

## Little Zizou

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**Movie:** Little Zizou

**Director:** Sooni Taraporevala

**Cast:** Boman Irani, Shernaz Patel, Jahan Bativala, Imaad Shah, Cyrus Broacha, Iyanah Bativala, Dilshad Patel, Zenobia Shroff

In a recent interview co-producer-writer-director Sooni Taraporevala spoke about the Mary Poppins song A Spoonful of Sugar Makes the Medicine Go Down. So you have scenes where you let out a laugh while tackling the brooding message beneath; and this deliciously contrasting emotion is reflected throughout the film.

“It’s good but confusing,” is little Xerxes’s (Jahan Bativala, a little charmer) response to older brother Artaxerxes’s (Imaad Shah, flawless) graphic novel; “it’s still a comic book whatever fancy name you may call it,” he adds. You can’t really call them a family – the Khodaijis: the father Cyrus II Khodaiji is on a political power trip, the mother is no more, the two brothers used to being neglected or given orders to by Cyrus’s unreasonably loyal “Girl Friday” Ms Patel (Shernaz Patel, so delightful, we need to see more of her) “who eats children for breakfast”.

Cyrus has launched a purification drive, crowning himself God’s messenger, and demanding that all Parsis who marry outside caste and others around the world who voluntarily convert to Zoroastrianism be termed outcast as “we need quality not quantity”. He calls his drive BTP: Back to Purity. Played comically, and in an over-the-top manner by Sohrab Ardeshir, this character, as you can see, is such a forbidding comment on how effortless it is to divide people. Any delusional nut can get up and scream ‘us’ and ‘them’, and there will be enough lost people who’ll follow. Not surprising then, Taraporevala thought of the film when years ago, a fringe group of conservative Parsis began to claim that Russians who converted to Zoroastrianism might seize Indian Parsi assets, leading to considerable panic.

When Cyrus collects people to collectively chant in the morning, it results in one of his “followers” self-righteously ordering an old lady whose late husband was an Italian, to quit her home as the society is only for “pure” Parsis. Naturally this predicament, as others tackled in the film, is relatable outside the scope of any one community.

Artaxerxes keeps himself busy trying to recreate an airplane cockpit with some scrap bought off a local guy. With two friends, he runs this workshop in a rundown building where the owner (Cyrus Broacha) typically threatens them with a my-uncle-is coming-back-to reclaim-the-place line for extra money. The money for rent comes from donations that were supposed to reach the father, and are stolen by Artaxerxes mid-way. Other ways of spending the money include taking Zenobia Pressvala (Dilshad Patel) to fancy dinners. Zenobia’s father (Boman Irani, simply fab) runs a newspaper full of mischievous rebellion. His younger daughter Liana (Iyanah Bativala) who “loves animals but hates people” is adorable and is called the ‘little trouble maker’. She’s a tiny star, so lovable in her little frowns and going up on the school stage to mouth a seriously corny speech on love.

Xerxes who idolizes International soccer player Zinedine Zidane (therefore the nickname Little Zizou) spends time getting pampered by Liana’s mother (played by the simply marvelous Zenobia Shroff) much to her jealous disapproval. Meanwhile, Zenobia is in love with hunky Arjun (John Abraham in a fun cameo) despite her father lecturing her not fall in the marriage trap and to make a career for herself.

With Khodaiji openly admiring Hitler and Idi Amin in an interview with an international crew, it’s only time that his growing fundamentalism clashes with the liberal and irreverent stance of Boman’s newspaper.

The film is nuanced with little touches like little Xerxes believing his late mother can manipulate Zidane’s schedule to India, Art’s password that says sonofpsycho, and a rundown Hotel Majestic that is run by their slightly nutty grandmother played by Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal. The quirks of the characters, authentic dialogue and showcasing existing Cozy Building and Masina Hospital are not surprising considering Taraporevala has grown up around these areas and has decades of research behind her. In 2000, she had published a book called Parsis: A Photographic Journey, 20 years after she thought of the book concept. Little Zizou might occasionally take you back to Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey that Taraporevala had also adapted as a film screenplay by the same name. In her directorial debut after writing award-winning screenplays (Salaam Bombay, Mississippi Masala, The Namesake), Taraporevala proves she’s equally proficient a filmmaker.

Watch Little Zizou for its deep message interspersed with quality laughs and for the performances especially by the little people (who, by the way, are Taraporevala’s kids; some talented family, this). For its ability to ‘sweeten the medicine’, Little Zizou remains a delectable treat.

***Verdict: Three and a half stars***