

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## In Limbo we watch as an unrecognisable Simon Baker takes on a cold case



**Paul Byrnes**

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**Limbo** ★★★★★  
(MA) 108 minutes

Ivan Sen's latest is another journey into the heart of the country, a desert mystery like his two recent police dramas, *Mystery Road* and *Goldstone*. In some ways they're the same movie – a stranger arrives in town, attempting to solve a mystery – but with variations that allow him to look at different aspects of the schism between black and white Australia.

Sen has become very good at what he does as writer and director, refining his craft so that there is very little wasted time or emotion. *Limbo* is an exercise in minimalism, but that does not mean it's not watchable.



Simon Baker is almost unrecognisable in Mystery Road director Ivan Sen's latest movie. BONSAI FILMS

The stranger in the earlier movies was a black detective. This time we have Simon Baker looking almost unrecognisable as a white city detective sent to Umoona, an opal mining village in the very flattest, driest, most moon-like desert in Australia. This is Coober Pedy as a metaphor for limbo – a place where the dead and the living go to be sorted.

Travis comes to Umoona to examine a 20-year-old cold case, in which a young Aboriginal woman disappeared. He checks into a cave motel with no hospitality or even staff and injects heroin as soon as he arrives. We see that his body is heavily tattooed, with a large pair of wings on his back. Religious symbols appear throughout – without the sense that religion offers any answers or much comfort to the condemned. This may be limbo but God hasn't sent his best guy.

The cinematography is stunning – widescreen black and white, with Sen's characteristic aerial glides over the landscape. The monochrome concentrates everything, matching the minimal dialogue and long takes with few close-ups. Sen knows exactly what he's doing: the drug injection is shown in long shot, without going in close for the heightened horror that other directors would have chosen. It's a sign of his confidence.

The missing girl's brother Charlie (Rob Collins) tells him to get lost; so does her sister Emma (Natasha Wanganeen), who looks after three children. The plot, such as it is, is about the black characters learning to trust the detective – at least enough that he can look into what

happened to the girl. Nicholas Hope, haggard and wizened, plays an old white prospector whose late brother was a main suspect.

There's very little action here, in comparison to the two earlier (colour) movies. Sen relies on his actors to carry us along, and he has cast well. Baker continues to surprise with his range and ability to physically transform. Collins and Wanganeen bring a sense of betrayal and despair going back generations. *Limbo* is a quiet but powerful meditation on how far we have not come in this country.

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