

Little Zizou Is a Treasure of a Film

By E. Nina Rothe | Chic Today Entertainment | November 18, 2008

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*The film plays on October 25th at Harvard University as part of a **whole event** dedicated to the films and photographs of Sooni Taraporevala. If in Boston, do not miss it!*

There are a handful of things in life that, when witnessed, tasted, experienced or chanced upon, make me thank the higher powers and remember how grand life can be. The film “*Little Zizou*” – written and directed by **Sooni Taraporevala**, premiered as well as celebrated with two awards at the **MIAAC Film Festival** little more than a week ago – is exactly one such gem.

Xerxes, or “*Little Zizou*”, is a young boy who prays persistently to his late mother for her to send his soccer idol **Zinedine Zidane** on a visit to Bombay. His elder brother Art is a prolific cartoonist, a romantic with a fantastic imagination and a group of friends determined to achieve the nearly-impossible, while the boys’ father Khodaiji is a religious leader of sorts, with prophetic aspirations and a flair for the dramatic. Because of Khodaiji’s fanatical convictions, the boys spend most of their time at the home of their father’s archrival, Boman Pressvala, a principled newspaper man with a loving, kind wife and two girls. While Art pines for the elder one, the younger Liana resents the presence of Xerxes, who is tended to with care and attention by her mom. It is a modern fairy tale, with a story as old as love itself.

But the ultimate greatness of this film lies in the journey that it takes us – its audience – on, through the fascinating **Parsi** community of the colorful Maximum City, warming our hearts with the love and family values so obviously present in this society, while filling our thoughts with a story worth watching more than once.

For an quick insight into just who the Parsis are, I will use the words of Ms. Taraporevala herself: *“Parsis are followers of the world’s first monotheistic prophet Zarathushtra who was born more than 3000 years ago in Iran. With the Arab invasion of Iran, a group of Zoroastrians fled to save their religion. They sailed away and landed in India 900 years ago. These strangers were called “Parsis” (from ‘Pars’ – Persia). Today there are only 70,000 Parsis left in India, 250,000 Zoroastrians around the world.”*

Little Zizou does tell a story that is unmistakably woven into this tightly knit community but this film is also about any child with a deep sense of longing for the mother he never knew, any teenager trying to grow up in a world where dreams are difficult to hold on to, any mother who has enough love in her heart to contain in it more than just her biological children and any man who believes that the freedom of speaking the truth is worth fighting for, at any cost. And Taraporevala manages to infuse the film with humor and charming inside jokes, like the newspaper in the beginning of the film with the headline *The Namesake* wins Oscar for Best Film!”

The film is presented by director Mira Nair and Indian Films. While this is Sooni Taraporevala’s directorial debut, she is well known as the writer of such **Mira Nair** hits as *Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala* and has written the screenplay for the screen adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. It is superbly acted by all involved, from Little Zizou himself, Jahan Bativala, and his nemesis/friend Liana played by Iyanah Bativala – both making their feature debut – to Indian cinema great **Boman Irani**, playing the amiable Pressvala with flair and dashing charisma and his loving wife Roxanne, played by Zenobia Shroff who is beloved by the camera and brings familiarity and warmth to her role. Bollywood heartthrob **John Abraham** has a lengthy cameo as – you guessed it! – a hunk, and **Imaad Shah** brings an almost tangible melancholy, as well as a striking screen presence and soft-spoken wisdom to his role as Zizou’s brother Art.



I recently met up with Sooni Taraporevala, Boman Irani and Zenobia Shroff while they were in New York to promote the film and got to ask a few questions about this beautifully poetic project, as well as what to expect from them next. First off, I got to chat with director Taraporevala, a striking woman with a short, luscious bob and wearing a beautiful fuchsia jacket and a black kurta with red and green embroidery.

E. NINA ROTHE: Ms. Taraporevala, you are an accomplished screenwriter and also a fabulous photographer with a published book of your images under your belt. What made you want to start directing as well, to add that to your resume?

SOONI TARAPOREVALA: I don’t know if this is a career move for me. But as a screenwriter, everything I worked on in the last twenty years has been commissioned by somebody, so this was the first personal, original script that I have written. It’s an idea that just came to me and I wrote it in ten days. It was a story that needed to be told and because it is a world that I know so well, I thought, let me try and direct it. I really wanted to direct it

only because I knew it so intimately. I wrote it with a lot of actors in mind. So it was a very different kind of film in that sense.

ENR: Apart from you dealing with the Parsi culture which you were born into and therefore know so well, are some of the specific characters based on real persons in your life?

ST: Yes, some are... *(laughter)*... Lets leave it at that.

ENR: What do you see in the future for the film, what is coming next?

ST: We are looking to find distribution and I hope it gets seen widely and by diverse audiences. Because I believe that even though it's about a very particular and familiar subject, I also hope that it translates and speaks to people everywhere. It's a film about love and love is not a local subject.

ENR: There are so many references to Italian – and in particular Neapolitan – music in the film. Where do they come from? And do you plan to release the terrific soundtrack of the film?

ST: Mainly, the music comes from my father. I grew up listening to Italian classics and raided his CD collection for the film. Parsis have always felt a deep connection to the music and culture of Italy for some reason. **Perry Como** is actually nicknamed "Parsi Como" in my household! And we do plan to release the soundtrack of the film as well, because I love the music so much.

Next came my time with actor Boman Irani, a tall, handsome man, with a low, honeyed voice and looking quite dashing in a dark corduroy suit.

ENR: Mr. Irani, what drew you to this role?

BOMAN IRANI: Let me put it bluntly, it had a lot to do with Sooni [Taraporevala]. I have known Sooni for so many years and we tried to make a film together before, but due to some red tape that film never happened. I will say it openly, I love Sooni and her writing. I do a lot of commercial cinema in India, which is great fun, but every once in a while it's important for us to do a small film, which will impact people. It's not always about how big an opening a film will have, but then again, when we shot *Little Zizou* we never thought we would be here in New York at the MIAAC Festival! This film is like a dream come true, the story is so universal.

ENR: You have done a lot of theater, as well as Bollywood, as well as films like *Being Cyrus* which are considered arthouse, but if you could do any kind of project, what would you pick above the rest?

BI: You know, there is no such thing. I always get drawn to a good story. But it's also very important who the people are on the project, the filmmakers and such. I can see a script that I really like, but if there is a director associated with the film that I don't enjoy – and when I say that I mean I don't completely respect them and don't enjoy the process he or she may use – then it won't be a good learning experience. I don't know how professional it is to say "OK, I do my work at the studio, then come home and that's it". That time at the studio is very, very precious and I would not like to spend it with people I do not enjoy or respect. In the name of "Art" I can say and do five hundred things, but I don't have time for people who are not good human beings. And it matters to me because we spend so much more time in the studio together than I might even spend at home with my family. So I get drawn to movies because of that! Of course, it can't be a lovely, lovely human being making a terrible movie...

ENR: Can you talk about some of your upcoming projects?

BI: There are about seven or eight films that are ready for release. In fact, there will be a few releases in November and December. There is *Sorry Bhai* with **Shabana Azmi**, and Subhash Ghai's *Yuvvraaj*. Also Ravi Chopra's *Banda Yeh Bindaas Hai* and I'm doing a cameo in *Dostana*. Then *Maharati* with **Om Puri** and **Naseeruddin Shah** and a couple more...

And last, but not least, Zenobia Shroff arrived to our talk wearing a glamorous red dress. She is, in person, every bit of the warm, beautiful woman that she portrays in Roxanne.

ENR: Ms. Shroff, how did you come to be involved in this project?

ZENOBIA SHROFF: Getting *Little Zizou* was truly fated for me. I have been a theatre actress here in NYC for the past nearly 20 years. I happened to go visit my family in Mumbai. Sooni was searching for her Roxanne and a friend suggested I audition for her. So I did and four meetings and auditions later Roxanne was mine and a one month vacation turned into a four month sojourn. It was indeed fortuitous!

ENR: What personally drew you to the role?

ZS: Roxanne was everywoman – so to speak – I knew growing up. I was raised in a colony and there were tons of Roxannes around me. The fact that I was telling their story through one woman really appealed to me. This way hopefully the world could glimpse into the life of this particular wife/mother/woman. I hope I served her well.

ENR: What did you do to prepare for this part?

ZS: Rehearsal of course, with the kids, Boman and Mahabanoo [Mody-Kotwal, who plays Roxanne's mother in the film]. I think the rehearsal with the kids really were very helpful because by the time filming began we were nicely bonded. I adore those two! Also, Boman and I had dance rehearsals with a choreographer. Personally, I did my homework on the emotional life and arc of the character. Then the costumes, hair and make-up, as well as Roxanne's tones of voice were key. For me, those particulars personally inform my performance greatly.

ENR: What were the easiest and most difficult aspects of playing Roxanne?

ZS: Roxanne was easy all the way! Growing up in a Parsi household and colony she is in my blood. The way the husband and wife speak to each other in the movie is the way my parents have been talking to each other for 50 years. They call each other "darling" even when they are angry! It is very Parsi. It's a type of shorthand I know well.

All "Little Zizou" photos by **Aparna Jayakumar**, courtesy of Jigri Dost Productions