

TELEVISION | August 1, 2013, 3:55 p.m. ET

Noir Down Under

By SOHRAB AHMARI

A debt collector knocks on the door of a ramshackle bungalow in a quiet suburban development. He is let in, only to be greeted by a World War-II era pistol pointed at his face. But the gunman is shaking from the combined effects of age and alcohol, allowing the debt collector to smack the firearm out of his hand and lock him in a bedroom. After locating the money he came for, the debt collector calls an associate with the good news, wryly adding that next time, "I wouldn't mind being warned about the armed and the desperate."



Acorn/RLJ Entertainment
Guy Pearce

The collector is Jack Irish (Guy Pearce), the eponymous antihero of this intelligent, hard-boiled thriller set in Melbourne, Australia. It's the first episode in a series based on the novels of Peter Temple, Australia's answer to James Ellroy. "Jack Irish: Bad Debts" aired Down Under last year and is now finding a U.S. audience online thanks to AcornTV.

Jack Irish: Bad Debts
Acorn.tv (Streaming)

Jack is a criminal-defense lawyer by training who abandoned the profession after a client, enraged by what he saw as an inadequate courtroom performance, shot and killed Jack's gorgeous new wife before turning the gun on himself with the words, "You're listening now, Jack!" Ever since, he's been adrift, surviving on strong drink, whiling away his time betting on horses and building cabinets, and cashing in on his seedy connections to support a new career as a debt collector and private eye.

This sad existence is interrupted when another former client, a newly released convict named Danny McKillop (Simon Russell) is killed by police in the dead of night after leaving multiple harried voicemails for Jack. The official explanation is that Danny pulled a gun on the cops. Awakened from his moral stupor, Jack suspects still fouler play. Years ago, Jack (unsuccessfully) defended Danny against hit-and-run charges arising from the death of a housing activist who had been leading protests against a big new development. Could sinister forces have run down the pestering activist, framed Danny for it and returned to eliminate him?

Of course they could have. This is a classic noir, and we quickly identify the bad guys: an alliance of corrupt officials, greedy developers and clergymen with a taste for underage flesh. For Jack and his journalist sidekick/lover, Linda (Marta Dusseldorp), the question that matters isn't whodunit, but how and why. The answer is complicated—too complicated—and it takes longer than necessary to get there (104 minutes to be exact). It involves labyrinthine business arrangements, hidden photographs, fake lottery winnings and a Nat "King" Cole album.

A few of the subplots are a little weak. When he's not unraveling murderous conspiracies, Jack apprentices with Charlie (Vadim Glowna), a cabinetmaker who dispenses cringe-inducing homespun advice: "Until you make something nice out of it, it's only a piece of wood." Perhaps the character is fleshed out in greater detail in later episodes or in the novels. Here, however, the Charlie sequences merely baffle.

But if the show's pacing and character development aren't as crisp as they should be, "Jack Irish" more than compensates with terrific atmospherics and solid acting. Like "Chinatown" and other American noirs whose spirit it channels, most of the action here takes place in well-lit exteriors, rendering the evil it depicts all the more terrible. Deserted cityscapes provide an eerie backdrop for the conclusion's rapid-fire action sequences. "Jack Irish" also benefits from Mr. Pearce's and Ms. Dusseldorp's understated and good-humored performances; the larger cast of characters, especially Jack's shady racetrack partners, provide additional comic relief.

One final note. Almost everyone here speaks with a heavy Australian accent, in addition to which there is much slang that will be unfamiliar to U.S. viewers. But this isn't a major cause for concern. Noir is an international language.

—Mr. Ahmari is an assistant books editor at the Journal. Nancy DeWolf Smith is away.