

Perfectly Scripted

By Marie Claire | March, 2009

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FILMS

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SCRIPTED

Sooni Taraporevala talks about her directorial debut *Little Zizou*, which releases this month and her production firm Jigri Dost, which she has set up with her *jigri dost* Dinaz Stafford

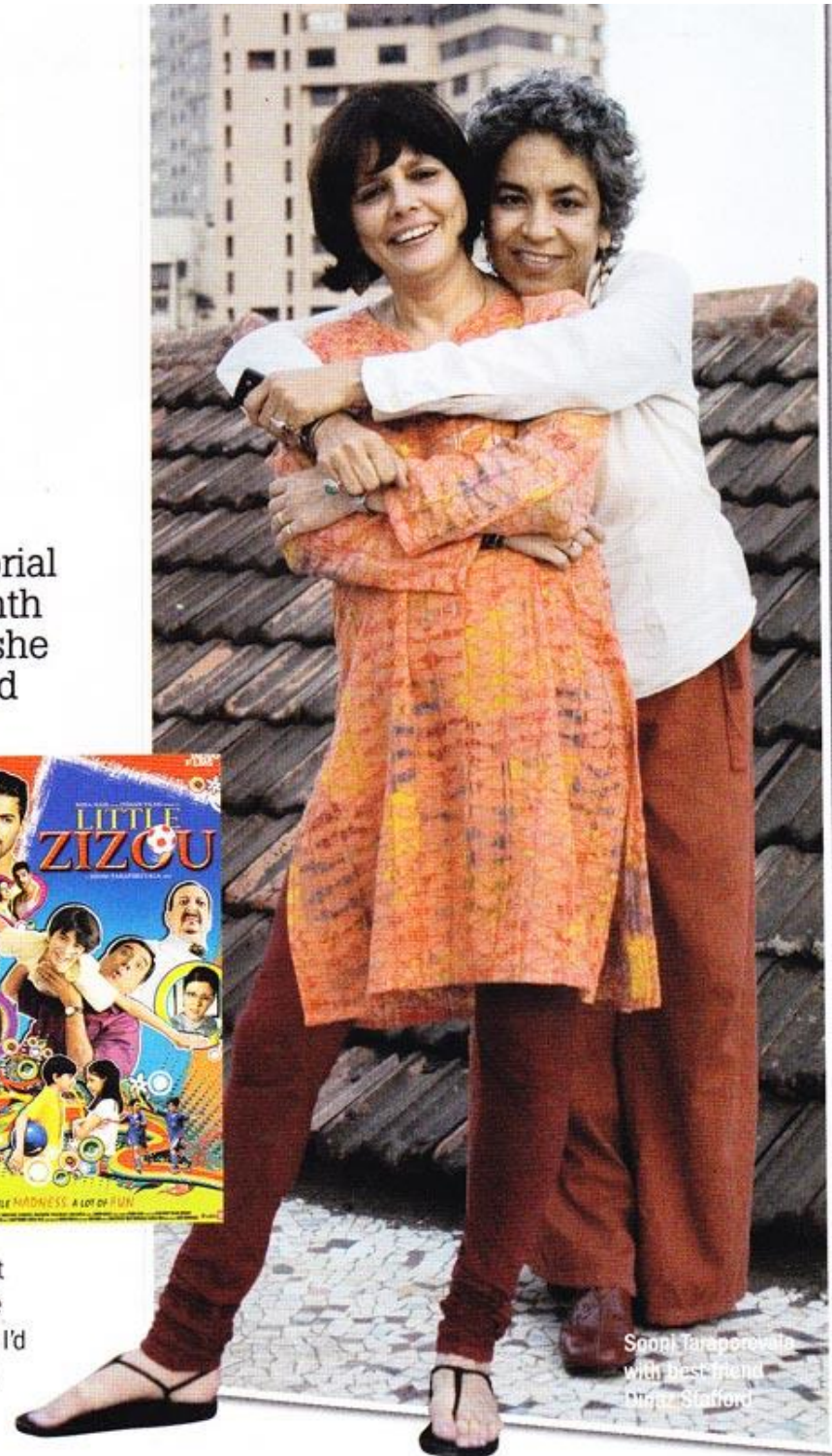
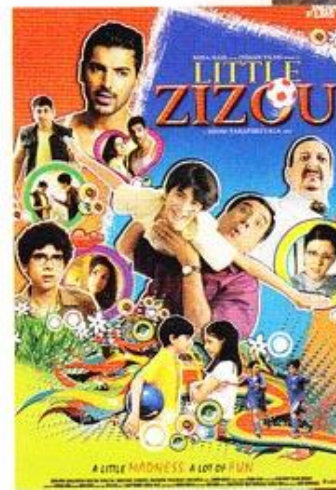
She's written the screenplay for award-winning films like *Salaam Bombay*, *The Namesake* and *Mississippi Masala*. Now 20 years later, Sooni Taraporevala has turned director with a comedy called *Little Zizou*. The film is set in contemporary Mumbai, among the loveable Parsis, a community that Sooni belongs to. Its underlying theme, however, is meant to reflect what is happening to communities around the world. *Little Zizou* examines this serious phenomenon lightheartedly. **After years of screenplay writing, what prompted you to turn director?**

I've been screenwriting for 20 years but they were scripts commissioned by other people. All exciting subjects for which I got paid well, but I've never really written a script for myself. In June 2005, after returning from Mira's (Nair) set of *The Namesake* in Kolkata, I started working on an idea I had. As I wrote, I'd meet a lot of people, and add them into the story... so it was a very organic script. I finished the first draft in 10 days and spent the next two years revising it. I also did a photo book with the actors and locations I had in mind. Dinaz Stafford, my friend and partner in our company Jigri Dost Productions, agreed to be the producer. **How did Jigri Dost Productions come about?**

Dinaz and I formed the company for this film. We've been *jigri dost* since I was 13. We also have other honorary members like Mira Nair, who is presenting this film, and Anil Tejani and several others who were involved with *Salaam Bombay*. So we had a lot of old *jigri dost* and a lot of new ones who've become part of the family now. The next film by our company will be Dinaz's. **Why a film on fundamentalism set amidst peace-loving Parsis?**

Parsis are known to have a great sense of humour. If you were to find the most benign fundamentalist in the world, he would have to be a Parsi. But the form of fundamentalism in *Little Zizou* is not about burning down buildings or issuing *fatwas*. I am making fun of that mindset. Maybe I am being an alarmist, but I don't know if you progress from more benign forms to more lethal forms. **Your earlier screenplays weren't particularly known for the humour, yet your first film does a humorous take on a serious problem...**

I definitely feel the need to laugh more... maybe it's age (*laughs*). I believe that our world, which grows increasingly insane, can only be saved by love. And a little bit of laughter. My film is a light-hearted look at a serious problem, and the problem is not terrorism. Nobody is blowing up anything or killing anyone. It's about the tussle between



Sooni Taraporevala with best friend Dinaz Stafford

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fundamentalism and a more liberal outlook. The fundamentalist is not an evil terrorist, he's more of a cartoon... I wanted to make a joke of it rather than preach to the converted and make him into this heavy villain. **What was it like having a crew full of women?**

Let me first say that the men in the crew were equally fantastic. We had a lot of women starting with Dinaz and me, several assistant directors, the art director, costume designer among others. We had a really good time, and there was great female energy on the sets. **After several years of working and writing in different countries, did making a film among Mumbai's Parsis signal homecoming?**

Yes, after 20 years of international travel, I finally came home and wrote a story that takes place in my own backyard. It helps if you're making your first film about a world you know really well. Having said that, *Little Zizou* is not exclusively set among Parsis. It's a subject that I hope has a wider relevance. It's basically about people, relationships, love, and about universal things that don't have to do with being Parsi, Christian, Muslim or Hindu. ■