

Little Zizou is a big winner

By Parizaad Khan | *Live Mint and the Wall Street Journal* | March 13 2009

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Lead roles: (from top) Boman Irani after putting in a hard night's work at his newspaper; Imaad Shah and Jahan Bativala put in superb performances; John Abraham plays an apprentice to sculptor Arzaan Khambata.

Scriptwriter Sooni Taraporevala's first film as a director is a humorous and often touching story of Parsi families based in Mumbai. The plot is fairly simple, maybe even simplistic—Boman Pressvala (Boman Irani) is a free-thinking newspaper editor, and his arch rival Cyrus II Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir) is a self-proclaimed religious scholar, healer and bigot. Incensed by the negative coverage about him in Pressvala's newspaper, Khodaiji tries to get revenge.

The story is told by Cyrus' younger son, 11-year-old Xerxes (Jahan Bativala) who calls himself Little Zizou after his idol, footballer Zinedine Zidane. Xerxes believes his dead mother, who is an angel, has the power to bring Zidane to India. Meanwhile, his brother Artaxerxes or Art (Imaad Shah) had dreams of his own, which involve Pressvala's older daughter Zenobia (Dilshad Patel), and a flight simulator. Art and Xerxes hang out often at Pressvala's home, and the

motherless Xerxes uses these opportunities to get closer to Roxy aunty, Pressvala's wife, who showers him with affection, which does not go down well with her own younger daughter, 9-year-old Liana (Iyanah Bativala). In one scene, Xerxes pretends to be sick and gets to stay home with Roxy aunty, while the furious Liana gets packed off to school, despite the fact that she sees through Xerxes' ruse and warns her mother. "He's faking!" she yells accusingly.

Taraporevala told Lounge in a previous interview that the first thing she told her children, who are the young stars, was that she wanted no artifice. And that's exactly what she got from Jahan and Iyanah, and from her whole cast. Little Zizou wasn't like seeing a film; it was more like sitting in Dadar Parsi Colony and watching the lives of everyday people unfold. Just like *Slumdog Millionaire*, the kids are the real stars of the film. Jahan doesn't seem to realize there's a camera on him; he's endearing and sincere, seeking attention and love from his older brother and Roxy aunty. Liana is like your younger sister—insecure, jealous, clingy and a tattler, which is probably a more difficult

role to play that Jahan's, and she manages to be quite likeable. "She's one of those people who loves animals but hates people. Well not all people, only me," Xerxes says at one point.

Boman Irani, as always, is a revelation. He holds the film together, and is responsible for some of the best moments in the 101-minute narrative. Zenobia Shroff is fabulous as the Parsi mother—she's another one who seems like she's unaware of the presence of a camera. Imaad Shah's performance as Art is restrained, and so much more powerful for that. There are also other supporting characters—Shernaz Patel, Tknow Francorsi, Cyrus Broacha and John Abraham that are fun to watch. Only Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal seemed to be hamming it up in some scenes.

Taraporevala seems to have an eye for detail—a picture of a young Zubin Mehta is seen on a classical music lover's wall, a pair of sunglasses is cheekily placed on a bust of a Parsi philanthropist.

The film also acts as a mirror for the Parsi community—or any other community—showing the divide and animosity between the traditional and modern factions. But the topic is dealt with skilful humour, so that it rarely manages to be preachy or tedious. And it's refreshing to see Parsis depicted unlike the comic caricatures portrayed in Bollywood cinema. The truth doesn't make them any less eccentric or funny, but as Taraporevala shows, it definitely makes them more real.

Little Zizou released in theatres on 13 March.