

HOW THE WEST HAS WON

By GARRY MADDOX

The Sydney Morning Herald

Saturday 30th October 2021

1133 words

Page 10 | Section: General

999cm on the page

Film festival

GARRY MADDOX



Clockwise from main: *Here Out West* screenwriters Claire Cao, Arka Das, Bina Bhattacharya, Dee Dogan, Vonne Patiag, Tien Tran, Matias Bolla and Nisrine Amine; Jing-Xuan Chan and Warren Lee; Arka Das on set in Blacktown. PHOTOS: JOHN PLATT, WOLTER PEETERS



HOW THE WEST HAS WON

Here Out West is a bold new take on western Sydney, with eight writers, five female directors and nine languages.

Like all the other writers who gathered in a room three years ago, Arka Das had no clue that their brainstorming session would result in a film. He thought it might be, at best, a small-scale online series.

"Day one, we didn't know what we were in for," he says. "Now here we are opening the Sydney Film Festival."

Das has written one of the interweaving chapters – and shines playing Robi, whose knowledge of Bengali helps a desperate woman – in the anthology film *Here Out West*. Set in fictional Sunnyholt and shot in Blacktown, it's a fresh take on contemporary western Sydney.

Eight new writers from different cultural backgrounds from the area – Bangladeshi, Chilean, Chinese-Burmese, Kurdish, Indian, Lebanese, Filipino and Vietnamese – have teamed up with five female directors for a story told in nine languages.

What sounds like a roll-the-dice creative experiment has exceeded all reasonable expectations with selection for such a prestigious festival slot.

Here Out West tells an engaging story about what happens over 24 hours after a grandmother (Genevieve Lemon) steals a baby from a hospital. Other characters include a Chilean security guard (Christian Ravello), who writes poetry to get through his long shifts; a Kurdish musician (De Lovan Zandy), who has been offered a new job; a Filipino nurse (Christine Milo), who takes on an extra hospital shift; and a mother (Gabrielle Chan) and daughter (Jing-Xuan Chan) facing the closing night of the family's restaurant.

While films set in the city's west and south-west are not new – notable examples include *The Finished People* (2003), *Fat Pizza* (2003), *Little Fish* (2005), *Blacktown* (2005), *Footy Legends* (2006), *Housos vs Authority* (2012), *Fat Pizza vs Housos* (2014) and *Ritz* (2015) – it's fair to say the class schism revealed during lockdown between "LGAs of concern" and the rest of the city reflects what has been happening in the film industry over the years.

Bangladesh-born and Sydney-raised Das, an actor who has been in *Lion*, *Top of the Lake* and *Mulan*, was looking to move into screenwriting when he heard of the

call-out for emerging writers. "I applied on the last day, a very cliché deadline kind of thing," he says. "I thought if it made a web series or something, that would be great. But magic happened in the room. Eight of us had these loosely connected ideas of western Sydney and about place and family and belonging and how we wanted this new generation of migrant stories to be told and how we wanted to change the Australian cinema landscape because we felt it was always showing the same thing... always tales about refugees or downtrodden immigrants."

Das wrote a chapter called *Brotherhood*, about three friends (Das, Thuso Lekwape and Rahel Romahn) whose argument leads in an unexpected direction.

He credits script producer Blake Ayshford (*Fighting Season*) with helping the writers to develop their stories and weave them into a single film. He considers it an important boost for emerging talent in the economic, social and cultural powerhouse that is the western suburbs. "You've got so much talent, so much artistic ability," Das says. "But what we've never had is the infrastructure. We've never had the pathways to get into the film industry or for people to start showing their work on a mainstream platform."

Here Out West grew out of an initiative to explore a new model for film-making and feed a demand for more diverse stories.

Producer Annabel Davis says the two production companies that became partners, Co-Curious and Emerald Productions, wanted to find and nurture under-represented writers to tell unfamiliar immigrant stories. "They're all incredibly personal stories," she says. "Not 'head down, work hard, be thankful you got to Australia' but this new generation who wants to be seen; they want to be heard, they want to have a voice."

For writer and actor Nisrine Amine, the festival screening is ideal timing.

"It's going to be an accidental statement in a way to say 'here we are, we've come out of lockdown, we matter and our voices can be heard,'" she says. "It's just a beautiful way to commemorate the end of lockdown, especially for western Sydney."

Like Das and Amine, the other writers are all newcomers to film: Bina Bhattacharya,

Matias Bolla, Claire Cao, Dee Dogan, Vonne Patiag and Tien Tran.

A feature of the project was that all of them were made associate producers.

"That meant we could be involved in creative decisions right from the beginning through to marketing," Das says. "That changed the game. The producers would come to us and ask what we thought of certain creative decisions, whether they were authentic to the story or whether it was becoming a little commercialised."

Two established directors, Leah Purcell (*The Drover's Wife: The Legend of Molly Johnson*) and Ana Kokkinos (*The Hunting*) teamed up with the less well-known Fadia Abboud, Julie Kaleff and Lucy Gaffy to shoot the film. Abboud, the daughter of Lebanese immigrants and a former co-director of the Arab Film Festival, is thrilled that her first feature film is on opening night.

"Good on them for putting it up there as a story that you need to see and is worthy of your attention," she says. "We were all wondering exactly how it was going to work, but it's paid off."

Abboud says she admired how the producers approached the project.

"They adopted a cultural development process, which is the idea of centring the writer and the culture at the heart of the story and keeping the writer at every step in the process," she says. "They're giving up a very personal story, and it's about a culture and a community that you don't see very often on screen. So we had to get everything right and... honour that story."

As the daughter of Lebanese immigrants, Abboud identified with the two chapters she directed – *The Musician*, about two Kurdish refugees who plan to set up a music school, and *Brother Tom*, about two Vietnamese-Australian brothers. "I understand the struggle that you have with your parents when it feels like they've given up everything to come here and give you a better life."

Here Out West opens the Sydney Film Festival on Wednesday and will also screen at the Casula Powerhouse and Randwick Ritz. The festival's online program runs from November 12 to 21. It opens in cinemas in February.