

# Romulus, My Father: a compassionate film about immigrant life in Australia

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*Romulus, My Father* is based on the 1998 biographical memoir of the same name by philosopher Raimond Gaita. It is the directorial debut of Australian actor Richard Roxburgh, whose acting credits include, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1996), *Passion: The Story of Percy Grainger* (1999), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) and *Like Minds* (2006).

Roxburgh's first film is an honest and heartfelt work about the personal hardships and tragedies endured by Romulus Gaita's immigrant family, one of the tens of thousands that settled in Australia in the early 1950s.

With almost 25 percent of Australia's current population born outside the country, local movies about this subject are numerous, almost constituting a specific genre. Some in the last decade include, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Floating Life*, *Marking Time* and *Molly and Mubarak*. This year alone has seen the release of three other features—*Lucky Miles*, *The Home Song Stories*, which has a number of similarities to Roxburgh's movie, and *The Jammed*. These constitute a healthy, almost subliminal, reaction against the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Australian talkback radio and the tabloid press.

*Romulus, My Father* continues this tradition, with the story seen through the eyes of Romulus's 10-year-old son Raimond (Kodi Smit-McPhee).

Romanian-born Romulus (Eric Bana) and his beautiful but psychologically troubled German wife Christina (Franka Potente) have immigrated to Australia from Yugoslavia and are living in the rural town of Maryborough, about 107 kilometres northwest of Melbourne. Romulus is a skilled ironworker and, under the terms of his immigration passage, he must be prepared to work in any industry anywhere in Australia for the first two years.

Christina yearns for cosmopolitan Europe, finding it impossible to settle into the small, dry and dusty settlement. She has several love affairs and flits in and out of the family home before finally leaving Romulus for his friend Mitru (Russell Dykstra).

Romulus tolerates Christina's behaviour despite the insistence of Hora (Martin Csokas)—his closest friend and Mitru's brother—that he should leave her. Hora is a highly principled man and, like Romulus, instills in Raimond the importance of education and cultured human relations. He becomes a kind of mentor in the young boy's life.

Christina and Mitru have a baby and move to Melbourne. Christina's deteriorating mental health and their miserable existence in a poverty-stricken inner-city boarding house eventually overwhelm Mitru and he commits suicide. Tragically, Christina, who is forced to put the baby in foster care and work in a shoe factory, eventually also takes her life.

For Romulus, there is the possibility of a new relationship with a woman still living in Yugoslavia. After sending money to help her immigrate, he discovers that she is already married and has used the money to assist her own family.

Romulus, however, seems to be an indomitable force throughout—generous, trusting and always optimistic—and able to impart to his son the necessity for humanity and kindness under all circumstances. But the almost endless obstacles to establishing financial and emotional stability become too much. Romulus has a nervous breakdown and admits himself to a sanatorium, where he spends several years.

*Romulus, My Father* has moments of deeply-felt tragedy and touches on issues—mental breakdown, suicide—that were not well understood in Australia in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, it is not a pessimistic

work. Like Gaita's best-selling book, it is brutally honest and has some genuinely uplifting moments, expressed in the enduring love between father and son.

All the actors are convincing, particularly the young Smit-Macphee as Raimond, and there is a genuine, unforced affinity between the two main protagonists, who are often able to express the complexities of their relationship with little more than a look or gesture.

Geoffrey Simpson's cinematography is used to good effect, capturing the seemingly omnipotent geography of rural Australia, with its blinding, almost unrelenting sunlight. The still and harsh aridity of the countryside—especially for Christina, who seems cowed by its ferocity—is a forceful counterpoint to the emotional upheavals that pervade the Gaita household.

The natural environment is only one of the new experiences encountered by the young immigrant family. The 'new' country is socially different from the close-knit and densely populated rural villages of Romania and Yugoslavia with which Romulus was familiar, and worlds away from the culture and cosmopolitanism of Germany where Christina grew up.

Despite its undoubted strengths, *Romulus, My Father* is, however, only a partially successful work, with moments that cry out for more depth. The sense of alienation is clearly apparent in the family's tumultuous relationships, but why did Romulus and Christina leave Europe in the first place? What were the circumstances? The film provides no real answers, an omission that appears to be deliberate.

As Richard Roxburgh explained to one journalist: "We were determined that the film must, at all costs, avoid the trap of the 'period drama'. There were to be as few elements as possible of the set-in-aspic-migrant-period-story... This would ensure that there would be no safety of distance, that somehow the story, in all of its dark and complex beauty, would be allowed to breathe with a contemporary immediacy."

Obviously no one wants a cold "period drama" but the elimination of important historical context is a limiting factor and an ongoing problem in most recent local cinema. Romulus was clearly a man with a strong moral compass, but what were the social and historical factors—war, Depression, the struggle against fascism—that helped shape him?

*Romulus, My Father* presents the events and characters in mainly episodic form. This is not to say

that the film is disjointed, but the absence of a strong narrative gives it a sense of repetitiousness which, after a while, tends to blunt its emotional impact. The movie also has a propensity to be static and lacking in dramatic flair. This is perhaps bound up with the fact that the book itself provides little historical context. But instead of trying to overcome this problem, the movie tries to further emphasise the relationship between father and son.

Peter Galvin from *Inside Film Magazine* (May 2007) says of *Romulus, My Father* that it is, "An episodic narrative of impressions and feelings." Intended as praise for this obviously sincere work, it instead, quite accurately, describes the film's limitations.



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