



Life & Luxury Arts & Culture Review

This Outback noir is a career-redefining role for Simon Baker

This is the kind of movie Michelangelo Antonioni might have made had he ever felt inspired to visit the Australian desert.

John McDonald

May 25, 2023 - 5:00am

Save Share

For the Catholic Church, limbo was literally the outskirts of hell, inhabited by those good people who died before Christ was born, and by infants without experience of baptism or sin.

In common parlance, the word has come to mean a state of indecision, of forced inaction with no clear path in sight.



Natasha Wanganeen as Emma and Simon Baker as Travis Hurley, a broken man sent to look into a 20-year-old crime.

For filmmaker Ivan Sen, this seemed like an appropriate description of an isolated Outback community where people drift through their lives, one day like the next, edging towards eternity. Nothing ever seems to happen, but there are painful, niggling traumas beneath the skin of appearances.

Such a place is Umoona, the Indigenous name for a town instantly recognisable as Coober Pedy, in regional South Australia. It's a place of dry, scorching heat, where much of life is conducted beneath the surface of the earth, in the opal mines, and caves excavated from solid rock. Most visitors will stay in a primitive underground motel, which is exactly where policeman Travis Hurley (Simon Baker) puts up when he arrives from Adelaide to reopen a 20-year-old cold case about the disappearance of a young Aboriginal woman.

For Simon Baker, this is a role that virtually redefines his career as an actor. Gone is the suave heartthrob with the wavy hair. In his place is an ageing, weather-beaten cop with a full set of skeletons in the closet. It's hard to find Baker in this figure, with his crewcut, beard, glasses, and abundant tattoos. Even more disconcerting is Hurley's air of terminal depression. As we gradually piece together his story we find he is estranged from his wife and child, has killed someone, and is a low-level drug addict. In his gloomy hotel room, the camera lingers at a discreet distance while he shoots up.

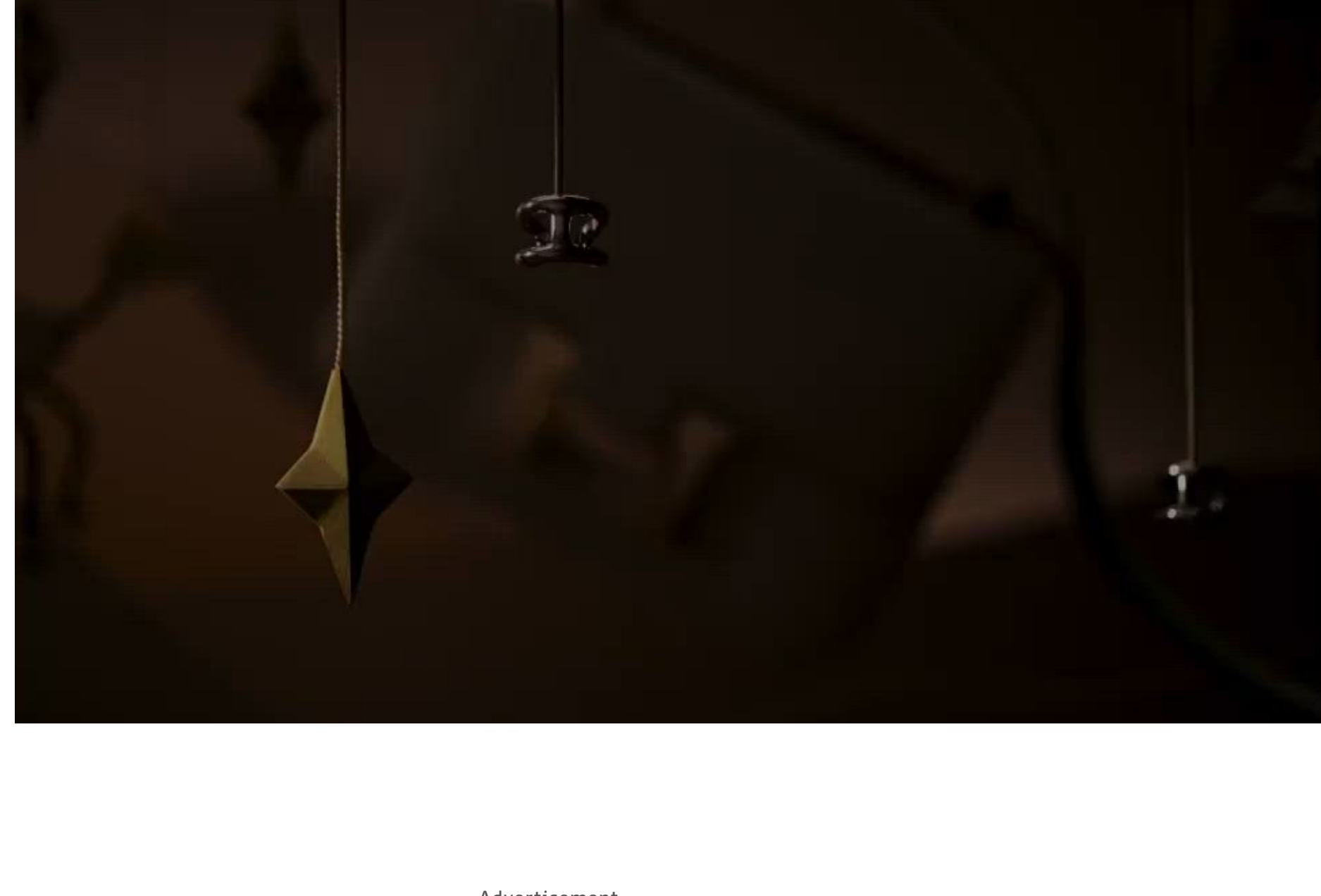
This is, of course, a standard profile for all those miserable cops we love to read about in crime fiction, from Rebus to Wallander to Harry Bosch. Every truly magnetic cop has a broken marriage, a problem with substance abuse, and a collection of deep dark secrets that keeps him awake at nights. They are damaged personalities that find salvation in action: tracking down criminals as a way of establishing their own existential *bona fides*.

Hurley doesn't even have the will to action. He is a broken man, carrying an unspecified burden of guilt and shame. We suspect he has been sent on this dead-end assignment as a punishment, or a way of getting rid of him for a while. As he drives around, the radio keeps up a stream of evangelical white noise, suggesting that he is looking for some kind of spiritual redemption but can barely be bothered to do anything about it.



The entire film is shot in black-and-white; an inspired choice which removes the powerful, distracting colours of the Australian landscape.

Arriving in Umoona is like arriving on the surface of moon. It's a desolate place, pockmarked by mines and craters. To emphasise this atmosphere, Sen shot the entire film in black-and-white; an inspired choice that removes the powerful, distracting colours of the Australian landscape and lets us concentrate on its inhabitants' lives. Their existences are equally flat and grey, neither good nor bad, devoid of passions and ambitions – or so it seems. There's a hint of symbolism in the bright opals the locals extract from dull rock.



Advertisement

Hurley sets to work as in any police procedural, but nobody is willing to cooperate. Neither the girl's brother, Charlie (Rob Collins), who lives like an outcast in a caravan, or his sister, Emma (Natasha Wanganeen), bringing up three kids by herself, will have anything to do with the investigation. They are embittered and wary, distrustful of coppers who have always been racist bastards. In his passive way, Hurley seems OK with their decisions. He can understand why nobody would want to talk to him. It's his very reticence, his lack of insistence that will eventually win the family's trust.

Hurley's main focus is on a white prospector named Leon, named as a suspect in the original investigation. But he has died, and Hurley can only get the vaguest of stories from Leon's elderly brother, Joseph (Nicholas Hope). This interview proves as inconsequential as everything else Hurley has done so far, although we feel some small pieces of the puzzle are beginning to fall in place.

If you're thinking *Limbo* sounds like a film in which very little happens, you'd be right, but that little is almost hypnotic. One is drawn gradually into this grim, small-town drama, as we begin to understand the anxieties and sadness of the characters. We see how their sister's disappearance has inflicted permanent wounds on Charlie and Emma, leading to the disjointed lives they now lead.

It's Hurley's almost-accidental destiny to bring the family back together, to mend Rob's relationship with his son, Zac (Marc Coe), and to draw Emma out of her shell. He does it by being more hopeless and despairing than any of them. They sense his own damaged state and recognise he's like no copper ever seen in this town. In the most unlikely manner, Hurley acts as a one-man force for reconciliation.

This awkward relationship between black and white Australians is a constant theme in Sen's films, and he handles the subject with great skill. He is a one-man-band among filmmakers, producer, writer, director, cinematographer, composer and co-producer.

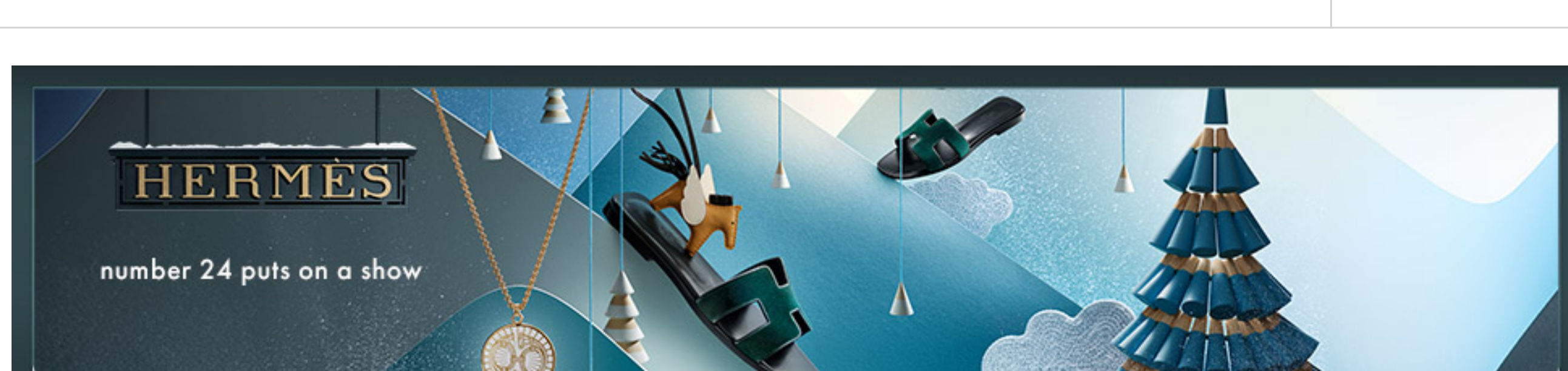
He also does the editing and the casting. This instinctive need for control means that Sen's movies feel unusually intimate and handmade, self-conscious works of art rather than industry product.

From his impressive debut feature, *Beneath Clouds* (2002), to the present, landscape has been central to Sen's vision. With *Limbo*, he says the landscape came first, inspiring the kind of story he wanted to tell. What happened was his third successive attempt at "Outback noir", with a lone policeman chasing crime in a remote community.

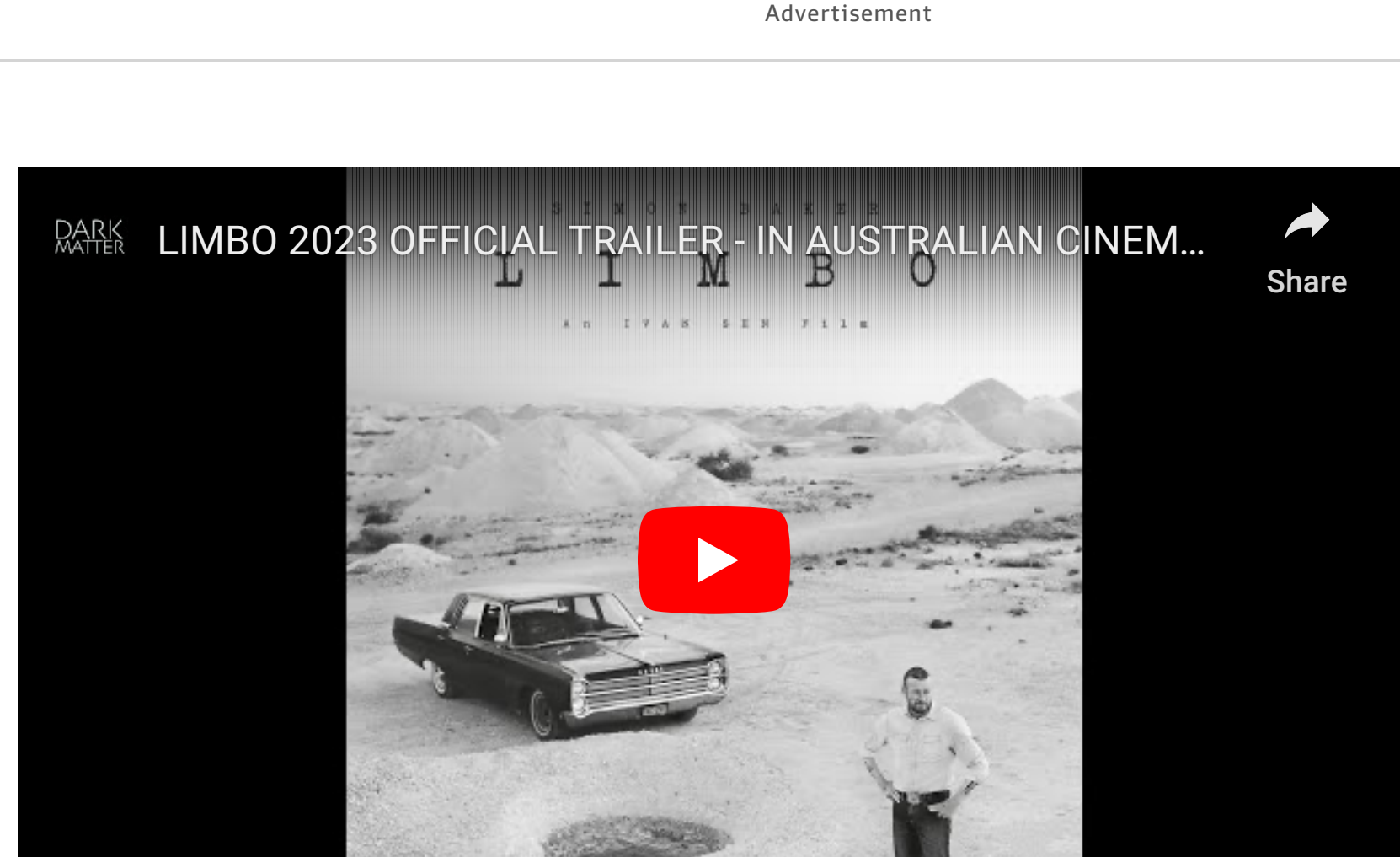
With *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016), Aaron Pedersen starred as the Aboriginal cop Jay Swan. With *Limbo*, Travis Hurley represents a departure, and a more piercing examination of the links between landscape and the psyche, with the scarred surfaces and underground life of Umoona providing what literary critics call an objective correlative of the characters' personalities.

By any standard, *Limbo* is a huge advance on Sen's two previous features. Gone are the caricatural figures, the stereotypes and stock action sequences.

This is the kind of movie Michelangelo Antonioni might have made had he ever felt inspired to visit the Australian desert. It's Sen's deepest and most mature film to date, a film that speaks to the black-and-white heart of Australia and finds a story that goes to the human condition.



Advertisement



Limbo

Written and directed by Ivan Sen

Starring Simon Baker, Rob Collins, Natasha Wanganeen, Nicholas Hope, Marc Coe, Joshua Warrior, Mezi Atwood

Australia, MA 15+, 108 mins

More reviews from John McDonald

- [So much more than a miniskirt with a Vidal Sassoon bob](#) Sadie Frost's documentary of fashion icon Mary Quant blends newsreel footage with interviews with fashion experts and those who knew and worked with the designer
- [This thriller becomes more suspenseful with each new wrinkle](#) Director Tarik Saleh has set his story within the highest echelons of Islamic learning
- [Rolf de Heer's weird new film is 'pure cinema'](#) It's hard to love such a beautiful-ugly film, but it's equally hard to write it off
- ['Polite Society' is original, fast and consistently funny](#) This suburban family comedy is also a marital arts extravaganza, a bizarre coming-of-age story, and a black horror fantasy with a wedding theme.
- [Joaquin Phoenix as you've never seen him before](#) Just in time for Mothers' Day – a film about a matriarch who is a kind of evil mutant, descended from Medea via Mommy Dearest.

The best of travel, fashion, cars and more, straight to your inbox. [Sign up to our weekly newsletter.](#)

Save Share Print article License article

READ MORE

Review + Film + AFR Weekend + Weekend Fin +

MOST VIEWED IN LIFE AND LUXURY

LATEST IN ARTS & CULTURE

Fetching latest articles