

# GAME OF TWO HALVES

**Marianka Swain** refereed *Bend It Like Beckham* at Phoenix Theatre on June 24

**W**omen's football, immigration and multiculturalism: Gurinder Chadha's new musical couldn't be more pertinent, right? Well, yes and no. Like her original film, writer/director Chadha keeps the action in 2002, meaning there's no UKIP, no IS and no FIFA meltdown. Threats to happiness are mainly domestic in scale and easily overcome. It's a rigorously feelgood time capsule.

Southall teenager Jess dreams of becoming a professional footballer like hero David Beckham, rather than a good Indian housewife. She gets her chance when Jules recruits her for local team Hounslow Harriers, but before long individual desires clash with familial and community

obligations, climaxing at a crucial match scheduled on the same day as Jess's sister Pinky's wedding.

The three-hour show takes a while to warm up, which highlights weaknesses like limited characterisation, flat staging and earnest exposition repeated in Howard Goodall and Charles Hart's sometimes plodding numbers, but it bursts into life in a rousing second half. Though anxious to avoid pastiche, *Bend*

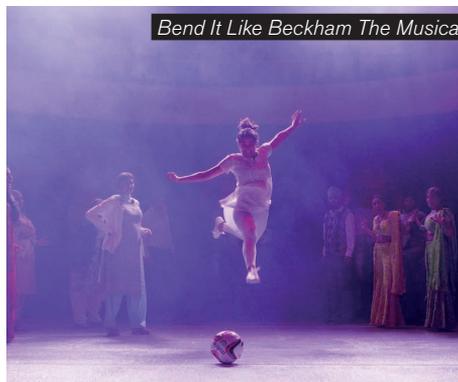
*It* works best when embracing its Asian heritage, impressing with Aletta Collins' energetic bhangra set-pieces and a haunting traditional love song performed by Rekha Sawhney.

The dominant theme is generational conflict: both Jess's parents and Jules's mother fear the loss of their offspring to a world they don't understand. It provides effective universal resonance, and the preaching of tolerance, compromise and empathy is laudable, but stronger focus on the specific culture and its ongoing challenges would give the show some *Billy Elliot* heft. There's also a balance problem:

the democratic score gifts solos to practically everyone, prioritising breadth over depth.

Natalie Dew brings appealing naturalness to Jess, Lauren Samuels belting vocals and single-minded determination to Jules, and there's good support from Preeya Kalidas's bling-tastic Pinky, Sophie-Louise Dann's sexpot single mum, Tony Jayawardena and Natasha Jayetileke's well-meaning parents, Jamal Andréas's gay best friend, and Jamie Campbell Bower's dishy coach.

The team is disappointingly sidelined, with little actual football on display (matches are awkwardly reported), though Collins does supply some energetic drills. *Bend It* scores as a cheeky, irresistibly likeable fairytale, but its empowerment is flimsy when it's so easily won. ●



*Bend It Like Beckham The Musical*

[www.benditlikebeckhamthemusical.co.uk](http://www.benditlikebeckhamthemusical.co.uk)