

The Limey

Stephen Soderberg is the chameleon of American directors; he can adapt himself to any genre and make it his own. He is also loath to repeat himself. His first film was the independent surprise *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), but he has also made films as diverse as the quirky, expressionist *Kafka* (1991) and the heartfelt period piece *King of the Hill* (1993)--not to mention last year's smart cops-and-robbers flick *Out of Sight*. His latest, *The Limey*, starring Terence Stamp, could be seen as a parallel to the last named picture, but the cops are barely present and the look and the flavor are very different. This is LA all the way.

Dave Wilson (Stamp), a cockney hitman just out of prison in England, learns that his daughter Jenny has died in LA under mysterious circumstances, and he comes seeking revenge. Never much of a father--he "watched her grow up--in increments"--Wilson quickly discovers that Jenny's demise probably came at the order of Hollywood promoter/producer Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), who had seduced her. He takes Valentine's measure at the latter's fabulous cantilevered mansion overlooking the smog-laden city, but he eventually has to track him down at another layout--just as fabulous and almost as cantilevered--up in Big Sur country.

This is standard chase and revenge stuff, the man alone seeking vengeance on the smug hustler who done him wrong, the material of countless Westerns, for example. What makes it more interesting is mostly the Limey, Wilson himself, who, while familiar with underworld doings (his life's work), doesn't know what he *can't* do under the spangled sun of Los Angeles. It's fun to see Stamp, who more often than not portrays menacing toffs or off-kilter elegance, playing an easy-talking mug dropping rhyming slang ("gonna take a 'butcher's hook'--look--around the place"). And the cockney can get pretty ripe, especially when Wilson delivers a convoluted explanation for his visit to a DEA agent (Bill Duke) who hasn't the dimmest idea what he's haranguing about. Besides the smarmy Fonda, there are other typical denizens of the City of the Angels--like Valentine's security consultant Avery (Barry Newman)--who are puzzled as to how to confront this London Outsider.

The film also plays nicely with some of the familiar riffs from other gangster films. One example is a scene where we see a lone Wilson, prostrate after being roughed up by a bunch of Avery's toughs in a warehouse, get to his feet and stagger back into the office for revenge. The shot stays on the doorway until we hear gunfire within, and then one mug flees followed by an implacable Wilson. The standard action movie would have followed us inside to witness every bloody round the gunman got off. Another neat oddity of the film is the recycling of an earlier Terence Stamp film, *Poor Cow*, made by British director Ken Loach in 1967. Sequences from this kitchen sink drama about a then-young lowlife (Stamp) serve as flashback material for the hitman's reveries.

This is one LA gangster flick served up with ginger beer rather than a Perrier with lemon.

("The Limey" is rated "R" for episodes of violence.)

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