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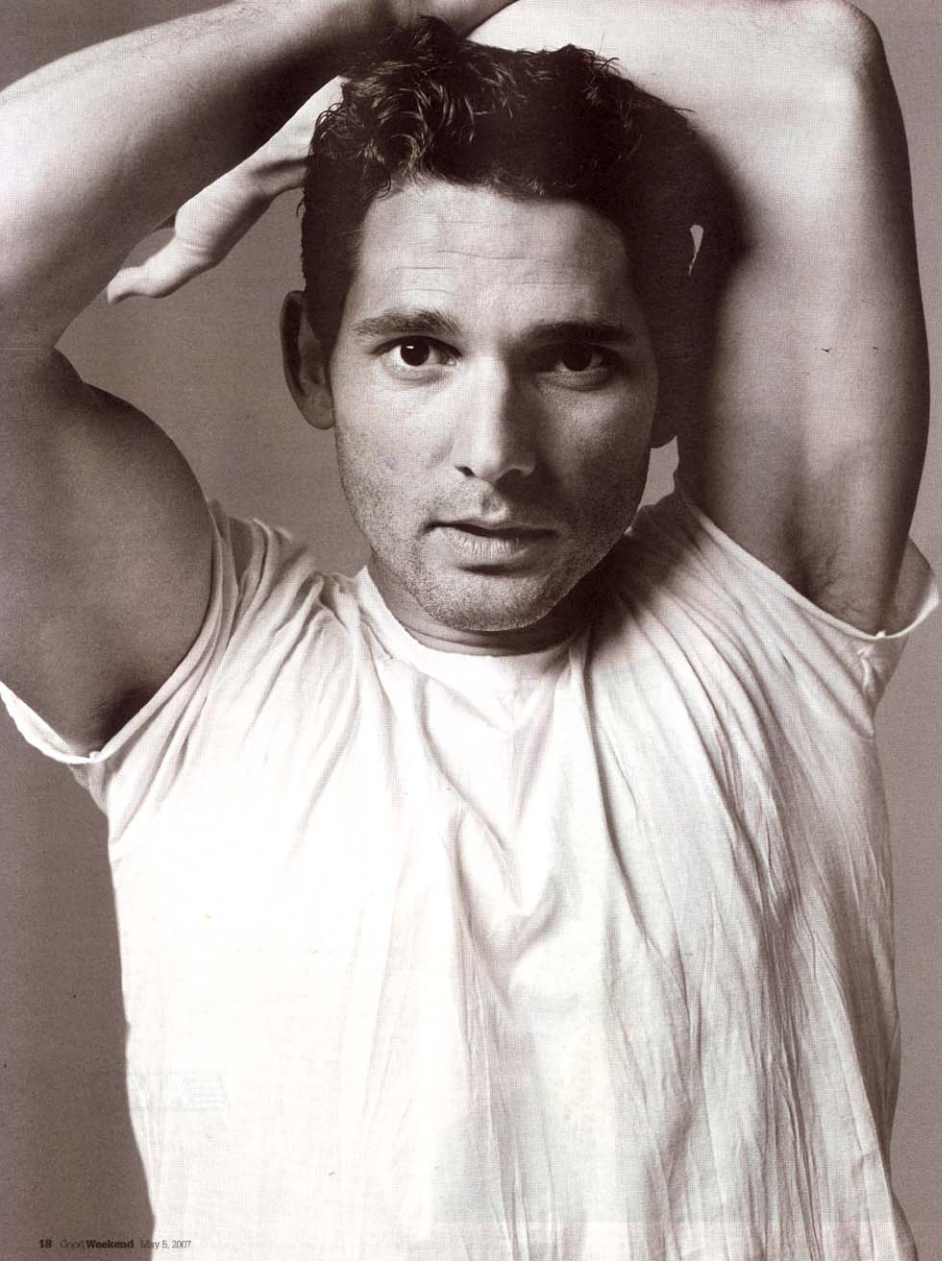
GW
Good Weekend

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Eric Bana's
dream run

How a suburban comic
cracked the big time
By Janet Hawley



JETLAGGED AND HUNGRY, JUST BACK FROM LOS ANGELES, ERIC Bana drives us in his sleek silver family wagon to a cafe near his bayside home in Melbourne. His taut, muscular body perches on a stool as he eats hot chicken focaccia and monitors messages on his mobile with piercing, ever-observant eyes. All morning, this movie star has been trying desperately hard to be normal.

He orders wine (thank goodness) and starts to relax enough to contemplate the magical upwards trajectory his life has taken in the past seven years. After a decade on Australian television comedy shows, suddenly international film directors began courting him to star in their \$US100 million movies, and Hollywood was "blowing smoke up my arse".

It's been one helluva ride for Bana, now 38, once a happily misfit petrol-head private-school boy from Tullamarine, who meandered into stand-up comedy in pubs and on TV, and never had an acting lesson in his life.

Call it the *Chopper* effect.

Bana's second film role, his mesmerising performance as the eerily charismatic standover man and killer Mark "Chopper" Read, exploded him into world film stardom. As the shoestring-budget film about an Aussie crook, made in 2000, did the rounds of overseas festivals, word spread.

Famed director Ridley Scott saw *Chopper*, and decided he wanted to have Bana in *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Taiwanese legend Ang Lee saw *Chopper*, and cast Bana as the star in *Hulk* (2003). Brad Pitt saw *Chopper*, and sought Bana to share the screen with him in *Troy* (2004). Steven Spielberg saw *Hulk*, watched *Chopper* on DVD, and summoned Bana for his lead in *Manich* (2005). Bana has three new films due to be released shortly: *Romulus, My Father* and *Lucky You*, out this month, and *The Other Boleyn Girl*, scheduled for December.

"I only very occasionally have moments of pure clarity, where I really urge myself to soak up what's happening", from modest beginnings". Eric Bana (left) has rocketed to international film stardom.

He's a bona fide Hollywood star, and Steven Spielberg and Brad Pitt are among his fans, but what Eric Bana treasures most is his life as a suburban dad, he tells Janet Hawley.

Photograph Richard Bailey

So, how's it feel when Ridley, Ang, Brad and Steven et al call up and say, "Hey Eric, drop by for lunch in LA. I want you to be in my next movie"?

"Surreal," he says, shaking back his dark hair and laughing, "until you meet them, sit down and start talking, then very quickly it becomes normal.

"I only very occasionally have moments of pure clarity, where I really urge myself to soak up what's happening. I try not to force those moments, because it can screw with your head and confuse you. It's too much to logically comprehend, so you're better off just letting it go, and when a moment really hits, you think, 'Wow, this is really cool and weird, what's happening right now', and just go with it. It's dangerous to over-analyse it.

"It's like trying to justify the money Hollywood pays. You can talk about the pressures of fame and all that bullshit, but the bottom line is, all of us are overpaid. That's a fact, that's the way it is." (In 2006, *BRW* reported that he earned \$12 million the year before.)

One such lucid moment came when he recently finished filming *The Other Boleyn Girl* in the UK.

"I thought, 'Well, f... me. I've just played an English king, Henry VIII, that is so cheeky!' Then I thought of my huge variety of roles in the last few years. I've played Prince Hector in *Troy* and been killed in a sword fight by Brad Pitt. I've been a poker player seducing Drew Barrymore in *Lucky You*. I've blown up and killed people as a secret agent in *Manich*, shot and bashed them in *Chopper*, turned into an angry green comic-strip monster in *Hulk*, jumped out of US air force helicopters under attack in *Black Hawk Down*, been a highly moral father in *Romulus, My Father* ... well, like, f... me.

"I've spent half the past seven years living on movie sets and locations in Morocco, Malta, Mexico, Budapest, London, LA. I've hung out with the real *Chopper*, retired Mossad agents and US Delta Force guys, researching my roles. I've been professionally trained to shoot all manner

LUCKY ERIC

of guns, blow up buildings, fast-rope-drop out of helicopters, ride horses, stab with knives, fight with swords and lances.

"I tell ya what, you don't wanna mess with me," Bana chuckles, slapping his biceps, black eyes gleaming.

IN A WAY, BANA HAS NOW COME FULL CIRCLE with *Romulus, My Father*, which opens on May 31. After his seven-year run of overseas mega-movies, he returned to his home patch to make a low-budget (\$6 million) Australian film with a first-time film director, the actor and theatre director Richard Roxburgh.

It is an adaptation of Melbourne-born philosopher Raimond Gaita's much-loved, award-winning book about the bond between a Romanian migrant father and his only son. And *Romulus, My Father* the film, like the book, is a sensitive, restrained, beautiful gem.

It's rare that authors like films of their books; usually they end up loathing the result. But Gaita says he's been so moved watching Bana play his father Romulus, and talented 10-year-old Kodi Smit-McPhee play the young Raimond, that he's wept through seven viewings of the film.

Bana is touched by Gaita's reaction, as the actor himself "bawled when I first read the script. It was as though someone had clawed their way into my insides and found my DNA. I was a mess reading it and I can't completely articulate why. But I know if a script messes with my head and churns me emotionally, then I'm onto a role I can inhabit."

Gaita's childhood, living in a humble shack in central Victoria with his extraordinarily compassionate blacksmith father and a cockatoo called Jack, was marked by sadness, madness and suffering. But he found solace and healing joy in knowing "that I was always greatly loved, by people who exemplified human goodness – my father, and his friend Hora who opened my mind to books and ideas".

Young Gaita also shared their intense love of the natural world, "the soul-piercing beauty of the surrounding silvery granite hills, swaying tall burnt-yellow grasses and blue blue skies" (Roxburgh has captured this beauty on screen quite superbly).

Gaita grew up to become professor of moral philosophy at King's College London, and a keen mountaineer. When his father died, he wrote their story, which won the 1998 Victorian Premier's Literary Award.

For years Gaita knocked back top directors seeking to turn his intensely personal book into a film. But he was won over by the integrity of Roxburgh and his screenwriter, UK poet and playwright Nick Drake, and later by the performances of both Bana and young Smit-McPhee (whom all on the film declare "a miracle find").

"The singular thing about this story," says Roxburgh, "given its tragic dimensions and its almost biblical reach, is how strangely uplifting it is. Somehow through the pain there is not only a sense of possibility but of promise, held in the relationship of that father and son.

"As a first-time director, I had to have balls approaching Eric, but I knew he was perfect for Romulus. Luckily he agreed, did it for peanuts, and also became associate producer."

Says Gaita: "My main worry was that it is so hard to portray madness – and this story has three people in various phases of madness." His beautiful, tempestuous, vulnerable mother Christina, increasingly manic-depressive, leaves

Romulus for another man, Mitru. She bears him two children, then she and Mitru commit suicide. Romulus, betrayed by people he loved and trusted, plunges into deepest depression, but eventually recovers. The third example of madness is Vacek, a kindly, insane neighbour who lives between two boulders, and cooks and pickles food in his own urine.

Bana says his own migrant family background made Gaita's story resonate so deeply. He was born Eric Bandanovich in Melbourne in 1968, to a Croatian father and a German mother.

"My parents both migrated here as teenagers, with their own parents, starting out in migrant hostels," he relates, "so I've grown up knowing numerous characters and stories of struggles, friendships and honour, similar to Romulus's and Rai's journey."

"I found myself so affected playing Romulus, because his implacable moral code of decency and honour make you examine your own life. Romulus was a courageous man who would rather suffer evil than do evil; he knew no other way."

ERIC BANA'S LIFE AS AN ASPIRING ACTOR began in 1979 at age 11, when the crazy kid saw the first *Mad Max* film. Waving at a huge *Mad Max* movie poster on his office wall, Bana says: "It was the hugest influence on my life. I so identified with Mel Gibson and everything he did in that movie. I thought, 'That's

"Seeing Mad Max aged 11 was the hugest influence on my life. I so identified with Mel Gibson and everything he did in that movie. I thought, 'That's what I want to do, be in movies like Mad Max and thrash Mad Max cars.'"

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Aged 15, with \$1100 saved from three after-school jobs, Bana bought an old *Mad Max*-type muscle car, a 1973 model XB Ford Falcon coupe, which he still owns and treasures. (It is now a totally pampered, exquisitely rebuilt car that he drives in rallies: a bright-red roaring monster.) Bana's father and elder brother Anthony drove the car for young Eric until he was old enough to get his licence.

But while he was well on his way to becoming a reverb, Bana admits he was clueless about how to get a start in acting. "It took me years to actively do anything about getting into movies," he reveals. "A tertiary education or going to NIDA seemed as far away as the moon." Bana never went to NIDA, contrary to endless incorrect reports on websites and in articles that he did. He's never had a formal acting lesson, but instead has absorbed dramatic skills "by living life."

Four of Bana's in-film lives have father-son themes: he's the son in *Hulk*, *Troy* and *Lucky You*, and the father in *Romulus, My Father*.

"I find these roles fascinating, particularly since I became a father myself seven years ago," Bana says, "but I swear I have no issues with my own father; we've always been extremely close.

"My dad, Ian, is the friendliest, warmest, funniest guy; he sees goodness in everyone. He's worked at the same company for over 40 years, in logistical management."

Bana says all his extended family exude a great sense of humour. "We always argued a lot, especially my mother's German side. Every weekend we'd all get together, play cards and spend the whole time teasing, bitching, moaning, laughing, putting shit on each other. Mum and I are also incredibly close but, because we're both Leos, often we communicate with each other like two roaring lions."

Young Eric excelled at mimicking his relatives and television personalities. The adults enjoyed and encouraged his skill, little realising the later career they were nurturing.

He didn't excel at schoolwork. "I went to Essendon Grammar, but there wasn't much I was good at academically. I had no understanding of my creative side for a long time.

"I was mainly interested in football, and fast cars and motorbikes, driving them, pulling them to bits and rebuilding them. Not studying. I thought I'd be a mechanic and racing car driver. I had lots of friends at school, but never acted in school plays.

"In year 11, a wonderful passionate English teacher finally opened my mind up to books, a real turning point. Then, at the end of year 12, I entered the school talent quest, doing impersonations of teachers, and the kids went nuts begging for more."

While elder brother Anthony had become an accountant and worked in a bank, Eric on leaving school drifted through odd jobs: labourer, courier driver, barman. Then, one night at the Castle Hotel in Melbourne, Bana, aged 22, filled in for a stand-up comedian, proved good at it, and thus began his career in comedy.

"Finally I was consciously pursuing something," he tells me. "When I started stand-up, I think my parents were as pleased as if their son had got into law."

Performing comedy in pubs, in front of audiences baying for blood, was a more painful experience than any drama school, swears Bana. "You gotta learn quick. You are so exposed, it can be



horrendous. If the audience decides you are not funny one night – it sucks the life out of you.”

Comedians often sprout from dysfunctional, indeed dreadful childhoods. For such people, comedy is their lifeline, but Bana had no such emotional baggage. He was never bullied at school, didn't tell jokes to survive in the playground, had a stable and loving home life.

Bana believes his secure roots, “my knowledge of what is usual, gave my curiosity free rein to explore what is unusual,” and this became the basis for his material. Being well-adjusted and normal also allows him to play fascinatingly abnormal characters in his films.

BANA'S FIRST BIG BREAK CAME THE NIGHT Glenn Robbins (who plays Kel in *Kath & Kim*) walked into the pub. Robbins was struck by Bana's impersonations. “I was then on Channel 7 in *Fast Forward*, and we were seeking new talent,” remembers Robbins, “so I asked Eric to come round to my place, put his act on tape, and he ended up getting onto *Fast Forward*, then *Full Frontal*, then his own show. He did well!”

Bana also did well in romance. While at Channel 7, Bana dated and in 1997 wed the station's publicist, Rebecca Gleeson, daughter of judge Murray Gleeson, now the chief justice of the High Court of Australia. Bride and groom were both in their late 20s, and Bana had just made his first cinematic foray as Con Petropoulos in *The Castle*.

Bana remembers: “Rebecca had so warned me about my future father-in-law, this scary guy, but when I flew up to meet him, he had a dry comic sense of humour, and was such a thespian at heart. I never felt I was being judged. I mean, I was a comedian on some stupid TV show wanting to marry his daughter, but I was never made to feel inadequate or inappropriate.”

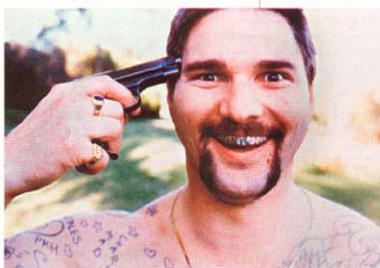
In 1999, their first child, Klaus, was born, and the next year Bana was unleashed in *Chopper*. Says Rebecca: “Everything hotted up. It's good it happened in Eric's more mature 30s, not his 20s, as he could have gone a bit loony.”

“Luckily for me,” says Bana, “Rebecca embraces the craziness even more than I do. Having worked in the industry, she has a better ability to understand it, cope with it and superbly manage our ever-changing lives. I'd be dead without her.” Eschewing an entourage, Rebecca was total *Girl Friday* until two years ago, when a Melbourne-based PA was hired.

The Banas, now four with Sophie (born in 2002), made the decision to always travel together when Eric works overseas, striving for a more normal work-life model. The pattern has been: work overseas for six months; back like a homing pigeon to Melbourne to resume suburban life for six months. For Bana, that revolves around family, footy, mates, tinkering with his hot cars, reading scripts, researching the next role – then the Bana caravan heads off to the next foreign location. “Which may prove to be the agony or the ecstasy, or a bit of both,” Bana says, grinning.

Bana says that when he signs on for a new role, for months before he starts shooting “I've lobotomised part of my brain, married it to the new character, so I am thinking, seeing, reacting like him, birthing him. When the film starts, the role becomes everything. Rebecca becomes my department of defence, and she and the kids become my complete sanity and respite.”

This was sorely needed on *Hulk*. Multi-genre director Ang Lee (*Brokeback Mountain*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Sense and Sensibility*) has a



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“I'm living half my life as a fake”: (from top) Bana as Romulus in *Romulus, My Father*; as Mark Road in *Chopper*; showing his suburban frontside in a *Full Frontal* skit; as Prince Hector in *Troy*.

reputation so awesome that actors rush to work for him without reading the script. Bana says he never would have agreed to play the young scientist Bruce Banner – whose genes have been tampered with by his scientist father so that he morphs into a roaring green colossus with superhuman powers when angry – if Lee hadn't been the director.

Heath Ledger has admitted to a desolately lonely, insecure time on set making *Brokeback Mountain*, with absolutely no feedback from the fey, wilful genius Lee. Bana's experience was similar. Visibly tying himself in knots remembering his cosmic-scale Ang angst, he says: “Look, like Heath, at the end of the day, I'd do it all again, and I always had huge respect for Ang's creativity – even though at times I wanted to head-butt him.”

Or Hulk him? “Yeah. He grimaces. “Ang is very rigid; it's his film and experimentation from the actors is not wanted, appreciated or allowed.”

What Bana found particularly excruciating was the number of takes: “Ang shooting a scene over and over again from 60 different angles.”

“When you start work, and do take one – knowing Ang will want 60 takes, and it could be like this 18 hours a day, six days a week, for six months – a certain amount of shoulder slumping happens.”

“If you did less than 30 takes for a scene, you were getting off lightly. The scene I did was 117 takes, over two days. It's the most I did my girlfriend's colonel father [played by Sam Elliott] quizzes me to remember my parents, and I say, ‘I don't remember.’”

Does Bana know which take was finally used? “I have no idea,” he says. “I don't remember the difference! Rebecca bore the brunt: I'd come home screaming and complaining from sheer desperation. It's energy-sapping and can play havoc with an actor's self-confidence. If you were the only one it was happening to, you'd panic, but all of us got it.”

While Bana was happy with his performance in *Hulk*, there remains in him an element of frustration. “I definitely would have given a better performance had I been allowed more creative freedom,” he says.

“Some directors, like Ang, are more interested in what they want actors to do. Others, like Spielberg and Richard Roxburgh, are interested in what actors can do.”

“If you work with a director who is prepared to allow things to happen on camera before him – when director and actor feel free and brave enough to do so – then truly great performances can result.”

BANA ADORED EVERY MOMENT WITH STEVEN Spielberg, making his controversial drama *Munich*. Bana gives an electrifying performance as Avner, an Israeli secret service agent leading an avenging team of assassins who hunt down a list of terrorists held responsible for murdering 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The hunt takes a dehumanising toll on the hunters; Avner becomes increasingly paranoid and questions the futility of killing terrorists, only to see them replaced by worse terrorists.

“I felt Avner down to the cartilage in my spine,” says Bana, “but the great thing was, I could discuss every aspect of Avner and *Munich* with Spielberg. He's a sweet man, and a ridiculously great director.”

“He never treats actors like puppets, he loves what actors can do, loves to be surprised. Spielberg's style is so dynamic, open, his set is alive –

not grinding along – it's running, and you'd better run with it. If he sees something has clicked for his actor, he wants that scene on camera now, not re-created half an hour later."

Bana declares *Munich* his greatest film experience. "I've never worked as hard, never had as much energy, never felt so drained at the end. I was completely physically and emotionally spent, but at the same time depressed and upset the shoot was over. I didn't want it to end. I wasn't ready to walk away from it. It was all such an overwhelming experience."

Bana maintains that *Munich* was a hugely important film in Spielberg's life, and that the director had agonised over it for years. "It was disappointing how many people who never even saw the film wanted to attack *Munich* and use it as a soap box for their own politics," Bana says.

BECAUSE SCREEN CHARACTERS SEEP INTO him so deeply, Bana won't do back-to-back films. "I need time to zone out of one character, then zone into the next," he says. "I look at every film like a tattoo stamped permanently on my body, so I have to feel strongly about a project to say yes."

He says some films are more fun to make, like *Troy*, where, on location in Mexico, Bana and Brad Pitt rigged up an outdoor bar between their adjoining trailers, "where we hung out and drank beer."

Bana, as Prince Hector, and Pitt, as the warrior god Achilles, have a stunning swordfight at the end of the film. For six months prior, both separately trained with stuntmen to learn the 375-move choreographed fight.

"The set was massive; they rebuilt *Troy*, and had 1600 extras as soldiers, huge costume tents, weapons tents, horses, warships.

"I had a lot of fight scenes, and you'd start to shoot, and your senses are assaulted as 1600 extras start screaming at the top of their voices rushing at you with rubber axes, which will do a lot of damage if you don't duck and pivot on a queue.

"So much went wrong. A hurricane blew the set down, and *Troy* had to be rebuilt, then Achilles [Pitt] damaged his achilles tendon, which took months to heal.

"Finally Brad and I are shooting the fight, but we get tired towards the end and five per cent out of step, and Brad whacks his fake sword full-force across my nose, and real blood spurts everywhere. Brad freaks, there's no time to stitch my nose, so it's glued up, and we finish the fight scene, and he kills me. I thought it was pretty cool, but I was thinking about my mother, because I knew it would spook her."

Bana still has the scar on his nose. "I saw Brad the other week, and he pointed at it and said – 'Was that me?'"

Black Hawk Down, detailing an elite US commando raid on a warlord's headquarters in Somalia that went horribly wrong, was his most dangerous film set. "We trained at a US army boot camp, and had real US helicopters, real US soldiers as extras, and real US weapons advisers on set, as guns, bombs and explosives erupted all around us. It was all so authentic that often at airports some retired US military guy will discreetly approach me, wanting to discuss it."

IN A REFLECTIVE MOMENT ON THE SET OF *LUCKY YOU*, Bana asked his poker-champion screen father, the legendary actor Robert Duvall: "Bob, how did you stay sane and survive, when all your friends and everyone else in Hollywood was either doing coke, speed or dope, or in rehab?"



Says Bana: "Bob replied: [here he imitates Duvall] 'I always had a hobby; mine was riding horses. You gotta have an outside passion.'"

Bana's outside passion is his cars, and his four best car-crazy mates. "It's my whole other world; my sanity from my acting world, where I'm living half my life as a fake." He circuit-races his new yellow Porsche 911 and rally-drives his old red XB Falcon.

Standing next to the immaculately restored Falcon, Bana tenderly strokes its bulbous roof body. It's been rebuilt so often, only the red is now original, but he's so sentimental he regards it as his boyhood dream car.

"I've had it 23 years, it's been like a fire that my mates and I gather around, to pull the engine out, put it back in again, rip out the gearbox, the diff, replace the interior."

He's driving the Falcon in the five-day Targa Tasmania rally the week after we meet (and in fact, will crash the precious car on day three and put himself out of the race, though he and his navigator will emerge unscathed), so we go for a test burn in suburban Melbourne's backblocks.

We clamber in through the roll cage. Bana straps me into the navigator's seat in an H-shaped harness and starts the engine. It's real vroom-vroom, boys-and-their-toys stuff, where Bana's *Mad Max* DNA takes over. It's so loud inside all you can do is shout, and he yells explanations of rally-driving skill, while demonstrating that "cornering is the real thrill".

Back in the garage, he holds the wheel emotionally and says: "Driving this car is so visceral – it's sight, sound, smell, vibration; there's nothing I can compare it to in levels of adrenaline and satisfaction."

One of Bana's car mates, business executive Peter Hill, says he and Bana talk every couple of days. "Eric rings me up for a detox when he's on movie sets. I say, 'G'day, movie star', and wind him up a bit, to give him a reality check from the Hollywood bullshit and sycophants. He tells me hilarious mockumentary-style anecdotes and satisfies his comic urge."

Bana confesses that he misses comedy; indeed his abundant comic gifts have been in hibernation, awaiting the right role on the big screen. He's trying with writing a script, with a co-screenwriter. In the past decade, Bana says, he has seen countless characters and situations to mercilessly send up, "but Rebecca ends up being my one-person audience."

"I'm really a homebody; I want to be home for the footy season. I love my life here: my family, my mates, my cars. We've lived in the same house for eight years. It's important to lay your roots."

"Rebecca embraces the craziness even more than I do"; (above left) Bana and his wife at the Melbourne premiere of *Hulk* in 2003.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, DOWN BY ST Kilda bay where the Bana family often cycle, the nomadic movie star says wistfully: "I'm really a homebody; I want to be home for the footy season. I love my life here: my family, my mates, my cars. We've lived in the same house for eight years. It's important to lay your roots."

Would he have been happy if he'd become a mechanic and driven racing cars?

"Probably very happy, but I might have wondered what if, and been a bit of a dreamer.

"I've always been a risk-taker. Comedy is risk-taking, so is acting. But so is doing nothing – that's pretty scary.

"Imagine hitting 40 or 50, and thinking, 'Damn it, why didn't I...?'"

"I think I could have potentially been a very miserable person, if I hadn't felt that I'd given something a go." CW

