

Strong visual tale of local migrant drama

Romulus, My Father (M)

★★★★★

DESPITE Australia's history of settlement built on migrants from many corners of the globe, the challenges faced by "new Australians" thrown into life outside the cities hugging the coast have received limited attention on screen.

The alien landscape wasn't the only thing that Raimond Gaita had to contend with as a new arrival from Yugoslavia.

His father and mother's troubled marriage, their separation, and what followed, pressed heavily on his childhood.

Now in transporting Gaita's much-loved 1998 memoir, *Romulus, My Father* from book to screen, actor Richard Roxburgh has made exactly the sort of mature, artistic film you'd expect from such a seasoned performer.

Working with experienced Sydney producers Robert Connolly and John Maynard, he's turned the widely read story of broken English and broken hearts into a grown-up, universal drama.

Roxburgh, one of our finest actors, doesn't appear, but his first film from the director's chair demonstrates he's been paying attention during his years of acting on stage, screen and television here and abroad.

The inspiration for his debut came from the widely read autobiography by philosopher Raimond Gaita about his family life as the son of post-war immigrants in rural Victoria.

His book has been tellingly adapted for the screen by British writer and poet, Nick Drake, found after an exhaustive search for a suitable screenwriter.

Roxburgh's superior film, examining the bond between an immigrant father and son in Australia in the early 1960s, boasts the strongest performances and most appealing cinematography (Gordon Simpson) of this year's local productions shown to date.

A prestigious international cast has been gathered to do justice to Gaita's heart-wrenching read, which proves every bit as emotional on screen as it was on the page.

Sydney child actor Kodi Smit-McPhee is simply a wonder as the young Raimond, who lives on the outskirts of Maldon in rural Victoria (where the real-life events took place).

He's being reared by his immigrant hard-working blacksmith father (Eric Bana, the film's co-producer relishing his most impressive role since *Chopper* despite his big American credits).

The father's named Romulus, but he's known to the locals at the pub and around town not yet at ease with "foreign sounding" names as Jack.

Raimond feels the absence of his promiscuous mother, Christine (Franka Potente's *Lola, Run*) who has had problems adjusting to her new home country and life.

Looking to escape her domestic trials, she has headed to the city.

Romulus learns from his closest immigrant friend, Hora (Marton Csokas) that Christine has in fact moved in to live as the de facto wife of Hora's brother, Mitru (Russell Dykstra).

Hora shows a fatherly interest in Raimond, and provides comfort for the boy when he's having trouble understanding what's going on.

Despite his wife's adultery, Romulus can't stand the idea of living without her, and he still welcomes her at Maldon.



COMPELLING performance ... Eric Bana in *Romulus My Father*.

Young Raimond gets his chance to be close to his mother again when he samples her new life in a working-class area of Melbourne, where she's trapped with a new baby in boarding house accommodation, and living in a strained relationship with Mitru.

Roxburgh brings distinctive touches to familiar domestic drama rituals, and his actors prove a potent ensemble, even down to minor supporting roles such as the hermit-like

Vacek (played by Jacek Koman) who shows a novel way to beat the drought — boiling his breakfast eggs in his urine.

Bana and young Smit-McPhee establish a wholly believable relationship, often exchanging nothing more than meaningful looks that say more than words could.

Alethea McGrath (Mrs Lillie), Terry Norris (her husband) and Esme Melville (Miss Collard) bring years of

experience to their roles as Raimond's concerned neighbours.

The actors, plus the attention and care given to the film's costumes, sets, music (Basil Hogios) and Simpson's alluring cinematography, all contribute to the experience.

It's a strong visual film that demands a big screen experience, so do make the effort to see it in a cinema. It will carry the Australian-made badge proudly wherever it screens. (103 min)