

Ensemble's welcome breakthrough

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FILM

It's true that Australian cinema barely represents the diversity of Australian society. We have ignored the greatest success of our culture – the peaceful revolution of post-war migration – for a narrow representation of who we are. To put it more bluntly, white faces run the business and other colours must battle just to get in the door.

One sign we had grown up as a nation would be more films about the migrant experience – but there's no guarantee audiences will embrace them just because they're "ethnic".

Most films that have broken through the "skip ceiling", if I can call it that, have been broad comedies with stridently "ethnic" characters, calculated to appeal to a niche community. Stories of dramatic warp and weft have been harder to fund and find.

What's blazingly clear about *Here Out West* is that the football team-sized squads at work here wanted to make something that grabs and holds our attention.

They chose a brave way to do that – an ensemble film, weaving together eight different stories, with eight writers, five directors and 10 different languages: Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Kurdish, Kurmanji, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish, Vietnamese – and English. This must be a record.

More remarkable is that for the most part, they succeed. *Here Out West* is an absorbing comedy drama. Parts of it are uneven, but the best bits are very good, like Leah Purcell's finale, set in a Chinese restaurant. The mother (Gabrielle Chan) has fought for every dollar since leaving Burma; her daughter (Jing-Xuan Chan) wants to move to Melbourne with her non-Chinese boyfriend, breaking her mother's heart. Purcell's warmth and humour envelop this story, written by Claire Cao, as it wraps up many threads.

Purcell and Ana Kokkinos – the most experienced among the directors – give the film a solid rudder. Kokkinos directed or co-directed three stories, each with its own poise and flavour. In each, she works with a different young writer: Matias Bolla, Arka Das (who also stars) and Tien Tran. Fadia Abboud directed two stories and Julie Kalceff one – an affecting tale by Vonne Patiag about a young Filipina nurse (Christine Milo) pulling a double shift in a western Sydney hospital.



Here Out West features eight stories.

HERE OUT WEST ★★★★★

M, 101 minutes, in cinemas and coming to ABC TV. Reviewed by **PAUL BYRNES**