

Press Cuttings

Bend it like Beckham

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Bend It Like Beckham

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All the feel-good factor of an England win

Like the England mens' team at their very best, 'Bend It Like Beckham' – the West End's latest musical adaptation of a hit Britflick – is about fifty percent wondering where this is all going to fifty percent pure euphoria. And that'll probably do me.

The biggest problem is the songs: composer Howard Goodall is revered for his great skill and subtlety, but his finishing is lousy: the man just doesn't do catchy. Though there are some beautifully dreamy Indian flourishes,

Goodall's meandering ditties set the tone for a first half content to sit back and kick the story of 18-year-old, football-mad West London Sikh Jess (Natalie Dew) around the pitch.

But that's not to say that writer-director Gurinder Chadha (who also created the smash 2002 film) doesn't play a blinder. Even when it feels like Jess's fairytale rise through the ranks of the local women's team Hounslow Harriers is taking a while to get going, 'Bend It Like Beckham' is relentlessly likeable. A lot of that comes down to the loving details and attention that Chadha and designer Miriam Buether have lavished on their stage Southall. From the rows of Indian shops to the garish fairy lights and giant picture of Guru Nanak that adorn Jess's house and the shabby streets teeming with all creeds and colours, 'Bend It Like Beckham' is a fond celebration of multicultural Britain that feels quietly radical after an election where multiculturalism and immigration have come in for so much stick (and it's refreshing to see so a West End musical not just about white folk).

The star player, though, is Aletta Collins and her truly sensational choreography: extended dance sequences that nod to the spirit of Bollywood without actually pastiching it; a totally audacious climactic scene in which she stages a football match and a wedding simultaneously and totally gets away with it, back of the net.

Ultimately, 'Bend It Like Beckham' is about what most musicals are about: friendship, following your dreams, and standing up for yourself. In the second half the stakes and the spectacle are raised high enough that you can't help but become totally absorbed in the struggles of the adorably hangdog Dew as she nutmegs her disapproving parents and dribbles through a fraught love triangle with BFF Jules (Lauren Samuels) and dishy coach Joe (Jamie Campbell Bower) to finally achieve her dreams.

I have some doubts about the fundamentals of 'Bend It Like Beckham': the first half needs a trim, and the songs are not memorable. But you wouldn't leave a 2-0 takedown of Germany unhappy just because there were no goals before the half, and it's difficult to leave this new musical without feeling like we all won today.

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