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theatre cat - Libby Purves reviews:

[BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM Phoenix, WC2](#)

BACK OF THE NET!

Rejoice! In the midst of Fifa's dismal doings musical theatre makes football beautiful again. Gurinder Chadha's and Paul Mayeda Berges' fable, of a British-Asian teenage girl longing to play football rather than cook dhal and live traditionally, was beloved on screen but emerges all the stronger for being driven by Howard Goodall's music and Charles Hart's lyrics. It's a lovely show, with the rare quality in musicals of feeling all-of-a-piece: one solid creation by a team who understand one another and were allowed to get on with it.

It has comfortable specificity – the Sikh community in semis near Heathrow, Southall's Asian high street, the local park and football ground all swiftly realized by Miriam Buether's neat arc of revolving panels. Yet it is a universal fable about mothers and daughters, generational anxiety and teenage longings. We meet Jess "dreaming of somewhere where being other / Doesn't incur the wrath of your mother"; teased for her tracksuit by her preening sister Pinky and her friends, but recruited by the footballing tomboy Jules, whose own mother (a hilarious blonde bombshell) is equally appalled by the athletic brawn of her daughter ("You'll damage your girlybits!"). All shine, but at the centre Natalie Dew as Jess is a new star: she has not only a friendly sweetness and lovely shy grin but sings like a bird and – crucially – can boot a ball into the coach's netting bag from ten feet away, three times running across a West End stage. Lauren Samuels, lean and keen, is a powerful Jules, and Preeya Kalidas slinkily funny as Pinky. Jess' gay friend Tony (Jamal Andreas) has a glorious number too, about how young people bend the truth to disapproving parents: again Hart's lyrics hit the spot with "Don't say your tastes incline to men – just say "have you met my flatmate Sven..?". And Chadha is a playful director: up pops a token Sven, an instant blink and you miss it gag. Combined with Pinky's temporarily ruptured engagement to the snobbish neighbours' son and his surly rebellion ("She's fit, init?") it all adds to the lovingly anarchic celebration of teen spirit.

The last time a new musical felt this good was *Legally Blonde*, for in classic musical style every number pushes the story forwards: nothing ever stops it dead, even the Bollywood-style set-pieces at Pinky's wedding. Though one moment of peacefulness, the wedding song by Shahid Khan and Rekha Sawhney, is breathtaking. Indeed what could have been a crude tale of teenage victory is fascinatingly balanced, musically and dramatically, between the exuberant footballing ambition and Jess' parents' anxiety to protect their girl within the community limits and not risk "shame". It breathes a rare decency, and that likeable British-Asian willingness to mock itself without belittling. The ensemble of three censorious grey-bunned Aunties nipping up and down the aisle is pure delight, but there is seriousness in Tony Jayawardena as the father, singing baritone memories of his early days fresh in from Nairobi: best spin-bowler back home, but here never allowed to play: "People like us don't join the clubs, jump the queues, get served in pubs... People here are decent enough. Till you call their bluff".

Charles Hart's words have a simple lyrical honesty, clever but never forced; Goodall gives us rising joyful tunes, melancholy conflict, duets and quartets and big choruses blending traditional Punjabi tunes with western familiarity. But oh, best of all is the ensemble dancing when the girl football team are on. It might be tempting to have choreographed them ballet-style, in tribute to those

leaping moments when great players do hit a line of grace. But Aletta Collins eschews that to express, rather, the strain and sweat and grimaces of hard training: kicking, stamping, swerving, separating, pointing. Proper footballers, chanting “Girl Perfect! Keep on trying, even when you’re dying!”. It is the the least chorus-girly dancing imaginable: one big number rises to a real haka ferocity before morphing, with quick-change costumes, to a scrubbed-up celebratory disco. It is a hymn to the athletic female body, as the team in their baggy shorts and team shirts exult in effortful joy and great waves of exercise endorphins wash over us from the stage. We grin in delight, not just for Jess and Jules and the accommodation they reach with their parents, but for all girls in all communities who leap and run and laugh and won’t be bound and tethered and primped into submission. Yay..