

Summers of heartache



Reminiscences: Eric Bana and Kodi Smit-McPhee in a terrific coming-of-age story

PHILOSOPHER Raimond Gaita's childhood memoir is a heart-breaking study of a post-war immigrant family doing it tough in all sorts of ways.

Seen through the eyes of young Rai (the wonderful Kodi Smit-McPhee), it is a deliberately fragmented collection of reminiscences over a succession of summers — of financial hardship, emotional struggles and heartfelt bonding that had a significant influence on his life.

Set in rural Victoria in the early 1960s, young Rai lives with his Romanian immigrant father Romulus (Eric Bana) in a half-busted shack with a cockatoo and mutt for company. Rai's German mother Christina (Franka Potente) is absent for long periods. Why, soon becomes obvious — she has a weakness for other men.

Romulus tolerates her infidelities for a simple reason: he's in love with her. Even when she shacks up with one of his old friends, Mitru (Russell Dykstra), the brother of Romulus's best mate Hora (Marton Csokas). And even though they have a kid, a half-sister for Rai. Crikey, who said life in the bush was boring? It's difficult to keep up with this mob.

DRAMA-BIOGRAPHY

Romulus, My Father (M)

→ **Who's in it?** Eric Bana, Franka Potente, Marton Csokas, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Russell Dykstra

★★★★½

But eventually tragedy strikes, and Rai is faced with growing up awfully quickly.

For those unfamiliar with the story, it'd be spoiling it to reveal too much of what happens. Instead, indulge me as I ramble on about the terrifically taut script — first-timer Nick Drake has mastered the art of brevity and clarity. Working from this, first-time director Richard Roxburgh (the actor) has crafted a story that'll grab and twist your heart. Obviously he's well served by the cast. Bana is quietly dignified, even in his madder moments, while Smit-McPhee gives the film heart and soul.

It's a sad, sad tale, but worth the effort, and another quality Australian drama that helps makes up for all those awful comedies.

— CHRIS BARTLETT