

Actor moves in a

A passion for a book took actor Richard Roxburgh behind the camera, writes Des Partridge



DEBUT role... first-time director Richard Roxburgh and his leading man Eric Bana on the set of *Romulus, My Father*.

A BRIEF holiday in Italy has helped actor Richard Roxburgh calm his nerves about his imminent debut in the new true-life role of a film director.

But Roxburgh, Sydney star of stage, cinema and television screens, is not the featured attraction in Milan, where he answers the telephone to talk about his eight-year quest to turn Raimond Gaita's award-winning memoir *Romulus, My Father* into a film.

Effortlessly stealing every scene in Italy is Raphael, born three months ago to Roxburgh and his Italian actress wife, Silvia Colloca. The couple met during the making of *Van Helsing* in England in 2003.

The baby's trip to meet his Milan grandparents and other Italian relatives was organised so Roxburgh could be back in Australia to launch *Romulus, My Father* around the country this month.

The film's premiere will be held at Castlemaine in Victoria on May 27, four days before it opens on screens nationwide.

Roxburgh, who featured in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* and won the 1997 AFI award as best actor for his role in *Doing Time For Patsy Cline*, admits he's turned down some interesting work in recent years because of his commitment to turning Gaita's story into a film.

"I was given the book eight years ago by my sister, and I devoured it overnight," he says.

"I told her then, 'I'm going to make a film of this', and she said, 'I knew you'd say that'."

However, his plan stalled when Gaita, now professor of philosophy at King's College, London, and the Australian Catholic University, declined the offer.

Gaita's book, which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award when it was published in 1998, centres on Gaita's migrant family, and is set in the Victorian bush at the end of World War II.



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new direction

"I'm sure there were dozens of filmmakers wanting the story before I made a call," he says. "I think Rai was very reluctant to allow the story out of his control. It was too personal a story for him to give it up to people he didn't know, people he didn't know if he could trust. I think there was also a deep scepticism about the art of film within Rai. He's quite a moral philosopher, you know."

Roxburgh said the initial rejection did not dissuade him and eventually he flew to London to meet the author. "I joke now it was the alcohol that did it," Roxburgh says. "I turned up at his door with a couple of bottles of wine."

"I let him know how strongly I felt about the story, and turning it into a film."

"Once I linked up with Sydney producers Robert Connolly and John Maynard (in 2003) the momentum picked up, and Rai's trust in the project grew."

British poet and writer Nick Drake wrote a treatment of the book that convinced Roxburgh and his small creative team that he was on the right emotional wavelength to adapt Gaïta's memoir.

"What we didn't want to do was to turn it into a biopic. We were constantly having to steer it away from being too reverential, although we obviously wanted to keep intact all of those elements that first appealed to us," Roxburgh says.

When it came to casting the role of Romulus, Roxburgh says he was in Italy thinking about the film when he was "hit by a thunderbolt", and thought immediately of Eric Bana.

"I wanted someone with a great depth of character who could act in a still manner, and convey feelings without a lot of words."

"It's not a dialogue-rich role," Roxburgh says.

"Eric's the son of a Croatian immigrant and a German mother, so knew what the character was about."

"It also helped that he was right into motorcycles (Romulus rides one in the story)."

"I like to point out that we got him for our film as he was about to head off to work with a couple of Oscar winners in Curtis Hanson (on *Lucky You*) and Steven Spielberg (Munich)."

"I come next on his CV now," he laughs.

Bana's film wife, Christina, is played by the *Run, Lola Run* discoverer, Franka Potente, and young Raimond by 10-year-old Kodi Smit-McPhee, so effective in the

role that he has been signed by Bana's US agency, William Morris.

"We'd seen about 50 youngsters before Kodi auditioned. He's one of those miracle children who just goes where he's needed to go. He gives an astonishing performance without showing any of those terrible child-actor characteristics."

Roxburgh says Rai did not visit the set while Kodi was involved because he did not want to inhibit the young actor.

The pair did not meet until the "wrap" party at the end of filming at Maldon in the Victorian Goldfields.

Completing major casting are Marlon Csokas as Romulus's friend, and AFI-award winner Russell Dykstra as Christina's lover.

"I directed Russell in a play in Sydney, and I'd have him in everything I do if I possibly could," says Roxburgh of the ex-Brisbane resident. "He's one amazing actor. He's a great clown, but he can also do something with gravitas."

Roxburgh says working on the other side of the camera was "totally different" from acting.

"It bears no comparison. It's the fact you're leading the charge, I suppose... a bit like being a general."

Curiously, the first morning of the shoot, I felt quite OK.

"There had been such a build-up to finally get to the set and be able to say, 'Action' was quite a relief," he says.

He said the customary tight budget that's part of Australian feature films meant "every imaginable deceit and device" had to be used by the film production team to save money.

"I'm deliriously happy with the way it looks," he admits, praising cinematographer Geoffrey Simpson for the look of the film. "We were shooting in the dead of winter, suggesting a dry, parched rural Australia when it was greener than the rolling hills of Kerry."

With *Romulus, My Father* now ready for cinemas, Roxburgh is preparing to resume his acting career.

First up there's a new six-part drama series for ABC-IV to be shot at Byron Bay — he plays a travel writer returning home after a long absence — and later in the year, he will star for Company B Belvoir in Sydney in a new play by Michael Gow, *Toy Symphony*, being directed by Neil Armfield.

"It's quite a frightening engagement. I haven't been on stage for nine years, and I'm honestly quite apprehensive about it, although it's a marvellous play Michael has written," he says.

Richard Roxburgh will talk about making *Romulus, My Father* after a preview screening at Dendy Portside from 6.30pm on Monday. Ticket information, Dendy Portside 3137 6020.

Man on a

Jason Nahrung
RELEASES

LISTENING to Wayne Hussey tear *Deliverance* is one of the quintessential moments of '80s goth rock. There are many more heartfelt pleas than the soul of his vocal cords shredding on "give n give me, give me deliverance". Hard believe it's 21 years since he and Cris Adams split from seminal UK rockers Sisters of Mercy to form The Mission and create such classics as *Wasteland*, *Tow of Strength* and *Butterfly on a Wheel*.

While goths flocked to them, as with the Sisters, the Mission's music shot to hold broader appeal. They are a rock band first and foremost, and in Hussey offer distinctive singer to boot.

So it's pleasing to see Hussey, the senior member of the original Mission, mark his anniversary with a new album.

For *God is a Bullet* (Shock), he has made the most of the studio, but hasn't strayed too far from his winning ways to produce 15 tracks of guitar-driven rock goodness with plenty of shades of former glory ghosting through the album.

To whit, *To Love and To Kill* with *Very Same Hand*, a song for our violent times, and the sensual, slow-build opener *Still Deep Waters*.

There's a sense of comfortable maturity throughout the album, with songs about abuse (the single, *Keep it in the Family*), loss (acoustic, Tea Party-esque crooner *Father*), and love, of course — love unrequited, failed and yearned for.

Hussey's rich voice is put through an impressive range on the love song *Aquarius* and *Gemini*, helping to tra-

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