

Press Cuttings
Bend It Like Beckham
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A pitch-perfect musical in a league of its own

Review
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BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM
PHOENIX THEATRE

I WAS rubbish at football at school, have little interest in the beautiful game, and shamefully know next to nothing about women's footie, beyond the fact that the Fifa Women's World Cup is currently under way in Canada.

Why am I absolutely smitten, then, with this new musical adaptation of the hit 2002 film *Bend It Like Beckham*, which puts the issue of women's football centre-stage and has shot past my defences leaving me in a state of gobsmacked admiration?

One immediate reason is that creator/director Gurinder Chadha ensures the evening is a level playing field in terms of prior interest. You don't need to have seen the film – and if you have, you don't need to have liked it that much. You need be no fanatic about football or that bothered about Becks, whose ability to "bend" a ball past a line of defenders gives the show its title. All that's required is to watch what unfolds with an open mind and prepare to be transported and uplifted in a way that few British musicals manage to achieve.

The essential ingredients of the celluloid original remain: out in suburban west London, a promising young, Becks-worshipping footballer called Jess comes up hard against the conventional, gender-prescriptive values of her Punjabi Indian parents. She joins "the Hounslow Harriers" on the sly and gets tangled in a net of confusion by her feelings for her handsome white coach Joe (causing an awkward love rivalry with her team-mate and tom-boyish girl-friend Jules, a role first created by Keira Knightley, here ably taken by Lauren Samuels).

Composer Howard Goodall and



Natalie Dew and Lauren Samuels, centre, as the 'gutsy' Jess and Jules in a highly entertaining production in which the sub-continent breaks into a suburban landscape

lyricist Charles Hart have cooked up numbers that allow those personal struggles – and the tale's romantic core – to find their melodious, emotionally rich voice. But it's what's going on

around Natalie Dew's highly personable, gutsily determined Jess that lifts the show into a league of its own. Everything is interwoven – so that individual dream-chasing journeys are

bound up with a broader evocation of the changing face of modern Britain. What begins with quite a rowdy, slightly mechanical chorus in praise of ethnic Southall – with its "litter and

glitter and noise" – keeps raising its game. Although basic comic needs are catered for – a gossiping trio of exaggeratedly stooped, ersatz-elderly women are like walk-ons from *Goodness*

Gracious Me – the under-sung pride and pathos of the Asian immigrant experience is superbly conveyed, with a wonderful ballad in particular from Jess's over-protective father Mr Bhamra (Tony Jayawardena), called *People Like Us*, reflecting on the prejudices he faced and which prevented him fulfilling his cricketering promise.

The show aims to entertain, not point score, though; it's about feeling the value, not just of football, but of different approaches to life, and even sex, on the pulse. For what feels like the first time in the West End, the sound of a sub-continent breaks into a suburban landscape – most beautifully in the use of a 500-year-old traditional love song, *Heer*, offered up in supplication as elder and youngsters convene for the wedding celebrations of Jess's bling and

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blinkered sister Pinky. The design abounds with colour and diversity, various nifty tricks are employed to convey the footballing action – from choreographed, balletic training moves to a bouncing light-spot – and if you want some star-players the show has them, not least dishy former Harry Potter star Jamie Campbell Bower as the carin coach.

But it's as a team effort and it's in the broad-brush portrait of who we all are that the piece scores its major triumph; the fusion of contrasting influences reaches fever pitch in the finale, combining the spectacle of whirling saris and traditional wedding-guest dancing with the blur of footballing bodies in motion in one spellbinding East meets West whole – melting-pot Britain on one irresistible plate.

RATING ★★★★★