now booking until October 2015 at the Phoenix Theatre, London.