

Migrant stories

Romulus, My Father, 104 mins, rated M, opens 31 May.

By MICHELE ASPREY, *Lawyer*

WHAT IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL AUSTRALIAN film? Is it *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) or *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975) – or even *Kenny* (2006)? Or is it more highbrow, like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) or *Lantana* (2001)? And what about these films makes them Australian? The film industry tells us that a nation must be able to tell its own stories on film. But what sort of stories are 'our' stories, and how do they reflect the true nature of Australia?

All these questions occurred to me as I watched *Romulus, My Father*, a stunningly beautiful new Australian film based on the memoir of the same name by Raimond Gaita. Gaita was born in 1946 in Germany. He is now professor of moral philosophy at King's College, University of London and professor of philosophy at the Australian Catholic University.

Gaita movingly describes a relationship between father and son, and the bond between them that somehow makes it possible to live through long periods of confusion, pain and sorrow. Raimond (young Kodi Smit-McPhee, who is superb) and Romulus (Eric Bana, also wonderful) live in rural Victoria during the 1960s. They are mostly without Raimond's mother, Christina, a beautiful but troubled young woman (*Run Lola Run*'s Franka Potente). Christina feels unable to live with her husband and young son, but visits occasionally, staying until she can stand it no longer. Then she returns to city life.

Romulus is a Romanian who came to Australia with his wife and child. He makes a living as a blacksmith and farm labourer,



but he's a resourceful man who can turn his hand to anything if necessary. Still, life is hard, and it is made harder by the unexpected arrivals and departures of Christina. She's an unconventional woman, but both Raimond and Romulus love her so much they forgive her, putting up with her shocking behaviour – which includes brazenly conducting an affair with Mitru, Romulus' close friend (Russel Dykstra), and even having a child with him.

All this is seen through the eyes of young Raimond, who cannot understand why Christina and Mitru cannot come to live with his father and him. Christina's increasingly reckless behaviour is driven by violent mood swings from joy to deep depression, and her mental illness will eventually cause terrible tragedy. But Romulus is Raimond's rock, and their love sustains them both – until the dreadful time when Romulus finally cracks.

The film is full of staggeringly beautiful – and sometimes terrible – images. There's a scene in which Raimond sits on a roof all day, waiting. The scene does not change but the lighting does, three times, from day to dusk to starlight. It is simply exquisite. The director of photography is Geoffrey Simpson who also filmed Scott Hick's *Shine* (1996) and Gillian Armstrong's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997). He has a great feel for rural Victoria. The wheat fields literally glow. The most terrible image is one that comes at the end of a sequence in which Romulus and his friend go into the egg business. The chickens get sick and have to be destroyed and buried. A single wing remains above ground. It's an image that will stay with you.

Along with all this angst, struggle and beauty come snippets of philosophy. Romulus and his friends read the philosophers and quote Bertrand Russell: "The time you enjoy wasting is not wasted time," and Marcus Aurelius: "The

A tale of troubled relationships in a migrant family in rural Victoria in the 1960s: Christina (Franka Potente) and Romulus (Eric Bana) star in *Romulus, My Father*.

universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it". Raimond takes all this in and it sustains him, later, when he must make his way alone.

I can think of only a handful of Australian films that focus on the migrant experience. *They're a Weird Mob* did it in 1966 using comedy. *Love's Brother* (2004) slid into cliché and so had nothing new to say. *La Spagnola* (2001) was confused and over-exaggerated for laughs. Better was *Little Fish* (2004). Its setting in Cabramatta (Sydney's little Saigon) is more than just background – it almost becomes a character in the story.

Romulus, My Father tells a story that is not told often enough. It is not a perfect film, but it is a worthy piece to add to the vast jigsaw puzzle of the Australian story. It has been made with great care. First-time feature director, the actor and theatre director Richard Roxburgh can take another bow.

Win a double in-season pass to The Dead Girl

Writer/director Karen Moncrieff's new film *The Dead Girl*, starring Toni Collette, Rose Byrne and Marcia Gay Harden, is a quintet of stories about people whose lives converge around the murder of a young woman. Hoyts Distribution and *LSJ* are pleased to offer you the chance to win one of ten double in-season passes to see *The Dead Girl* at selected Hoyts cinemas from 21 June. To enter, email your postal contact address to filmooffers@lawsocnsu.asn.au with "The Dead Girl" in the subject line before 15 June. □

Win a preview pass to La Vie en Rose

Icon Films and *LSJ* are pleased to offer you the chance to win a sneak preview pass to *La Vie en Rose: The passionate life of Edith Piaf* at selected cinemas on the weekend of 6-8 July. To enter, email your postal contact address to filmooffers@lawsocnsu.asn.au with "La Vie en Rose" in the subject line before 20 June. □