

Little Zizou: Zo zweet!

This small-budget flick made by a Parsee with Parsee stars must find audiences among all with an ear for a sweet story

By Mayank Shekhar | Times of India | March 16, 2009

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Teenaged Artaxerxes (Imaad) is a forever doodling caricaturist. He sees the world around him in graphic novel images. Whatever you call it, a graphic novel is still a comic book, says his kid-brother Xerxes. I sort of agree with Xerxes. He goes by the nickname little Zizou, for his love for football and an abiding ambition to meet the French super-star Zinedine Zidane some day.

The two brothers lost their mother early. They live with a nut-case dad, who claims to be a religious healer, though he's quite clearly a "feeler" of old women, and even more sly at community politics. Boman Presswala (Irani; incredibly improvised performance) runs a community newspaper in the neighbourhood. It is Boman's beautiful house that the two boys find a surrogate home in.

It helps that Boman has two daughters, roughly of the boys' age: the younger one feels threatened for motherly affection with little Zizou around; the elder one (the only non-actor here, who reminds you of sophomore NCPA-type English plays) is a girl about town, with a jock (John Abraham, in a cameo) for a boyfriend. She is also the quiet Artaxerxes's love-interest, though love has yet to be expressed, and it doesn't take much for interests to change in teen years.

Among other things Artaxerxes loves is a plane-cockpit that he wishes to turn into a flight simulator. He quite clearly hates his father, Cyrus II Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir), for good reason. The religious man wants to restore exclusivist honour among the Zoroastrian community. There are merely 250,000 of them left in the world because, he says, the community prefers quality over quantity. The film is in parts a crackling comedy. Cyrus II is raising an army called the PLO (the Parsee Liberation Organisation). Meanwhile Boman, the liberal-minded newspaper editor with a sense of humour, is up Cyrus's backside. He registers fewer followers than Cyrus at public meetings. Moderate voices are usually weaker in active support.

Per head-count, Parsees are by far the most successful ethnic group in India. Their natural facility with English and entrepreneurship has helped them rise above the rest, and their achievements rarely suggest their small numbers. Their contribution to popular art is equally unparalleled. Bombay cinema owes its origin itself to Parsee theatre.

Screen-writer Sooni Taraporewala (*Salaam Bombay*, *The Namesake*) is a Parsee name worth bold letters as well. This is her debut as director, and she's pretty much brought together the finest Parsee entertainers on one screen: from Mahabano Mody-Kotwal (the old Parsee lady from *Vagina Monologues*), right down to the finest Indian stand-up comedian Cyrus Broacha, even Rashid Irani, the delightfully genial film-critic, in a snap-shot part.

Clearly the cast is familiar with the casual eccentricities the community is known and loved for. They capture most. The intention is clear. The writing is crisp and cleanly cut. There is no room for excessive parody. The narrative around little Zizou, lost in the woods, and his rebellious, confident elder brother, is funny, at the same time, real and emotionally personal.

Very few films actually let you into bedrooms and living-rooms and regale you with nuances and atmosphere. Most Indian films don't even bear settings. This small-budget flick is by its publicity campaign, made by a Parsee with Parsee stars. It must find audiences among all with an ear for a sweet story.