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This Boy's Life

Romulus, My Father

A light bulb swings in the darkness, awakening the sleeping bees in the palm of a hand. Drowsy at first, then slowly gaining energy, the bees take flight, out of the room and into the breaking dawn. **By Rjurik Davidson**

THIS image – one which resonates long after Richard Roxburgh’s *Romulus, My Father* is over – resists simple interpretation. It is an image of hope in an otherwise harrowing story; it also comes to symbolize the particularly intense relationship between a father and son.

Romulus, My Father is the story of young Raimond (played with maturity by Kodi Smit-McPhee) and his emotionally constrained father, Romulus (Eric Bana) as they struggle to survive physical and emotional hardship in rural Victoria during the early 1960s. Romulus is a migrant from Yugoslavia (who thinks of himself as Romanian) and his vibrant and irresponsible wife Christina (Franke Potente) is German. At the beginning of the film, Christina has run off to Melbourne with a former family friend, Mitru (Russell Dykstra), and so Romulus has taken on responsibility for raising Raimond. Romulus loves Christina, and though he wants to win her back, he knows somehow that she is a too much of a free spirit, or too selfish (depending on one’s

view) to return permanently. Rai too wants Christina to come home, but her visits are unexpected, and cause emotional turmoil for both Romulus and Raimond.

This three-way relationship is at the heart of *Romulus, My Father*. Romulus’s story, which is the most developed, is one of unending struggle and pain. We are treated throughout the film to a number of tableau shots as he stands alone, the very image of suffering on his face. Working as a blacksmith and a farm labourer, Romulus struggles to raise Rai. He hammers hot iron; he drags a plough in the summer sun, but is unable to drag the family out of poverty. The physical and emotional pressure takes its toll on Romulus, and, with his relationship to Christina permanently crippled, his mental state starts to fray. He rides his motorcycle with self-destructive speed until he crashes. Disaster follows disaster – while Romulus is hospitalized, the family chickens fall sick and Hora (Marton Csokas) is forced to kill them. Christina comes back to look after Rai but cannot bear the landscape and so runs away with Mitru again,

1: AFTER DROPPING RAI OFF AT THE BOARDING HOUSE.
2: RAI, ROMULUS AND HORA.



falls pregnant, suffers from post-natal depression, and continues her infidelities. And so it goes on, both parents on a downward spiral towards mental breakdown. The disasters are all the more affecting when one remembers that the film is an adaptation of Raimond Gaita's moving memoir, and that though this is a fictionalization, the characters are based on real people, the film made with 'quite a bit of correspondence' with Gaita.

The Subtle Touch: Understated Drama

Grinding poverty, infidelity, mental breakdown, suicide – *Romulus, My Father* has all the elements of melodrama, yet the film itself is understated. It is never emotionally overwrought, for it is made with an astute lack of sentimentality: avoiding over-stylization in its direction and cinematography, and possessing a controlled and subtle script. Roxburgh has explained that, 'What I was after in the visual world of the film was that the camera was unintrusive in that we would let the performances tell their own story.' This understated style is related to the fact that it is told through the eyes of a child. Roxburgh says that, 'It was really important to us that it didn't have a sense of elaborate self-consciousness about it – the camera had to simply let the story be told.'

Indeed, the film is as much about Raimond's attempts to make sense of a world of hardship, in which adults are themselves breaking under the pressure, as it is about the relationships themselves. The child-gaze is a particularly powerful narrative choice, for it invites the viewer to see things with a fresh eye. Children are, as Terry Eagleton says, the original theorists, because when confronted with practices we've come to see as natural, they 'insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassing and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten...' The important thing here is that, as point-of-view characters, children reawaken that sense of estrangement within the viewer or reader. We are asked to participate in events, as if we were seeing or experiencing them for the first time. Rai is placed under exceptional emotional duress: he is witness to his mother's first suicide attempt and his father's mental breakdown. He is left alone for long periods; watches Hora kill the family's chick-

ens, burying some of them alive. He sees his mother have sex with a stranger. Staying with his mother in Melbourne, he looks after his baby sister while his mother suffers from depression. In other words, Raimond is required to make sense not only of a world dominated by hardship and difficulty, but of a very adult world. In a very real sense, he has no childhood. Through all this, his moral compass is his father Romulus, who, despite everything, tries to look after him. And, in fact, succeeds – in a reprise of the initial scene, Romulus is with Rai at the end, and together they release bees from a cliff, setting them free, ‘For luck,’ says Romulus. This moment of shared experience reasserts the love of the father and son for each other, reminding us of the critical role played by solidarity in the face of hardship.

Important Stories, Important Histories

Romulus, My Father is not likely to break any box-office records. It’s a quiet film, despite its dramatic subject matter. Yet it’s also an important film, for it documents a side of Australia’s history too often overlooked. Stories of growing up in rural Australia are not unusual; they are a defining part of the national experience. But what distinguishes *Romulus, My Father* from, say, A. B. Facey’s book, *A Fortunate Life* (itself important for its chronicling of an earlier generation of poverty and survival, and equally deserving of being translated to film) is that all its principal characters are migrants. Its picture of Australia is one that should not be forgotten. The early 1960s portrayed is not the golden age represented in some national mythologies; it is not a lost nirvana of low unemployment, cultural uniformity, social satisfaction and consensus. On this topic, Roxburgh accurately claims that the ‘story of migration, of people transplanted and ending up in incredibly harsh conditions is really at the heart of our civilization’.

These harsh conditions are ever-present: the vistas of sky, the twisted and dead gum trees (such as the dead red gum which seems to represent Christina’s own desolation, and to which she has a particular connection), the sun and the heat. Rai rides his bike along the dusty roads that cut through the dry fields, and if the Australian landscape of *Romulus, My Father* is harsh and barren, it is also picturesque and

beautiful, at times approaching an Australian pastoralism. Summer dominates the film – that time of year which is perhaps harshest in the Australian country.

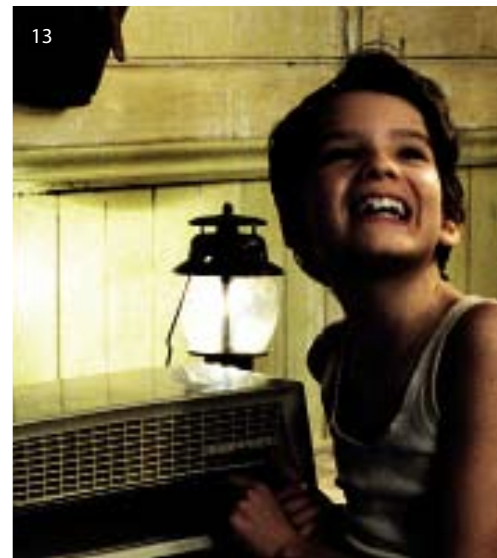
Roxburgh set out to avoid the ‘set-in-aspic-migrant-period-story’ preferring to ensure that, ‘there would be no safety of distance, that somehow the story, in all of its dark and complex beauty, would be allowed to breathe with a contemporary immediacy’. It is a film about outsiders, yet it doesn’t dwell so much on their status as on their struggles. Its themes are not discrimination: we are not treated to scenes of exclusion or repression. Rather, it focuses simply on the actuality of the existence, the reality of poverty. That Romulus must struggle terribly may be a result of his migrant status, but the film is not interested in exploring that particular relationship. It is simply taken *a priori*. Rather, it is interested in the *effect* of this: on Romulus, on his friends, on Rai. Materiality is central to the film – and its relationship to meaning and consciousness.

One of *Romulus, My Father*’s few weaknesses – as a film rather than a historical document – is its lack of emotional dynamism. Its tone is fairly unchanging throughout; there is little relief from the relentlessness of its themes (there are a few light moments, mainly involving Rai’s hobo friend Vacek [Jacek Koman], who at one point boils them both some eggs, using urine as water and then cracks open his egg without any kind of self-consciousness, unlike the hesitant Rai). Yet despite its relentlessness, the film does manage to hold on to hope. It is a tale of survival, and as we see it all through the eyes of Raimond, we cannot help marvelling at the resilience of the young, and at Rai’s ability to survive. It has, as Richard Roxburgh claims, ‘not only a sense of possibility, but of promise, contained in the relationship of that father and son’.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Roxburgh, quoted in *Romulus, My Father* Press Book, p.11.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, 1990, p.34.
- 5 *Romulus, My Father* Press Book, p.9.
- 6 *ibid.*

1: ROMULUS REVIVING BEES. 2: HORA KILLING CHICKENS. 3: ROMULUS SPEEDING AFTER CHRISTINA’S DEATH. 4: MITRU AND CHRISTINA ARGUE. 5: VACEK ROUNDING UP THE CHICKENS. 6: RAI DISCOVERS CHRISTINA UNCONCIOUS. 7: CHRISTINA RETURNS HOME TO SURPRISE RAI. 8: SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVING. 9: CHRISTINA AND SUSAN. 10: RAI STOPS ROMULUS’ ATTACK. 11: RAI’S BIRTHDAY. 12: CHRISTINA’S FUNERAL. 13: RAI LISTENS TO JACK DAVEY. 14: RAI AND ROMULUS AFTER CHRISTINA’S FUNERAL. 15: HORA TRIES TO STOP ROMULUS FROM NAILING UP A CROSS. 16: TESTING THE EGG MACHINE.





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