

A Parsi state of mind

By Naomi Canton | *Hindustan Times* | March 04, 2009

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Her first film *Little Zizou* will be released on March 13. Fifty-two-year-old writer photographer Sooni Taraporevala speaks to **Naomi Canton** about her directorial debut.

Why have you written a comedy about two Parsi families with extremely opposite value systems living in contemporary Mumbai?

I'm a Parsi who grew up in that community. So, the story came from my own experiences. Though it's set in the Parsi world, I wanted it to reflect what's happening in communities and religions across the globe. The constant battle in those communities between the fundamentalists and liberals is what the story is about.

It's intended for any audience but I hope and pray Indians like it. It was a story I wanted to make and I set it in a world I know well. The Parsi community has not been exposed in films much. I've made sure my film has an authentic feel. The actors playing Parsis are mostly Parsis.

How come John Abraham ended up with a cameo?

Once you see the film you will know that for the lead, we needed a character much younger than John.. and someone not as gorgeously handsome as him. Zoya Akhtar helped me with the casting. It's a small budget film. Put it that way.. it's less than one tenth the budget of *Slumdog Millionaire*. It's cost us less than \$ 1 million.

You have written much acclaimed screenplays like *The Namesake* and *Salaam Bombay*. Why such a low profile film then?

What do you mean by low profile? When you direct your first film, you don't start off with the highest of profiles. If people like it, then it takes off and things happen. How has *Little Zizou* been received at film festivals across the world? We got the Time Warner Award for the Best Screenplay.. and I was adjudged Best Director in New York.

We also won the Best Producer award in Singapore. Your son, Jahan Batlivala, is acting as Xerxes, the 11-year-old soccer-crazy son. And your daughter Lyanah Batlivala is Liana, the daughter of the other Parsi family.

What made you cast your own children?

Neither Jahan nor Lyanah are actors. I wrote several roles with specific actors in mind. Similarly, I wrote the roles for my kids. They were tailor-made for them. I have always been inspired by what they do and say. And that's how these roles came about. I made an agreement with Firdaus, my husband, that this would be their first and last film until they grew up. *Little Zizou* is a one off experience for them. It's a family and friends' film in several ways.

How was the experience of directing your own children?

I didn't have any problems directing my kids — it was the easiest part of the whole process. (Laughs) Jahan says that I was kinder to him on the sets than at home. They improvised a lot and more than lived up to what I thought they were capable of.

You have written 20 screenplays but only six were made into movies. What happened to the rest?

You get commissioned to write scripts but sometimes, for some reason or the other, the film is not made. This is the only script I have written that was not commissioned. I had some time on my hands after *The Namesake* and I was tinkering with an idea I had nurtured for a while. I found I was really enjoying myself. That's how I got into this crazy world of Parsis.

Go on.

I wrote the original script in 10 days and then spent two years writing 17 drafts. I wrote with many actors and locations in mind. Eventually, I thought I was the best person to direct the film because it was a world I knew well. It was not a conscious career move.

But then I never wanted to be screenplay writer either. I just ended up doing that.. and I just ended up doing this. I don't know what will happen next. I never plan my life. But I enjoyed the experience and would like to direct again.

What were the highs?

Collaborating with some wonderfully talented people. I was a hands on director , involved with every department.. and that made a difference. For 20 years I had been in a relatively solitary profession, although as a writer, you take notes from a lot of people.. it's a collaborative effort. In fact, the hardest part was having to stick to a schedule. We had to shoot 170 scenes in 42 days, in the heat of Bombay's summer.

How difficult was it considering you've never trained as a director?

Not difficult. I've been on several sets.. I've been writing for 20 years.. and I've done still photography of films. So I was familiar with the narrative and the visual elements of filmmaking. The only thing I wasn't that familiar with was working with actors. For that I took advice from Mira (Nair).

What was the one advice she gave you?

She told me that actors were very special and in front of the camera they can be really vulnerable. It was important to make them feel, protected and cared for. I made my cast feel as comfortable as possible. Since I had written the script, I was open to improvisations. I think they enjoyed themselves and gave their best. I am not the kind of director who casts someone and then expects him to be different. Nor do I show actors what to do or how to do it.

Would you say the story of *Slumdog Millionaire* is similar to your *Salaam Bombay*?

(Laughs) Someone wrote somewhere that *Slumdog..* is *Salaam Bombay* on speed. I think that summarises it best.

Would you like to write for Danny Boyle?

Sure, why not? Why have you always been associated with independent cinema? It's the kind of cinema I like watching. I think mainstream and independent cinema are finally coming together now. Every production house has an independent arm.

What's your next project?

I've been commissioned to adapt Mark Shand's *Travels On My Elephant* into an English film. I've not been asked to direct though.