



Review

In the Nguyen Kitchen review – cooking up a heartwarming Vietnamese-French diaspora musical



Aspiring performer Yvonne dreams aloud in candy-coloured reveries that carry the hopes of a marginalised singer in a rarely-seen Parisian community



📷 Captive to cliché ... Clotilde Chevalier in In the Nguyen Kitchen

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Paris is home to one of the oldest and largest Vietnamese diasporas in the world – not that you could tell from mainstream French cinema. In this heartwarming feature debut, Stéphane Ly-Cuong turns to the magic of the musical comedy to portray not only the dreams and the struggles of Vietnamese-French artists, but also a side of Paris seldom seen on screen.

A hopeful performer and singer, Yvonne Nguyen (Clotilde Chevalier) can't help but dream in songs. Her candy-coloured reveries unfold like a Jacques Demy fantasy, bursting with tunes and light. In reality,

however, she is stuck belting out jingles for spring rolls to indifferent supermarket customers. Without much luck getting cast in acting roles, Yvonne moves back in with her mother (Anh Tran-Nghia), who runs a restaurant in the outskirts of Paris. Generational clashes soon follow, but so does a too-good-to-be-true opportunity to star in a big-budget musical. While Yvonne's mother scolds her for not being Vietnamese enough, the role she is offered – Lotus Flower, an exotic Asian mistress – ironically demands that Nguyen play up cliché stereotypes.

This push-and-pull lays bare the barriers faced in an industry where Asian characters are often seen as interchangeable. Ly-Cuong approaches these issues with a winking humour and playfulness; the song sequences are a delight, but the beautiful chemistry between Chevalier and Tran-Nghia shines even more brightly. Here, music does not exist solely on stage, or in the rehearsal room; as Yvonne and her mother bond over cooking in a moving ritual of cultural inheritance, the sounds of clanking utensils and sizzling woks harmonise into a pleasuring symphony.

Against the cacophony of self-doubt and societal prejudices, it is this music of love and care that allows Yvonne to eventually dance to the beat of her own drum.

- In the Nguyen Kitchen is in UK cinemas from 29 August