

Bend It Like Beckham

Yes, yes, that title needs some explanation. And, yes, it's another of those "foreign" movies which might scare off some people worried they might not understand... So let me be absolutely clear up front that *Bend It Like Beckham*, the new Anglo-Indian comedy/drama is one of the most entertaining movies you will come across this year.

First that title: Beckham, to the uninitiated, is currently England's most prominent soccer player (over there, of course, he plays "football"), a mega-star with one of the country's great teams, Manchester United. Among his amazing football skills is his ability to bend--or curve--the ball around a defender on its way to the goal. Thus, the challenge to any good English footballer is to "bend it like Beckham."

This film has very little to do with David Beckham, however, except as inspiration. It concerns one spunky Indian girl from Southwest London, Jessminder ("Jess") Bhamra (played by Parminder Nagra), who loves Beckham and football but whose passion for the game is frowned upon by her traditional parents. After being befriended by another football-loving neighbor girl Jules (Keira Knightley), Jess joins a newly-formed girls's team and her problems escalate. She is constantly urged by her family to put aside foolish games and prepare for marriage, as her engaged older sister Pinky (Archie Panjabi) is doing, and she and Jules both acquire a yen for their charming coach (Jonathan Rhys Myers). Her dilemma reaches its peak when she has to choose between participating in her sister's wedding and playing in the Big Game that could lead to a football scholarship.

There are familiar elements here from any number of sports movies, like *The Karate Kid*, *The Bad News Bears*, *Breaking Away*, et al., but this charmer from director Gurinder Chadha, herself an Anglo-Indian, brings with it a flavorful clash of cultures--call it fish-and-chips on chapatis.

The film also aims at portraying the empowerment of girls, of young women stretching themselves towards new roles in their society, but it is not done pedantically. It is suggested through the fully rounded depictions of the two friends, Jess and Jules, so eager to prove their personal and physical skills. Jules (a fan of Mia Hamm rather than Beckham) is nicely, naturally played by Knightley, but Jess, the young soul torn between two worlds, played by Nagra in her first feature film, is the key to *Bend It Like Beckham*. Let's say that this fresh newcomer--to use an apt metaphor--kicks it right between the posts. Her devotion to Beckham and football shows as genuine in both her flashing eyes and her nimble feet (she had to learn to play football for the movie), yet those same eyes and that same physique are just as expressive when Jess confronts trials and disappointments. She becomes someone you want to root for.

Nagra is wonderfully supported by her film "family;" sister Pinky (Ms. Panjabi) is perfectly opposite to her sister, a flirty type who uses her wiles where Jess uses her wheels, Shaheen Khan is just right as the demanding, tut-tuting Mrs. Bhamra, and Anupam Kher (a major Indian star) shows hidden depths and ardor behind the stolid facade of Mr. Bhamra. His impassioned speech about discrimination in sport which he himself suffered is the kind of moment that adds weight and seriousness to a movie that is likewise light and agile. All the principal roles are well handled, with a real surprise coming from Juliet Stevenson, an award-winning classic actress who here goes

delightfully against type as a preening, flighty housewife.

Director Chadha, who has used elements of her own life in this film she co-wrote with Paul Mayeda Berges and Guljit Bindra, handles a myriad of characters and types with grace and wit. Her last film, the woefully neglected *What's Cooking?* (2000), was a paragon of ensemble filmmaking, done within that most American of contexts, the Thanksgiving dinner. Here she is back in her own territory and mixes us a bright, tart, and lively cocktail of Anglo-Indian ingredients. One epitome of her flair is a glorious finale intercutting the tense, crucial football game with Pinky Bhamra's rampantly colorful nuptial celebration. The game is thrilling, yes, but wait until you see this Big Fat Punjabi Wedding!

(*"Beckham"* is rated "PG-13.")

A Chat with Gurinder Chadha

Gurinder Chadha is both an ebullient, gregarious Londoner and feminist and a woman very proud and respectful of her Indian-via-East African roots. This implies no dichotomy, for she contains these and other dimensions easily, and it probably contributes to her film work investigating the mix and match of various cultures. Her first film, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), had a clutch of Indian women checking out that most English of resort spots, Blackpool. Her *What's Cooking?* gave us an ecumenical kaleidoscope of Thanksgiving dinners from the viewpoints of Asian, Latino, African-American, and Jewish families. In her latest film, the culture clash is obvious, but its overcoming or mitigation is also implied. Hers is a hopeful, warm-hearted vision.

Still, where does football come from as a metaphor for cultural differences? Chadha, it turns out, is no soccer fan. She said two events provided the germ for her film. During the 1998 World Cup, she was watching a game in a pub and witnessed people of all economic levels and races--white, black, and Indian--cheering on "their" English team. Seeing this, she realized that "things had changed" in her country and that football was, in a way she hadn't known, "the sport which defined (our) national identity." Then, in 1999, in Los Angeles, she bought a pair of sneakers which came with free tickets to a Women's World Cup soccer game at the L.A. Coliseum. Witnessing 90,000 screaming fans cheer on the USA versus China, she "was blown away. I was so moved by this celebration of girls backing girls that it stuck with me."

These memories percolated until she was looking for a subject for her third feature. Her friend and co-writer Guljit Bindra was mentoring a fan of Manchester United (Beckham's team), and the idea of an Indian girl realizing herself through football jelled. "The script's first draft (her husband Paul Mayeda Berges also contributed) was done in two weeks." She had found a subject which could offer the cultural contrast she sought, a tale of two obsessions: "The English obsession is football; the Indian obsession is marriage!"

Gurinder Chadha--who obviously has great rapport with her actors--treasures the casting process. "I look for people who can not only deliver lines but I look for actorly instincts--it can be a movement of an eyebrow." Casting for the movie's wedding party was both the most fun and the hardest, said Chadha, because she "had to direct my family in these scenes. But it ended with a real sense of celebration." As for Parminder Nagra, Chadha said she spotted the actress years before in a play in one of London's

“fringe” theaters and filed away her performance--”she could look very beautiful, but she could also look very moody and sulky.” When approached for the role, young Nagra was asked if she could play football and eagerly said she could. “She couldn’t,” confirmed Chadha, “but she had other physical skills--yoga, for instance--and she was, it turned out, very coachable.”

Not only didn’t Chadha know anything about football before her idea, she knew nothing about how to shoot it on film. Having been through it, however, and “knowing what I know now,” she said, “I would be too intimidated” to try it again. Along with her cinematographer, Jong Lin, they developed a special camera device for shooting at low-angle the ball-dribbling sequences, giving both a crisper look and a more forceful view of the girl players.

Bend It Like Beckham was a big success in England last spring and subsequently in other English-speaking countries. Chadha hopes for a similar success in America, and, after the quick demise of *What’s Cooking?*, she is hoping “for a film that will do well in the multiplexes.” Still, she seems content to have had a popular hit in her own country without any production or script concessions to the U.S. market.

Her considerable satisfaction with *Beckham* has been tempered by a personal loss. Her father, after whom the stoic but dignified Mr. Bhamra is closely modeled, died in 1999, before she conceived the film, but his presence, she admitted, was very much with her in its making. He, too, suffered a major disappointment with how he was treated as an immigrant in England, but stuck it out to forge a family in his new country. Because he was not around to see what she’d achieved in *Bend It Like Beckham*, she said, “I cannot cry out ‘yeah’ as loudly as I would want. You see, he was the measure of my success, and he isn’t here to share it with me.” He would be happy with the legacy.

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