

The Other Mumbai

An Acclaimed Screenwriter's Latest Film Takes on Indian Zoroastrianism

By Alexandra Viets | *The Wall Street Journal* | March 06th, 2009

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In the film "Little Zizou," 10-year-old Liana asks her friend Xerxes if he knows where their people, known as Parsis, come from. She then tells him how the Parsis, also called Zoroastrians, fled to India from Persia 900 years ago.



Liana Pressvala (Iyanah Bativala), left, and Xerxes Khodaiji (Jahan Bativala) on the beach

"They escaped in a small boat because Persia was invaded by the Arabs," Liana says, "And after terrible storms and much hardship, they landed here."

"Here?" asks Xerxes, who has adopted the nickname "Little Zizou" after his hero, French soccer star Zinedine Zidane. "Here," Liana confirms,

gesturing toward the city of Mumbai.

The city and its Parsis are well known to Sooni Taraporevala, a 51-year-old Zoroastrian who was born and bred in a Mumbai Parsi enclave. The acclaimed screenwriter, whose credits include "Salaam Bombay," "Mississippi Masala" and "The Namesake" (all of which were directed by Ms. Taraporevala's college friend Mira Nair), has spent her 20-year career writing stories about other cultures or other places: street children in Mumbai, African-Americans in Mississippi and Indians living outside India.

With "Little Zizou," she writes about her own people. The movie, her directoral debut, opens in theaters across India this month after screenings last autumn at film festivals in New York, Washington, D.C., India and Singapore.



Director Sooni Taraporevala, middle, on the set

"I'd like the world to finally know what a Parsi is," Ms. Taraporevala says.

There was a time when the number of Parsis -- followers of the 6th century B.C. Iranian prophet Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra) -- reached into the millions. The monotheistic faith centers on a

supreme god who presides over seven creations: the sky, waters, earth, plants, cattle, man and fire. Man's spiritual purpose is to preserve these creations.

After the Arab invasion of Iran in the 7th century, many Zoroastrians fled to India to escape religious persecution. Because the religion doesn't seek converts, says Ms. Taraporevala, only 250,000 Parsis are left in the world today; 50,000 live in Mumbai, with the rest scattered across the globe.

Some Parsis are world-famous -- conductor Zubin Mehta, the late rock star Freddie Mercury and India's steelmaking Tata family, to name a few. But Zoroastrianism remains a mystery to many in some corners of the world.

"'Zorro who?' people would ask me in America," says Ms. Taraporevala.

The screenwriter-director was raised in "Cozy Building," one of Mumbai's Parsi apartment blocks, where her parents and uncles still live and where much of "Little Zizou" was filmed. She grew up as an only child in a large extended family, surrounded by relatives.



The tango-dancing newspaper man, Boman Pressvala (Boman Irani)

Though she left India for many years -- for a stint while she studied in the U.S. in the late 1970s and early 1980s and another three years in Los Angeles in the late '80s -- she now lives in Mumbai with her husband, a dental surgeon, and two children. Yet she finds herself so inspired by the wealth of stories she heard growing up that she still writes in the

Cozy Building room on Sleater Road that once belonged to her great-uncle. There, she can still "hear his voice" she says, and feel connected to her past.

A respect for her heritage is what led Ms. Taraporevala, also a photographer, to put together the book "Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India, a Photographic Journey" in 2000. It is a visual study of Parsi culture. In the book's preface, Ms. Taraporevala describes the genesis of the book as a childhood need to hold on tight to what is precious and not allow it to disappear. She writes, "Photographs freeze time and survive death."

Ms. Taraporevala met Mira Nair as a sophomore at Harvard University in 1976. "What drew me to Mira was that she was everything I was not. She was confident and mature and swept through Harvard like a typhoon," says Ms. Taraporevala.

On a whim, and partly because of Ms. Nair, she took a film course at Harvard and got hooked. After graduating in 1980, Ms. Taraporevala tossed aside her plan to become a lawyer and enrolled in New York University's cinema-studies program, where she earned a master's degree. In time, she returned to Mumbai and began to hone her skills as a full-time photographer.

In 1986, Ms. Nair, who had made several documentary films in the meantime, proposed they work together on a project. "We traveled around together, researching a couple of stories, and then I suggested (we work on) an idea that Mira had talked about years ago on street children," says Ms. Taraporevala.

The result, "Salaam Bombay!" was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film. It was Ms. Taraporevala's first screenplay and it launched her career as a screenwriter. Since then, she has written six movie scripts, often working with Ms. Nair, tackling issues of identity in the Indian diaspora.

Only one of those movies -- "Such a Long Journey," an adaptation of a novel by Parsi writer Rohinton Mistry -- touched on the Parsi community. The story, set in Mumbai during the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, chronicles the social fabric of the Parsi community in a corruption-filled city on the verge of modernization. It focused on an enclosed world of Parsis.

Ms. Taraporevala's "Little Zizou," on the other hand, portrays the broader Parsi community and weighs in on religious fundamentalism and reform -- but it's a comedy, believe it or not.

In "Little Zizou," the antics of two young brothers bring some levity to a movie about a detached father -- a bullying, self-proclaimed protector of the Parsi faith -- and his run-ins with his archenemy, a liberal-leaning journalist.



Art Khodaiji (Imaad Shah) talks to Xerxes.

Xerxes (played by Jahan Bativala) is a 10-year-old soccer-crazed Parsi boy who dreams that his dead mother will bring Zinedine Zidane to Mumbai. Xerxes's cartoon-drawing older brother Art (played by Imaad Shah) spends his days trying to reactivate the flight simulator for a jumbo jet in the hopes of getting to fly. And all the while, as the boys pursue their dreams, they try to avoid their father, Cyrus II

Khodaiji (played by Sohrab Ardeshir), a character dressed all in white, who espouses notions of racial supremacy as he takes money from unsuspecting believers. Ultimately, Khodaiji brings about his own downfall when a plan to destroy his rival, the fun-loving, tango-dancing newspaper man, Boman Pressvala, backfires. Abandoned by his followers and his own children, Khodaiji becomes a man with nowhere to go.

The issue of religious fundamentalism in the Parsi, Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities that make up Mumbai is all too familiar to Ms. Taraporevala.

"I see this happening around me across the board with every religion, including my own," says the director, who has witnessed countless attacks and bombings in the name of religion. She describes the trend of intolerance and zealotry as a "hijacking" of faith.

The idea for "Little Zizou," Ms. Taraporevala says, began in 2000 with a series of news reports about a mass conversion of Russian Muscovites to Zoroastrianism. After their initiation, photos of the new converts went viral on the Web: They were shown dressed in the sacred *kusti* (girdle) and *sudrah* (shirt).

The event created an outcry in the Indian Parsi community, which found the conversions disrespectful and unsanctioned, says Ms. Taraporevala. To make matters worse, a fringe group of conservative Parsis began to claim that the Russian converts might seize Indian Parsi assets. (Many Indian Parsis live in enclaves owned by Parsi charities. If the Russian Parsis came to town, the thinking went, they would also be eligible for any Parsi charitable funds.) "The hysteria and fear they generated was real," Ms. Taraporevala said.

She saw the backlash as a turning point for the Parsi community. At risk, Ms. Taraporevala says, were the tolerant qualities that helped its culture survive in diaspora. Our "ancestors were open to change," the screenwriter-director says. "If they hadn't been we'd still be farmers and weavers in Gujarat," the Indian state.

The event forced Ms. Taraporevala to re-examine her own thoughts about what it means to be a Parsi in the 21st century. Five years later, she put her thoughts into a screenplay. "In 2005...after two weeks on set in Calcutta where Mira (Nair) was filming 'The Namesake'...I had some time on my hands. I began writing for the first time for myself."

Ms. Taraporevala says the extremely personal nature of "Little Zizou" led her to want to direct the film (she also carries a producer credit). The character of the boy in the movie, Xerxes or Little Zizou, was based on her son. And her own children (both nonactors) star in the pivotal roles of Xerxes and Leila.

"Since this was a world I knew better than anybody else," she says, "I had the confidence that I could also direct this better than anybody else."

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