

All in the family

By Parizaad Khan | *Livemint.com* | March 05th, 2009

Had I known that a charming cast member of Sooni Taraporevala's upcoming film would greet me with a big wet kiss when I went to interview her, I would have done up my hair and put on some mascara. Since the cast of *Little Zizou* includes John Abraham and Boman Irani, you can forgive me my vanity.

But the cast member doing the kissing is her fox terrier Toots who, along with various other family members, had been requisitioned to be part of the film.



Bawa bonding: (from above) Actors Dilshad Patel and John Abraham; Imaad Shah and Jahan Bativala play brothers in the film; and Sooni Taraporevala directing son Jahan. Photographs by Aparna Jayakumar



Little Zizou is a contemporary comedy about two battling Parsi families whose patriarchs are Khodaiji, a religious bigot, and Pressvala, the publisher of a liberal community newspaper. The story is told by football-crazy Xerxes, Khodaiji's younger son, who likes to call himself Little Zizou after his hero—the footballer Zinedine Zidane. His one fervent wish is that his idol should visit Mumbai. Xerxes believes that his mother, who died when he was young, is an angel and can grant his wish.



Taraporevala, the photographer/scriptwriter-turned-director, got her son Jahan Bativala, 13, and daughter Iyanah Bativala, 11, to play the child leads in the film. And since *Little Zizou* is set within the community, it is what Parsis would cheekily call a *gher no ghambar* (all in the family), full of Parsi actors and personalities. Besides Irani and Abraham (whose mother is Zoroastrian), Sohrab Ardeshir, Zenobia Shroff, Shernaz Patel and Kurush Deboo play the main characters. Between them, they have a filmography that encompasses Bollywood films such as *Black*, *Fanaa*, *Mangal Pandey—The Rising*, *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa*,

Page 3 and *Munna Bhai MBBS*, as well as foreign films and theatre productions.

There's more Parsi talent—Shiamak Davar's there, as are Gary Lawyer and Arzan Khambata. Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal, check. Cyrus Broacha, check.

The award-winning scriptwriter of films such as *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Such a Long Journey* and *The Namesake*, Taraporevala says she is always inspired by real life: “It’s a cliché but it’s true that real life is much more amazing than fiction.” The plot mirrors some current happenings in the community, such as “the tussle between the ‘Parsi press’ and people who have a more fundamentalist outlook”, says Taraporevala. “But it’s not confined to Parsis.” She points out that friction between fundamentalist and liberal factions is common to all communities.

As a scriptwriter, she has dealt with diverse issues ranging from the lives of streetchildren to interracial romance, and she feels her film would have been very limited had it only been for and about Parsis. “There are a lot of other things that are universal—unrequited love, following your dream even though it’s completely crazy, rivalry between two kids for the affection of a mother, and a father and son conflict,” she says.

In her first film as a director, Taraporevala has done things unconventionally. She’s written the script with the main cast in mind, something “that you are taught never to do”, she says. “In fact, they were so ingrained in my head and heart that in many instances I didn’t even change their names.” She’s used untrained actors—besides the two children, the character of Tito Fellini is played by Tknow Francorsi, a Parsi-Italian Taraporevala met at a party in Mumbai. “I just loved the way he looked and I think he was wearing an *Asho Farohar* (a Parsi symbol) so I went up and talked to him and found out his name. I went back home and wrote a character based on him. After the entire film was written, I approached him and told him that I had been inspired by him. Thankfully he could act and was very happy to do it,” she says, laughing. “Imaad (Shah) is the only one playing a Parsi who is not a Parsi,” she adds.

Taraporevala’s last stint at direction was a good many decades ago—she directed plays when she was in school—and she was understandably “a bit nervous about working with actors”. But she gathered a few tips from a mentor who happens to have solid credentials, film-maker Mira Nair. “Mira and I have had a very blessed and wonderful relationship. She teaches me a lot of things, even though we’ve known each other so long,” she says. They first met in 1976 in the US as international students at Harvard University. Ten years later, Taraporevala wrote the script for *Salaam Bombay!*, which was directed by Nair. “Mira loves her actors, as do I,” says Taraporevala. “She told me good actors are really vulnerable in front of the camera. You have to make them feel secure and comfortable. Play up to their strengths, and go with what you enjoy seeing them do. I absolutely did those things.”

Little Zizou has been on the festival circuit and has received positive reviews at foreign film festivals. Taraporevala recalls her experience at the Academy Awards in 1988 when *Salaam Bombay!* was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film. “That we went to the Oscars made hardly any news at all,” she says. “I wore some modified *ghaghra-choli*.” She saw Pedro Almodóvar, nominated for *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. “He was there with his whole entourage of wild and wonderful women,” she says. Jodie Foster came up to Nair and Taraporevala in the bathroom and told them that she loved their film. “I had a brief moment of disappointment (when the film didn’t win),” she says, “but then we all got drunk and that was that.” *Little Zizou releases on 13 March*.