

Australian film

Review

Limbo review – Simon Baker is transcendent in another beautiful film from Ivan Sen

★★★★☆

The cast are uniformly excellent in the auteur’s latest outback noir, with his star playing a tough, sorrowful detective investigating the murder of an Indigenous girl 20 years before

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Simon Baker in Limbo, a new film from Ivan Sen. Photograph: Bunya Productions

After making last year’s *Loveland*, a heavily ponderous and unsubtle sci-fi film set in Hong Kong, the Indigenous auteur Ivan Sen - most famous for directing the *Mystery Road* movies - has returned to crime in the sun-scorched desert. And damn it’s great to have him back doing outback noir, because Sen is so bloody good at it. His latest work, *Limbo*, is an eerily meditative production with top-notch performances and a harshly beautiful monochrome veneer.

Limbo - an Ivan Sen Film - new trailer (2023)



Simon Baker leads the cast as Travis Hurley, a tough, sorrowful, heroin-injecting detective with a buzzcut and a downbeat, Walter White-ish demeanour. At one point a child accurately observes that he looks more like a drug dealer than a member of the force.

The film is set in the titular - fictitious - opal mining town, where Hurley arrives to ask questions about the unsolved murder case of an Indigenous girl, Charlotte Hayes, 20 years before.


The addled cop is a bit of a trope: they may wrestle with the demon drink

(like Aaron Pedersen in [Goldstone](#)), be afflicted by physical ailments (Brendan Cowell’s tinnitus-suffering constable in [Noise](#)) or have a traumatic, personal connection to the scene of the crime (Eric Bana in [The Dry](#)). But Baker transcends stereotype, bringing sleepy-eyed and sorrowful gravitas, with lots of thousand-yard stares and a slow way of speaking, as if Hurley is aware that time moves differently in this part of the world.

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In reality the central location is Coober Pedy - the bizarre South Australian town where citizens live in underground dugouts to escape the blistering heat. Is it possible to maintain a circadian rhythm down there? Or is time itself stuck in limbo: never really day and never really night?

This striking location, captured in Warwick Thornton’s vampire series [Firebite](#), is presented by the multi-hyphenate Sen (also Limbo’s cinematographer, writer, editor and composer) in the aforementioned spartan-looking monochrome, which adds an extra layer of spareness to environments that already have a vast and empty feeling. The film looks better the closer Sen’s cameras get to the ground - birds-eye drone shots, which the director has deployed before, losing their earthy lustre and becoming oddly mechanical-looking in black and white.

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The monochrome aesthetic is also a bit of a pathos-o-matic, helping the cast hit their plaintive notes. Sometimes characters converse as if there’s vast valleys between them; sometimes they cut right to the bone. When Hurley informs the victim’s brother Charlie (Rob Collins) that he’s revisiting the case with “fresh eyes”, Charlie responds: “We needed fresh eyes 20 fuckin’ years ago.”

Part of the film’s lingering sadness comes from the knowledge that Hurley, and the police force he represents, is doing far too little, far too late. We know that authorities would have handled the case very differently had the murdered girl been white.

An ageing white man, Joseph (a very scabby-looking Nicholas Hope), might know something about what happened: he certainly seems to have regrets, though here they’re not in short supply. The victim’s sister Emma (Natasha Wanganeen) is a little more welcoming than Charlie, though everybody in this film has a lost, faded look in their eyes. These are people who don’t seem to hope for much, other than perhaps to be left alone. The cast, in weather-beaten and woebegone mode, are uniformly excellent, directed by Sen in beautiful unison, their performances different notes in the same melody.

Limbo isn’t, as you might have guessed, the kind of film in which all wrongs are righted and truth and justice restored. The story has an aura of compelling pointlessness, odd as that may sound, stemming from the sheer distance felt between the crucially important events of the past - when Charlotte disappeared and the “real” drama occurred - and the hazy aftermath of the present. Elements of the script share similarities with Stan’s series [Black Snow](#), in which another dozy detective, played by Travis Fimmel, tries to find the truth about a terrible crime many years after the fact.

From a structural point of view, Black Snow took the easy option, flashing between past to present. Limbo is all about the gap between then and now,

about being dislocated from time, unable to move forwards or backwards and too old to start again; the state of the characters' lives, in other words.

Sen achieves something quite difficult: telling a story not about action or intrigue per se, but turning the dramatic arena into something more like an ellipsis: an ever-unanswerable space, where crucial things are omitted. It takes a calculated, studious sort of audacity to make a film like this, and a deep-thinking humanitarianism to fill it with such pathos.

Limbo premiered at Berlin film festival; it is out in cinemas in Australia from 18 May

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