

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
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MANCHESTER FESTIVAL

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School trip slump plunges children's theatres into crisis

by Georgia Snow

Drama in education is suffering its worst crisis in decades, leading children's theatremakers have warned.

Theatre companies making work for children and young people have criticised a decline in schools' participation and a change in attitude within the education system that places the arts "at a very low-level status".

The concerns follow figures released by London's Unicorn Theatre, which found that the number of school groups attending the venue have fallen by 6% in the last year.

Unicorn artistic director Purni Morell said an increasing focus on academic subjects was preventing some children from ever visiting the theatre.

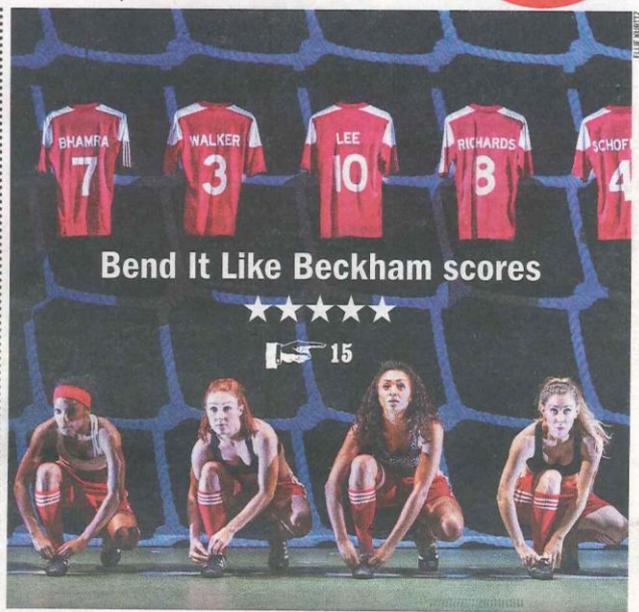
"For so many children, the only chance for them to go to the theatre is through

"We are trying to find funding to be able to support free school visits," he said. "There is a lot more of an onus on us to be able to try to find the funding."

The shrinking number of schools that want theatre has forced touring company Travelling Light to reduce its 2016 schools tour from 23 weeks to 14. Artistic producer Jude Merrill said: "I'm really terrified. There are so many children whose big achievements are in the arts and not really in other areas of school life. I am really concerned about what sort of people our education system is going to turn out."

The outlook for children's theatre in schools was the worst she had seen in her 30-year career, she added.

"This is the most scary. I think the arts have dipped in popularity before but they have not been told they are not a core subject before," she said.



ELIA KURTZ

THE BIG INTERVIEW

GURINDER CHADHA



Natalie Dew in Bend It Like Beckham the Musical at the Phoenix Theatre



The Hounslow Harriers in Bend It Like Beckham the Musical

'I refuse to do things the conventional way'

Gurinder Chadha talks to Mark Shenton about rebelling against tradition, depicting British Asian culture, and bringing her hit film *Bend It Like Beckham* to the stage as a West End musical

Stage musicals are frequently made out of successful film properties – heading to the West End next is *Kinky Boots*, bringing the world of a Northampton shoe factory to the Strand by way of Broadway, while Southwark Playhouse will soon have stage versions of *Grand Hotel* and *Xanadu*, too. But few of them ever involve the original creators of the films they are based on.

Now, though, following in the footsteps of *Billy Elliot* – which original screenplay writer Lee Hall and director Stephen Daldry took from screen to stage – comes *Bend It Like Beckham*. A stage version of the 2002 movie is now being brought to the West End by its original director Gurinder Chadha, with a book by Chadha and her husband and frequent collaborator Paul Mayeda Berges, who also co-wrote the film with Guljit Bindra.

Sitting on the outdoor upstairs patio of her Primrose Hill mews home, and sipping on a lassi smoothie made of live yoghurt, spinach and cumin seeds, Chadha tells me of how she long resisted giving *Bend It Like Beckham* a new, second life.

"Why would I want to put the film on the stage as it is? It's already a hugely popular film – and if you want to see more, go and watch it again. That's why I've never done a sequel. It was its own thing. So the whole point of doing the show, for me, as a musical was only if we could embrace the medium, and use it to its fullest capacity. Unless we made it as theatrical as possible, there was no point for me."

“I wondered how working with these English blokes [Howard Goodall and Charles Hart], who are part of theatre royalty, would work. But it was perfect – we shared this amazing vision for our story

The film is deeply personal and meaningful to Chadha. "It was an ode to my homeland, and I never thought it would be as huge as it became.

I just made a film with a lot of love for my community and for Britain and my dad who had just passed away. It's still the only Western film released in every country in the world, including North Korea. But the musical is an opportunity to take what people loved about the film and explore it further through singing and dancing."

The process of doing so involved a steep learning curve for her, as well as collaborations with a new set of partners. She is also a co-producer, with Sonia Friedman, of the stage version, and credits Friedman for "surrounding me with the right people" to make it happen.

That began with composer Howard Goodall and lyricist Charles Hart: "I went to see *Love Story*, which Howard had written, at the Duchess and I thought it was fantastic. But I wondered how working with these English blokes, who are part of theatre royalty, would work. But then I met them, and it was perfect – what we shared was this amazing vision for our country and our story. I hit the ground running with Howard immediately – the dialogue with him was fantastic from the beginning. In the first few weeks, we kept exchanging YouTube videos of things for each other to look at. It meant we developed a language of how to talk to each other about music and emotion. I conveyed what I valued to him emotionally, and that's what Howard writes best."

The process required a lot of toing and froing between them. "Obviously sometimes things worked and sometimes they didn't, but we built a mutual respect – he'd send stuff over and my response was



Keira Knightley and Parminder Nagra in the film version of Bend It Like Beckham, 2002

always emotional, not cerebral. That was a great way to talk to Howard, and what he responded to.

"There were times in the process when we got really stuck with certain moments. One that got particularly fraught for me in the last few weeks when we've moved into the theatre was when I wasn't getting what I wanted culturally for a moment going into the wedding scene. I got quite upset and felt alone, and felt I couldn't express the importance of what I was saying with all the pressures that were coming to bear. Howard hadn't been there as he was busy working on the orchestrations, but he came in and heard what I was trying to say straight away. He said he knew what I wanted and got right to the point, which is the kernel of the piece. If the show is what it is now, that's because of the tight relationships I have with him and Charles."

CV Gurinder Chadha

Born: 1960, in Nairobi, Kenya

Training: University of East Anglia; London College of Printing

Awards:

- OBE in 2006 for services to the British film industry
- Honorary doctorates at universities including the Open University, Leeds and Sheffield
- Best newcomer to British cinema in the Evening Standard Film Awards for *Bhaji on the Beach*
- Joint audience award winner (with Billy Elliot) for *What's Cooking?* at the New York Film Critics' Awards
- Best British director for *What's Cooking?* in the London Film Critics' Circle Awards

Landmark films:

- *I'm British But...* (1990)
- *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993)
- *Rich Deceiver* (1997)
- *What's Cooking?* (2000)
- *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)
- *Bride and Prejudice* (2004)

Agent: Doug MacLaren at ICM in Los Angeles

But why, I wonder, didn't she think of using an Asian composer?

"For me, the perspective I wanted was for it to be British with Indian influences, not Indian with a British influence. When you are doing culturally specific pieces, they stand or fall by who is the auteur of the piece and getting the right balance. It's not easy when you want to be able to appeal to a 70-year-old English couple from Sussex and also a 16-year-old girl from Southall. But that's what we're seeing in our audiences: every age, colour and creed. And we're appealing to all of them, not just in a musical way where everyone has a good time, but it's also a political piece, making statements about the last 50 years of my community in this country, and the way we've helped shape Britain into what it is today."

She notes that rehearsals for the show were conducted against the backdrop of the recent general election campaign: "We're the anecdote to the Nigel Farage version of what was going on in Britain. The show is full of very fine balances. We have a scene where there's all those Indians up there, and then a Polish guy walks past and someone complains that there are too many foreigners. You can do that when you're comfortable with the world you've created. But what's brilliant is that that's my world, but also Howard's and Charles's world, and now the audience's world, too."

Together with choreographer Aletta Collins and designer Miriam Buether, the world that has been conjured is specifically British, but full of Asian references. For instance, a big moment revolves around



GRANHAM BARKLEY

Gurinder Chadha

the wedding at the centre of the show, and Buether has created a house made up of fairy lights.

"It's so authentic," says Chadha. "That's what denotes an Asian wedding in Britain — that juxtaposition is so British and Indian at the same time, where people put up lights so that it's known as the house where the wedding is. Ultimately my single goal is to make my story with these characters, who have mostly never been seen in a West End musical before, come alive to as many people as possible. And I've worked with people at the top of their game, who have helped me to create the world I grew up in."

In the show, as in the film, the story revolves around an Asian teenager called Jess, growing up in Southall, who pursues a dream to play football. Did Chadha, herself raised in Southall after her family emigrated from Kenya when she was two, harbour footballing ambitions?

"No, but I am the character who always refused to do things the conventional way. I chose football as the metaphor to tell the story because I wanted two worlds that were so opposite — that of an Indian girl and football — and to bring them together in a story. It's a way of saying, you may not think it's your world, but it can be. In the song Glorious, I love that she sings: 'I'm just a girl from Southall with nothing but her dreams, and nothing girls from Southall aren't always what they seem?'"

And that's Chadha's own story in a nutshell. She remembers going to see a careers adviser at school at 15 and telling her that she wanted to go to university to study third world economics and politics in a development studies degree.

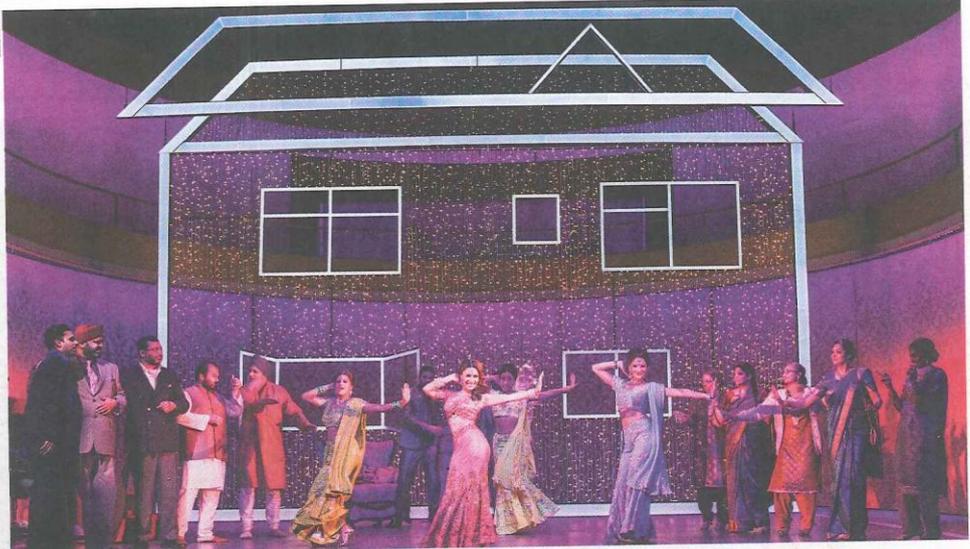
"She looked at me and said, 'I think you should think about secretarial college'. I thought to myself, 'What are you thinking when you see me?' I understood that when she saw me it was something that I didn't see myself — and that's where my fire came from."

She was always a rule-breaker. "As I grew up, I always refused to cook Indian food very vehemently, and to this day I don't cook chapatis at home. I'd always say, 'Why do I have to do it? Why don't the men do it?'"

She also contradicted that careers adviser and did that degree at the University of East Anglia, before training as a journalist at the London College of Printing.

"I'd come across a paper in an Indian feminist magazine about images of Indian women in the media, and something in me saw that it was all about how people see us. I already knew that from my childhood that people would see me and think one thing, but I always felt I was someone else. But this made me realise that I had to change how people saw me."

She initially thought that the way to make that intervention was via



Bend It Like Beckham the Musical

Q&A

What was your first job?

I stacked shelves at Tesco in Southall Broadway when I was 15 — I was in charge of soap powders and toilet rolls.

What was your first media job?

Reading travel and weather on Radio WM in the West Midlands, and doing packages for the breakfast show.

What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?

As a film director, to aim as high as you can — don't just make do, but aim for the top. As a stage musical director, to be more prepared for notes by committee.

Who is your biggest influence?

The person who I would credit for giving me a sense of being able to tell stories that matter was Jack Rosenthal. I remember seeing *The Evacuees* and *Bar Mitzvah Boy* and realising that you could write stories of depth about people you don't usually see on telly.

What is your best advice for musical theatre auditions?

Don't choose a song you think I'd like, choose a song that best shows your talent and your skills, and make sure that you tell us the story of the song as you sing it, instead of just singing it.

If you hadn't been a director, what would you have done?

I'd have loved to be a singer-songwriter if I could — I admire them more than anything.

the news, and so trained as a radio reporter to break into news broadcasting. "After a bit of time in newsrooms, though, I realised I wasn't making inroads, and so I started making documentaries," she says.

Her debut documentary, 'I'm British But...', made for Channel 4 in 1989, was the first film made from the point of view of a second generation Asian person. "It was the start of the whole British bhangra music scene, and I wanted to document the beginning of something uniquely British and Asian — something that came out of Southall and Birmingham that was

created by us, but everyone could partake in. It became a film about identity, and funnily enough, if you see the musical and this film, you can see the trajectory very clearly."

The success of the documentary led to a conversation with Film4, and her first feature film, *Bhaji on the Beach*, co-written with Meera Syal, was born. Released in 1993, it was the first full-length feature film made by a British Asian woman. Chadha was once again a trailblazer, showing that nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it.

Since then, her films have included *What's Cooking?*, *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice*. After the success of the latter, she flirted with Hollywood.

"I went to LA, and I was on two different studio movies at Fox and Sony, but they were never made in the end," she says. "When the second one wasn't happening, I ended up doing an episode of 'Who Do You Think You Are?' for the BBC, and went on a roots trip from England to Kenya, India and pre-partition India in Pakistan, where my family originally came from. We tried to find my grandfather's house, but we couldn't. I said we should ask an elderly person, as they'd know — but everyone we met came in 1947 as refugees from India."

That planted a seed that is to bear fruit next month: "I'm going to make a film about partition, which I've been avoiding making for some time as it's such a painful thing. It's called *Viceroy's House*, and it follows Mountbatten [played by Hugh Bonneville] to India in 1947 and the six months leading up to partition. It is based on top-secret British documents that were withheld for 50 years, so it tells a completely different story to the one that is usually told."

Chadha is going to have to leave *Bend it Like Beckham* behind in July

3 top tips for directors

- Always know why you're telling the story — if it is not compelling enough, don't tell it
- Be fluid about your story, but always understand the heart of what's important to the one you're telling
- Choose the people around you who are going to help you tell your story, not their story

to shoot the film in India. Theatre, unlike film, is constantly being reinvented night after night by the performers, and she's nervous about what changes might occur while she's gone.

"One of the things that is quite amusing to have seen is that actors try to vary it a little bit from night to night, and they find new moments to find laughs — sometimes that's okay, but sometimes it's not. I've seen some moments getting bigger and bigger and bigger."

Chadha also notes that going from film to theatre for the first time, she's encountered something else unique — the live interaction with an audience.

"When you're cutting a film, you don't have that interaction until you finish, then you might have two or three test screenings. But here we've been previewing for month and it's quite exhausting, trying to work out which reactions to follow and which not. But I'm a great believer in giving audiences what they want."

Bend it Like Beckham the Musical is reviewed on page 15

Further reading

Observer interview (2015): <http://bit.ly/1ftz6wr>
 Interview in *The Big Issue* (2015): <http://bit.ly/1ftz6wE>
 Daily Telegraph interview (2008): <http://bit.ly/1H7aOCQ>