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THE ATTENTION YOU DESERVE

Social isolation . . . Eric Bana reveals unsuspected range as Romulus, a man striving against almost impossible odds.

Romulus, My Father

(M)

★★★½ Vicky Roach

A father and son struggle to cut a meagre existence despite the constant pitfalls of early migrant family life in rural Australia.

Richard Roxburgh's film adaptation of Raimond Gaita's critically acclaimed memoir is refreshingly cinematic. The actor-turned-film-maker obviously decided he wanted to tell this story in images rather than words.

Of course, it helps that those images have been so stunningly shot by cinematographer Geoffrey Simpson (*Shine, Oscar and Lucinda*). Through Simpson's lens, the central Victorian landscape is breathtakingly beautiful and heartachingly remote.

Roxburgh's second inspired decision was to put as much creative distance as possible between this very personal story of a small, battered migrant family and the handsome post World War II period dramas audiences are so familiar with (for that very reason).

Aiding and abetting him in this task is poet and screenwriter Nick Drake.

Told from the resilient, sharp-eyed perspective of nine-year-old Raimond, the story cuts through the historical layers to the raw, human experience beneath.

Instead of nostalgia, there's a sharp and vivid clarity to scenes such as those in which Rai cracks a piece of ice that formed on a puddle or throws his father's broken razor into the dam. And Kodi Smit-McPhee's intense boy/man has nothing in common with the usual conventional Hollywood moppets.

Fiercely independent, Rai is remarkably stoic in the face of his mother's abrupt arrivals and departures, her infidelities and suicide attempts. Somehow, this only underscores

the impact Christina's volatility has on him. Eric Bana reveals hitherto unsuspected range as Romulus, a man striving against almost impossible odds – not least his ill-fated love for Rai's mother.

German actress Franka Potente (*Run Lola Run, Bourne Identity*) is terrific as Christina, a woman deeply disappointed by life.

It's a tough and deeply bruising life for Rai and Romulus as they eke out a fragile existence on the outskirts of Anglo-Australian society. The social isolation of the immigrant experience is echoed in the rural landscape.

But Rai and Romulus's inner strength and warm relationship sustains them.

An acutely observed and exquisitely photographed father-and-son story.