

WHEN ZIZOU MET ZIDANE

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Sooni Taraporevala's debut film saw her son idolising Zinedine Zidane. Now, almost a decade later, he meets the footballer. An elated mother recalls.

In 2005 when I wrote the film *Little Zizou*, my son Jahan who played the role was 11 years old. A footballer himself, he idolised the French team, especially Zinedine Zidane (nicknamed Zizou). After one epic inter-school tournament where Jahan's school team miraculously won (Bombay International School, while excellent, was too numerically tiny to support winning sports teams), I sent some photos to my friend, the designer Aurobind Patel. He wrote back "Little Zizou"—two words that instantly became the title of the film.



Top: Sooni Taraporevala's jahan, who played a Zidane Fan in her debut movie finally met his idol last week; (Above) A still from the movie *Little Zizou*

In the film Xerxes Khodaiji, truant chalta firta motherless child, has one enduring plea to his dead mother, who he believes is now an angel and can engineer miracles from up there; he wants her to bring Zizou to Bombay. He has cut out a newspaper clipping that shows Zidane in Bangladesh (he really did go there to support an NGO). "Bangladesh is so near.

Please, please, please bring Zizou to Bombay. I'll go to school; I'll even do my homework." His mother is not able to swing it; Zizou does not make a detour, leaves for Paris from Bangladesh, leaving Xerxes heartbroken. Not only does Zizou not come, but could that also mean that his mother is not an angel and there are no miracles? His mother proves herself in other ways, he believes in miracles again, but Zizou remains elusive.

Cut to 2016. I see hoardings everywhere in the city. Huge photos of the man I had been chasing in real life, my son in the film. For years, I had wanted to send "the greatest footballer in the world" our film, but never knew how to get past the gatekeepers. Now here he was. Coming to our doorstep as the brand ambassador for a building project.

From chasing Zidane, it was a chase to find the Kanakias who were bringing him here. After a fruitless asking around, good fortune smiled and thanks to a great many people's goodwill, I got through to Mr Kanakia and his super supportive executive assistant Tina. In the chaos of organising, she managed to send us tickets for the match and the gala dinner at the Dome, NSCI. But there were no promises of being able to meet Zidane. There had been a near stampede at the airport.

We set out for the match, Jahan and friends, my daughter Iyanah, who played Xerxes' bete noire in the film, and me with all cameras on the ready, batteries charged, an open DVD with the cover showing, another backup, just in case, in an envelope with a letter. He came and the crowd went wild. He didn't play. We watched Bhaichung Bhutia and the Indian team play a match. At halftime, a sporting Zidane kicked a few penalties, barefoot. They went in like easy bullets. The match resumed. Zizou has left the house. So have we. On the way out, I manage to make a reluctant Jahan pose for a couple of shots against a Zizou backdrop. One of Jahan's friends is going to Bandra and wants company. I forbid it — Jahan will never get back in time for the dinner. Grumble, grumble, grumble. He doesn't believe Zidane will be at the dinner. He's left to fly back for the UEFA match. Why does he have to wear a suit?

We return at 8pm suited, booted, cameras and DVD parcel on the ready again, this time with my husband Firdaus. His buddy Mihir got me my first introduction to Mr Kanakia; his uncle, Dr Rusi Soonawalla, one of Mumbai's finest and kindest doctors, clinched it. That evening Rusi uncle had given me Mrs Kanakia's number and asked me to call her. He had spoken to her.

We entered the dome; there were two sections, chairs at the back, a rope, and round tables in the front. We were early so we crossed the rope and seated ourselves at a table, unasked, Jahan still cynical and unbelieving, willing to take (but never really did) large bets that Zizou wouldn't show. I try calling Mrs Kanakia, no answer. And then yes, she picks up. Meet me at the entrance, she says. We do, she ushers us in with her, instructs the seating lady, which table to seat us at.

The event begins and Zidane enters in the flesh in Indian clothes. I exchange a ha-ha triumphant I-told-you-so glance with my cynical know-it-all son. Mrs Kanakia comes to our table, says just Jahan is to follow her. I quickly give him the DVD package. She seats him at their table. All three of us watch through other guests' heads, Jahan seated right behind Zidane. And then, we see the great Zidane lean over, shake Jahan's hand. He calls him out front, and we see their backs, their arms around each other, posing for photos.

The last line of the film is Xerxes Khodaiji saying confidently "And Zizou? I KNOW he'll come one day."

He did come. Miracles do happen. Jahan couldn't stop smiling.

Sooni Taraporevala is a photographer and filmmaker