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Bend It Like Beckham
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VARIETY

West End Review: 'Bend It Like Beckham,' the Musical



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ELLIE KURTZ

Matt Trueman

If [Gurinder Chadha](#)'s Brit flick "[Bend It Like Beckham](#)," which gave the world one [Keira Knightley](#), seems an odd choice for a musical adaptation, it actually works a lot better on stage than on screen. With composer Howard Goodall and lyricist Charles Hart's chipper songs finding time to dwell on ideas, this slight sporting success story blossoms into something much more considered: a sympathetic portrait of adolescence, a hearty

celebration of multiculturalism and a big fat feminist hell-yeah. All that plus the feel-good factor of a World Cup win. It's what you wish the [West End](#) were like all the year round.

Released in 2002, Chadha's film felt like a [hangover](#) from the era of "Girl Power" and ladette culture. Feminism, such as it was then, meant being able to booze like the lads and kick a ball with the best of them, and Knightley's tomboyish Jules, captain of the Hounslow Harriers, never quite became a figure to aspire to — even as Jess, a second-generation Punjabi Sikh defying her conservative family to sneak off and play soccer, looked up to her. While both competed for the affections of their dashing coach, Joe, you felt, deep down, that he might look elsewhere.

In 2015, with fourth-wave feminism far more sophisticated, it strikes a real chord. The Harriers aren't boyish; they're brilliant — young women content in their skin, toned and commanding and the very best of mates. Goodall gives them some cracking numbers: "Girl [Perfect](#)" is a tad flimsy, but "Glorious" is properly, "Defying Gravity," "Let It Go" anthemic and celebrates both their feistiness and their femininity. But the musical's careful not to judge Jess's sister Pinky (Preeya Kalidas) for choosing a different path of marriage and family. Come the finale, in which her traditional wedding segues into a must-win match, both the bride and the soccer star end up held aloft.

At first glance, though, it looks like Chadha, who also directed the musical, is out to replicate the film. As Jess, Natalie Dew has exactly the same doe-eyed sweetness as [Parminder Nagra](#), while Lauren Samels is the spit of Knightley, albeit with a bit more attitude. The shift, however, comes from stressing the social context. Goodall's opening number "UB2" [sets](#) the scene: "Saturday morning in Southall Market," a down-at-heel town on the outskirts of London teeming with cultural and generational clashes. There's a real authenticity about Jess's home life, where a portrait of Guru Nanak hangs over the fireplace and a poster of David Beckham is tacked above her bed.

The music often echoes that clash, and, working with Kuljit Bhamra, Goodall infuses the music with Asian influences before opening up into a gorgeous Punjabi wedding song, "Sadaa Chardhdi Kalaa." Aletta Collins' choreography also celebrates the cultural fusion as big Bollywood sequences trip into energetic sports drills. Less successful, however, are Chadha's attempts to catch the marvel of soccer; several of the effects — spots that spin through the air, glowing golden balls — can feel a bit tacky.

However, it's not the show so much as the spirit that wins through. There's not a scrap of cynicism here and, as a result, you get a real insight into the lives of others — and what's theater for, if not that? The show's book, by Paul Mayeda Berges and Chadha, brings out the vividness of adolescence, when life just feels fuller with its sudden swings from triumph to disaster, but also flags up the frustrations of parents who want the best for their kids but get only shrugs, sulks and door-slams in return. Sophie-Louise Dann is outstanding as a mother coming to terms with the possibility that her daughter might be gay (her bedroom's "like Prisoner Cell Block H"), as she makes sure that mum gets a life of her own.

Better still is the way "Bend It Like Beckham" throws open the immigrant experience. The Bhamra family (led by Tony Jayawardena and Natasha Jayetileke) are wary of diluting their Indian heritage by assimilating into British [culture](#), but also keen to establish the family's position within it. However, in the second generation, we get a real celebration of multiculturalism — "a little bit of Punjab, a little bit of UK," clunks Hart's lyrics — and British diversity looks flat-out brilliant in its own right.

That's what makes this so cheering, coming as it does at a time when immigration is under the microscope. Here, in the middle of the West End, smack bang in the mainstream, is a show that makes a real song and dance about it.



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Phoenix Theatre, London; 1012 seats; £75 (\$118) top. Opened, June 24, 2015 reviewed June 21. Running time: **1 HOUR, 50 MIN.**

Production

A Sonia Friedman Productions, Deepak Nayar and Bend It Films production of a musical in two acts by Paul Mayeda Berges and Gurinder Chadha with music by Howard Goodall, lyrics by Charles Hart, and book by Paul Mayeda Berges and Gurinder Chadha.

Creative

Directed by Gurinder Chadha. Set, Miriam Buether; costumes, Katrina Lindsay; sound, Richard Brooker; lighting, Neil Austin; orchestrations, Howard Goodall & Kuljit Bhamra; musical direction, Nigel Lilley.

Cast

Jamal Andreas, Raj Bajaj, Michelle Bishop, Daniel Bolton, Rakesh Boury, Lisa Bridge, Jamie Campbell Bower, Chloe Chambers, Jorell Coiffic-Kamall, Sophie-Louise Dann, Natalie Dew, Buckso Dhillon-Wooley, Irvine Iqbal, Tony Jayawardena, Natasha Jayetileke, Preeya Kalidas, Sohm Kapila, Sejal Keshwala, Shahid Kahm, Genesis Lynea, Kayleigh McKnight, Harveen Mann, Serina Mathew, Tom Millen, Sharan Phull, Leanne Pinder, Lauren Samuels, Rekha Sawhney, Karl Seth, Kirstie Skivington, Danielle Young.