

Romulus and Raimon

The film of an intensely personal memoir is a great Australian story

Sebastian Smee on an artist's island Graeme Blundell takes on Bastard Boys





Out of shadows

Miriam Cosic reports on the transformation of philosopher Raimond Gaita's memoir, Romulus, My Father, into a film that matches a distinctive European sensibility to a uniquely Australian landscape

T'S not surprising philosopher Raimond Gaita didn't want his memoir, Romulus, My Father, filmed. It is an extraordinary book, dealing with insanity and saintlines, among other aspects of the human condition, and informed by wisdom: more like an extended tragic poem in mood than a conventional biography or autobiography.

It is the kind of book that wakens countless epiphanies of various magnitudes in the reader. I read it twice through at one sitting when it was first published and those who admire it, and there are many, have needed to bring the sum of their experience and understanding to the encounter. The ultimate meaning of the book is not in its narrative, though the unfolding of Gatat's childhood is riven by almost unbearable episodes of dramatic intensity, but the egoless compassion that permeates the world view of his father and his father's friend, Hora, two greathearted men who were the boy's moral guides through a terrifyingly ambiguous world of postward sipalenement.

Gaita steps with philosophical calm through the depression and suicide of his mother, his father's stoic acceptance of his mother's lover, Mitru, and Mitru's eventual suicide, the intermittent company of a craye compartor, Vacek, who lived rough near their country home, and his father's temporary descent into madness when the cumulative effect of all these events reached a tipping point. As a child, Gaita seemed enveloped by a magical cloak of protective love given to him by these practical, helpless individuals, which allowed him to stare straight at the enormity unfolding around him and not be blinded by it.

Christian charity, though unnamed as such, illuminates Gaita's short book in a way that seems to have more immediate didactic power for our times than the founding parables of his religion, and Gaita's simple writing has a power that a more emotional account would have lacked. He listened to Bach, he says, when he was writing it, "to avoid the sentimental".

His main objection to having it filmed was that he couldn't imagine how it could be done.
"One of the things I was trying to do in the

"One of the things I was trying to do in the book was to bear witness to something very distinctive in my father's moral outlook, and that was the complete lack of condescension that he was able to show, and indeed Hora was able to show, to Vacek, though he was visibly insane." Gaita says not.

When Romulus, My Father was published, a journalist asked him whether he'd thought Vacek was weird when he was a child, and he said that he hadrit. "Il realised then that something I was trying to express in the book it may not have been entirely successful— was that it wasn't because of any great virtue in me

+ but because I saw him in the light of my father's

and Hora's attitude to him. And I thought: 'How the hell are they going to show that in a film?' "

Nor did he want any interpretive reductionism brought to bear; that his father's and Hora's orientation might have had to do with their nationality, as Romanians who had lived in Yugoslavia, or their experiences in that crucible of horror, the Balkans during World War II. Rather, it was something inherent in them.

"The aspect of his character that I wanted to celebrate wasn't anything to do with nobility or integrity or his courage, it was this very, very deep compassion," Gaita says.

His compassionate responsiveness to the needs of his wife and her lover, for example, ean't be accounted for by culture; quite the opposite. "His compariots were completely unsympathetic to this, and sometimes quite hostile to it and despied that aspect of him. They came from a culture in which honour was the central concept, so their attitude was: "It's bad enough that you're cuckolded by this friend of yours, why do you have to make things worse by paying his rent?" "

Romulus, My Father, the book, came about

The project took some courage on Roxburgh's part, too.

Gaira's agent had turned down all previous requests automatically, knowing how he felt, but she passed on Roxburgh's "I' had a phone call saying there was this young fellow who was a bit of a whiz around Sydney, everybody admires him, and could she give him my phone number," Gaita recalls. "It hought "Golly, he got a long way with her for her to announce him like this." She was very hard to impress."

After a couple of phone calls, Roxburgh visited him in London, where he spends half the year as professor of moral philosophy at King's College University (he is also professor of philosophy at Hang's Hollsophy at Atable University), Roxburgh's sister had given him a copy of the book for his birthday and he, too, read it at one sitting. "I rang her the day after reading it and said: "I'm going to direct this as a film." And she said she knew! I was going to say that." Roxburgh says. He had directed theatre before, but not film.

"It seemed very cinematic to me, for want of a better expression," he says. "It seemed that film would be the best way to flesh it out; it's certainly not something that would adapt to stage. But I thought the issues, and the minutiae and the subtlety of the issues, could be evolored

this film," "Gaita says. "But Angel at My Table was such a wonderful film, my reservations about that began to lessen."

At that time Gaita had rented a cottage in country Victoria near his childhood home, Frogmore, to write The Philosopher's Dog. Connolly and Maynard visited him there and, important for Gaita, they impressed his wife, too. The project was on.

They found a screenwriter in London, poet Nick Drake "Nick tells me that he was approached with this job description, that I had said that the author had to have a European sensibility and had to be a poet." Gaita says. "I don't remember quite setting those restrictions." The two have become friends.

Despite the Anglo-Saxon names of the writer and director, both, it turns out, had a European sensibility. Drake's named was an assumed one: his father, who was Czech, had come to Britain after the war.

Roxburgh, too, though he had no continental forebears, had a European outlook. At primary school in Albury-Wodonga, he had gravitated to the children of migrants, mostly Yugoslavs.

"Their parents were working in Tactories, I guess there was some industry picking up around the place, and I was very drawn to them, and to going around to their houses and meeting their parents and hearing them speak those languages, and trying to learn those languages myself. There was a time when I was a primary school when I was reasonably good with Yugoslav," Roxburgh says. "I had a real longing for the rest of the world, I was really desperately reaching out and deeply attracted to the rest of the world, and to Europe in particular."

He has spent a great deal of time in Europe as an adult, is married to an Italian and has an Italian-Australian baby.

Gaita agrees that the film has been informed by these men's understanding of the essential foreignness of his story.

"And Eric Bana too," he adds, referring to the actor who plays his father with an extraordinary stillness and simplicity in the film. "In fact, there's hardly an Australian name."

Hora is played by Marton Csokas; Gaita's mother, Christina, by Franka Potente; Mitru by Russell Dykstra; and Vacek by Jacek Koman. Terry Norris; Esme Melville and Alethea McGrath provide a wonderful foil as their neighbours who, despite their Anglo-Saxon reserve, were non-judgmentally helpful to the

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Dramatic intensity: Richard Roxburgh and Bana during the making of *Romulus, My Father*

on the urging of friends; it grew out of the eulogy he delivered at his father's funeral, which was later published in the journal *Ouadrant*.

Gaita repeatedly refused requests for the film rights after it was published in 1998, yet a complete novice, actor Richard Roxburgh, was the one to win his agreement.

If it took considerable courage for Gaita to publish the work in the first place — he was a man more used to negotiating the abstract and impersonal terrain of moral philosophy, after all — it took courage of a different order to entrust its interpretation to another.

"Beyond anything it was his deeply personal family story, and who the hell wants to relinquish that into the hands of some bloke who turns up at your door with a couple of bottles of wine." Roxburgh says.

in the terrain of cinema. If I could manage to distil it into a drama, rather than a kind of memoir, then I thought it really had a great chance of succeeding."

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It took years from that insight until the goahead. "First of all I liked him a lot, just
personally, and I was also impressed by how
much he cared for the book," Gaita says. "But
I did say no, even though we'd shared more than

one bottle of very good red wine."

He eventually agreed that Roxburgh could write a screenplay, but the contract gave Gaita the right to refuse its realisation and he didn't have to say why. Roxburgh was defeated in the attempt to write it.

"Then, ever optimistic as he is, he said, 'I've got just the person to do it','' Catla recalls with some wrynes. "He tried a writer and that didn't work out, and the producer went with the writer, and at that stage I thought. 'OK, that's good. It's all over, then.' And then, ever optimistic, he said:

'I've got just the producer.''
Roxburgh brought Robert Connelly and John
Maynard on board as producers, and that's
when Gaita began to be interested. Maynard had
co-produced the film Angel at My Table, the
biographical account of New Zealand author
Janet Frame.

"One of the views I had about making a film is that it's very hard to portray madness and I thought: 'My god, we've got three mad people in





Moral tale: Scenes from the film, from far left, Eric Bana as Romulus (holding his daughter) and Kodi Smit-McPhee as Rai; Rai with Jacek Koman as Vacek; and father and son with motorbike; above, Raimond Galta, helpur Por



Gaita family in their travails. The real find of the casting, however, is Kodi Smit-McPhee, who plays the young Rai with limpid charisma.

"He had a precoclously mature understanding of the story, of the pain of the characters," Rosbugh, says. "He'd researched the book online and came to his first audition and explained the story in a remarkably thoughtful way. And what really made me prick up my ears was that he seemed to grasp the tragedy of it without judging." The boy was able to measure up on screen to the gravity of his co-actors.

"That was always going to be the great hurdle for us," Roxburgh says.

Another hurdle was bringing Gaita along. He did not have a veto over the casting but he was consulted throughout. "Just as a matter of respecting the font," Roxburgh says. "And he was always very understanding of the process."

In fact, "on a good day" Roxburgh says he likes to think that he "might have awoken in Rai a further understanding of the purpose of what we do". People are always surprised, I suggest, by the skills of other professions. "I

don't have the same suspicion of philosophy, though," Roxburgh says quickly.

Galta, he believes, is suspicious of art in general. "I think he feels there's something about it that is essentially untruthib, because it can be a pastiche, because people can be doing it for the wrong reasons, it can be entirely ego-driven, and it's a deceit." When he visited Galta at King's College, he says: "He said that he frankly felt that art, and perhaps film in particular, was like Plato's cave, it was just a whole lot of dancing shadows on the wall and without real substance as a result of that."

Gaita is nonplussed when I put Roxburghs remarks to him: "I've spent a lot of my philosophical work writing about the importance of art to philosophy, so I don't see any simple contrast between art and philosophy, especially in anything that looks like moral philosophy. He does admit he had trouble distinguishing the historical characters and the characters in the film: "It was hard for me to speak of Rai and Romulus and Hora as characters, rather than say "my father", "my

mother', 'me'. But they had as much trouble; when they speak to me they say, 'You . . . Rai . . . the boy . . .' I think that's intrinsic to the nature of the theme."

There is a quintessential Europeanness about the book and a quintessential Australianness about the film.

But rather than jarring, the two seem of a piece. The countryside almost seems another actor in the film, one that is different in another, important way. It is permeated by silence.

"My father and Hora were great talkers, and it mattered in very, very deep ways to them. Conversation for my father was a mark of our humanity." Galta recalls. "And in the film, they're not talking; they're very silent. The first time we see Hora and Romulus together, Hora's reading a book. I don't know quite why that was, maybe because I had for so long been worried about the invention of dialouse."

Gaita had been asked to recall the sounds of his childhood and to describe the interior of his house. "It all came back to me, enormously detailed, and they rebuilt that house," he says. The result was remarkable. "I said the only trouble is, that elephant sitting on the mantelpiece, it's facing the wrong way."

There are scenes in the film that did not take place in the book: Gaita says a sequence in which Romulus rides his motorbike around and around his delighted son feel right. In fact, it's difficult at times for the viewer to tell whether the book has been condensed or expanded on.

"I know what you mean." Roxburgh says. "I think there's something naive about the film, as well. The attempt was really to not paste a lot of style on top of the story. We were always determined that the cinematography be unselfconscious, that it didn't have any experimental film-school asethetic, it would just allow the characters to sit in front of the camera and talk and react, and a lot of the time to be silent.

"We hoped that, in some way, some measure of understanding of the characters and their situation would arise."

Romulus, My Father opens on May 31.



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