

# THE STAGE

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## MANCHESTER FESTIVAL

What's in store  
at north-west's  
global arts event

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## GURINDER CHADHA

'I'm a great believer  
in giving audiences  
what they want'

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## School trip slump plunges children's theatres into crisis

by Georgia Snow

Drama in education is suffering its worst crisis in decades, leading children's theatre-makers have warned.

Theatre companies making work for children and young people have criticised a decline in schools' participation and a change in attitude within the education system that places the arts "at a very low-level status".

The concerns follow figures released by London's Unicorn Theatre, which found that the number of school groups attending the venue have fallen by 6% in the last year.

Unicorn artistic director Purni Morell said an increasing focus on academic subjects was preventing some children from ever visiting the theatre.

"For so many children, the only chance for them to go to the theatre is through school. If you create an environment in which you terrify everyone into thinking that it's all about league tables, what you will not get is a good education. It is not quite clear to me why the government doesn't understand that," she said.

Polka Theatre in Wimbledon, which has been making theatre for children up to the age of 14 since 1967, has recently changed the days it opens. This was formerly Tuesday to Saturday, but changed to Wednesday to Sunday in the last nine months as a result of declining schools audiences.

Artistic director Peter Glanville said the company had been used to a regular schools audience "for many, many years", but added that the current climate meant schools rarely subsidised theatre visits in the way they once did.

"We are trying to find funding to be able to support free school visits," he said. "There is a lot more of an onus on us to be able to try to find the funding."

The shrinking number of schools that want theatre has forced touring company 'Travelling Light' to reduce its 2016 schools tour from 23 weeks to 14.

Artistic producer Jude Merrill said: "I'm really terrified. There are so many children whose big achievements are in the arts and not really in other areas of school life. I am really concerned about what sort of people our education system is going to turn out."

The outlook for children's theatre in schools was the worst she had seen in her 30-year career, she added.

"This is the most scary. I think the arts have dipped in popularity before but they have not been told they are not a core subject before," she said.

Her comments follow news that compulsory GCSEs will not include the arts. Meanwhile, theatre company London Bubble claimed schools were less likely to programme drama projects based purely on their artistic value.

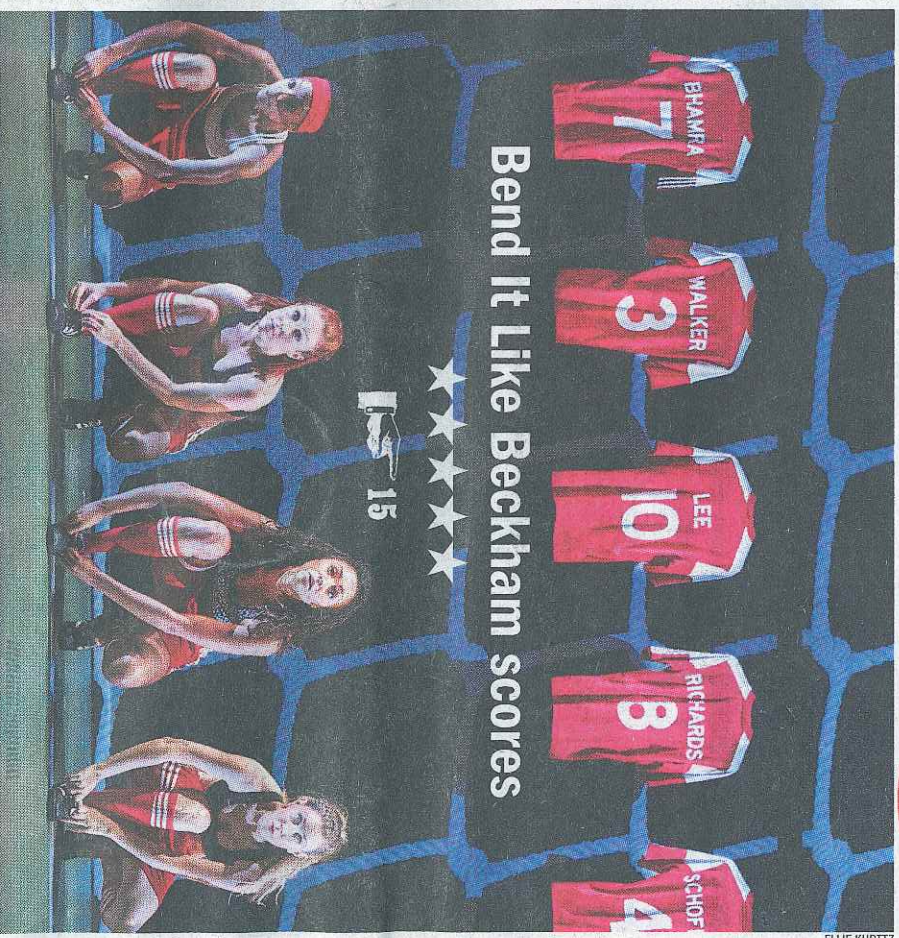
Its associate director for creative learning, Adam Annand, revealed the company had been forced to market its schools projects by emphasising their developmental and well-being benefits, rather than labelling them 'drama'.

"We have got a background in children's development but what we do with the children is make theatre. In most schools they are not buying that. They are buying it in because it is a programme that supports children who need an intervention. I think of it as drama by stealth," he said.

Independent Theatre Council chief executive Charlotte Jones has warned of an "unprecedented collapse" in the schools market.

Writing on her blog, she said: "Worryingly, external arts provision looks like one of the first casualties of a nervous education sector. It is particularly concerning that the decline is so sudden before any actual cuts have been announced."

Editor's view, p8



## Stage Entertainment sold to private equity firm

Private equity firm CVC Capital Partners is to buy European theatre group Stage Entertainment for an undisclosed sum.

CVC, which has investments in more than 60 companies worldwide, will have a 60% controlling stake in Stage Entertainment as part of a deal that is expected to be completed in the second half of this year.

A statement from Stage Entertainment said the move would allow it to expand into theatre markets in Asia and South America, as well as continuing to grow its business in Europe and the US.

Earlier this year, reports suggested that UK-based Ambassador Theatre Group was in talks to acquire a stake in the company. However, CVC was later linked with the deal, reported to be in the region of £286 million. Stage Entertainment founder Joop van den Ende said the sale was brought

about to "ensure the continuity and success of the international musical business" he founded 17 years ago.

He said: "My passion for theatre, especially musical theatre, remains strong. But at my age I have to be realistic, and I don't want to achieve the growth I envisage on my own. I will stay closely involved with Stage Entertainment in the coming years, both personally and as a shareholder."

Van den Ende, now 73, will retain 40% of Stage Entertainment's shares as part of the deal. "In my capacity as co-chairman of the supervisory board charged with the programming of musicals, the development of new titles and the strategy of the business, I will focus on the creative development of new, original titles for national and international markets," he said.

"The company has accomplished its first phase of growth organically, without making large acquisitions," he added. "But with our new shareholder, we can grow considerably more. In the coming five years we can grow from our current 10 million visitors to 20 million visitors per year."

Stage Entertainment has produced a number of UK shows including 'I Can't Sing!', 'Made in Dagenham' and 'Anything Goes', in addition to operating subsidiary companies across Europe and the US.

Ivo Lurvin, partner at CVC, said the company recognised the potential of the live entertainment sector and was impressed by the "strong position of Stage Entertainment in the musical industry".

He added: "These musicals are seen by audiences in the millions, and we expect this number to increase considerably in the coming years, boosted by expanding the company's activities to new markets."

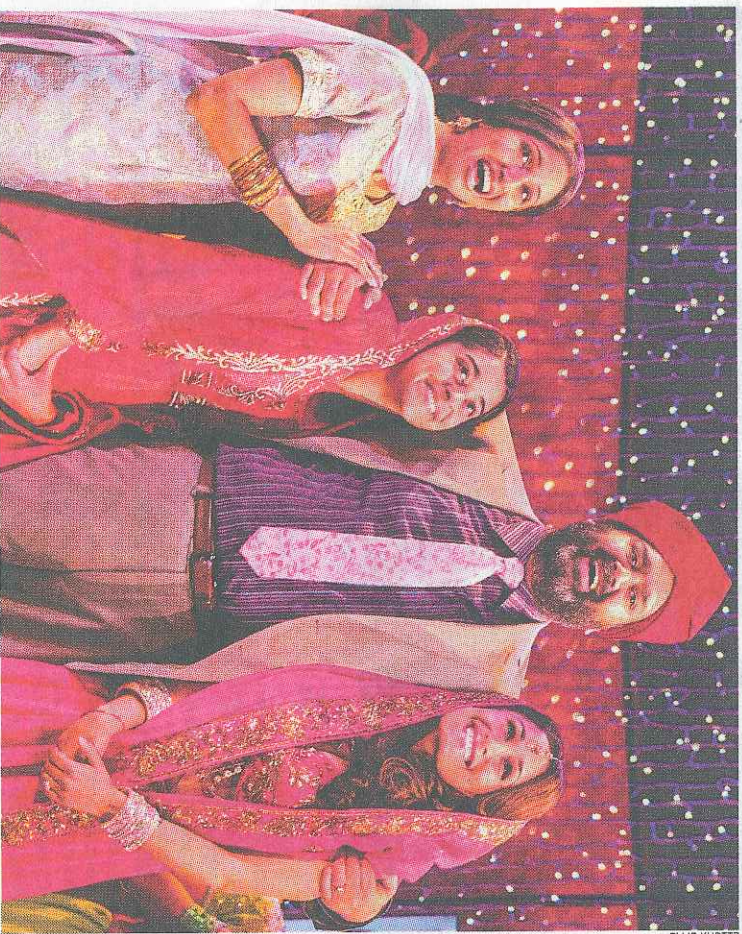
## CRITIC SEARCH 2015 p5

Meet the regional finalists in our nationwide competition





# WHAT'S ON



ELLIE KURTZ

Natalie Dew, Tony Jayawardena and Preetya Kalidas in *Bend It Like Beckham* at the Phoenix Theatre, London

## The big London review

### Phoenix Theatre

#### Bend It Like Beckham

##### Theatre

May 15–October 24, PM June 24

Authors: Howard Goodall (music), Charles Hart (lyrics), Paul Mayeda Berges, Gurinder Chadha (book)

Director: Gurinder Chadha

Designer: William Buehler (set), Katrina Lindsay (costume), Neil Austin (lighting), Richard Brooker (sound)

Musical director: Nigel Lilley

Choreographer: Aletha Collins

Technical: Howard Goodall, Kujit Bhanna (orchestrations), Gary Beeston (production manager), Sumita Hindia (company stage manager), Janet Bench (costume supervisor), Corrie Darling (wardrobe mistress), Pipa Allion, Jim Arnold (casting)

Cast includes: Natalie Dew, Preetya Kalidas, Lauren Samuels, Jana Andras, Sophie-Louise Dann, Tony Jayawardena

Producers: Sonia Friedman Productions, Deepak Mehta Productions, Bend It Films, Fischer and Vasevani Productions, Tanya Link Productions and Zeitiger Productions, Lost Marbles and Two Way Split, Delman Jacobson, Dori McE India, Reliance Entertainment

Running time: 2hrs 45mins

Reviewer: Mark Shenton

Just as no one bends a football quite like David Beckham, so no British-originated new show bends the musical in such a vivaciously fresh and welcome new direction as *Bend It Like Beckham*.

Like *Once*, its equally ground-breaking and warm-hearted predecessor at the Phoenix, it is based on a low-budget film from the first decade of the century that became a sleeper hit. But *Bend It Like Beckham* is a much louder explosion of colour, community and creativity, shot through with exhilarating energy and genuine heart.

It's a joyous, gorgeous portrait of the predominantly Asian west London community of Southall, beautifully introduced in the show's opening number UB2. But the area is more than a postcode and the

show is more than a postcard from it. Instead, it is about the cultural differences and assimilations happening every day in the melting pot of modern-day London. We follow a young Asian teenager, Jesminder (referred to by everyone but her parents as Jess), pursuing a seemingly impossible dream to play football and earn a scholarship to a US university to do so.

In a sense, it is the Billy Elliot story rewritten, swapping ballet for football, and providing just as keen a movement motif for choreographer Aletha Collins in which to ground the show so fluidly. Just as the stage Billy Elliot was directed by Stephen Daldry and scripted by Lee Hall, who fulfilled the same duties on the earlier film, here the film's director Gurinder Chadha and her co-writer Paul Mayeda Berges are again at the helm. So she knows the territory intimately, and maintains its heartfelt warmth throughout.

But instead of the jukebox collection of pop hits and Asian themes that underscored the film, the show is exhilaratingly set to a new score by composer Howard Goodall and lyricist Charles Hart. West End success has mysteriously eluded Goodall, to my mind easily the best British theatre composer we have today. But here he moves into a new dimension with a series of instantly memorable pop tunes folded within an Asian-influenced carpet of sound and his own signature fusion of competing thematic lines.

It is, to borrow the title of the show's second-act opener, glorious. So is the vast 30-plus cast, among whom come particularly strong contributions from Nathalie Dew as Jess, Lauren Samuels as her feisty team-mate Jules, Preetya Kalidas as her glamorous sister Pinky and a scene-stealing comic turn from Sophie-Louise Dann as Jules' mother.   
★★★★★ *Pulsating joy that at last provides a homegrown, original musical hit for the West End*



TOMMY GA-KEN WAN/WWW.FLICKR.COM

Michael Thomson and Morven Christie in *The Driver's Seat* at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

## The big regional review

### Edinburgh

#### The Driver's Seat

##### Theatre

Royal Lyceum Theatre

June 13–27, then touring until July 4, PM June 18

Authors: Muriel Spark (novella), Laurie Sansom (adaptation)

Director: Laurie Sansom

Designer: Ian Jabbars Pita (set/costume/video), Philip Pinsky (sound/composition), Chris Davey (lighting)

Technical: Laura Donnelly (casting director), Gavin Johnson (production manager), Diana Holt (company stage manager)

Cast includes: Ivan Castiglione, Morven Christie, Ryan Fletcher, Gabriel Quigley, Sheila Reid, Michael Thomson, Andrea Volpetti

Producer: National Theatre of Scotland

Running time: 1hr 45mins

Reviewer: Thom Diddin

Red herrings stalk, disport and flaunt themselves across Laurie Sansom's articulate and disturbing adaptation of Muriel Spark's 1970 novella for the National Theatre of Scotland. This is a wrydummit of considerable force, telling of Lise who, distracted and erratic from the alienation of her office job, sets off on holiday in search of an ideal man.

The supposition is that she wants romance. That she will find death is revealed early on. Her circling fellow office workers, whose hollow laughter echoes through the tense, claustrophobic build-up to her departure, soon morph into drably uniform detectives, who forensically reconstruct her final day in the fashion of the TV detective. Except their crime wall on Ana Ines Jabbars Pita's wide-open set is perplex, through which Lise's newfound title, victim, is soon visible in block capitals.

There is never, however, that much of the victim about Morven Christie's Lise. Her hunt for a man who fits her type reveals her as vulnerable, quixotic and certainly exploited by the men who surround her.

But the way she deflects them on to more vulnerable women, notably Sheila Reid's disquieting widow Mrs Fiedke, gives her an air of control. Despite us knowing the gruesome nature of her murder, she can never be a sympathetic character.

Everything about this production speaks of control and alienation. Not least Lise's psychedelic wardrobe (Sansom retains Spark's 1970s sensibilities despite his use of rather more modern technological devices), which defines her self-control and alienates her from her peers.

There is a wonderful slo-mo moment in the airport when Lise dons shades and drops her raincoat to reveal her new splendour. Suddenly the male world drops to full obsequious mode. It is this smooth control of storytelling at which Sansom excels. He never allows the real Lise to be seen as she flits through her role of fantasy characters. Sansom's use of the six-strong ensemble is exemplary, with Gabriel Quigley standing out. A well-drilled unit, they drift in and out of focus, always in the background reconstructing Lise's final hours, sometimes filming her live action so it appears in triptych across the rear walls of the stage.

Once foregrounded, the males are villains, ravenous with lust. Ryan Fletcher's desperate macrobiotics evangelist needs rice, yam and at least two orgasms a day. Italian actors Ivan Castiglione and Andrea Volpetti are sex-mad mechanics in whose workshop Lise seeks refuge during a student riot. Never fully drawn, they exist not for their characters, but for the casual repression they epitomise.

In her disquieting denouement, Spark reveals that Lise's murder itself was the red herring. The violence which betrays her trust is a lot less final – more normal and less visible – in its violation of her life before her death occurs.

★★★★★ *Stark realisation of a Muriel Spark novella that exposes a raw nub of everyday sexism*

## WHAT'S ON

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