

The Benign Fundamentalists

By Jerry Pinto | Man's World | March, 2009



THE BENIGN FUNDAMENTALISTS

A football-mad eight-year-old Parsi boy and a back story in which you are the greatest race ever. Sooni Taraporevala's first directorial attempt *Little Zizou* has its fair share of charm — this is never a problem if you get a bunch of Parsis together — and also takes an acerbic look at the community. By **Jerry Pinto**

YOU'D THINK THERE WERE more films and books about the Parsis than there are Parsis. When you have only 25,000 people left in a community that is highly educated, sophisticated and educated, the desire to record one's life and of the lives those around one becomes too much of a temptation to pass up.

So one approached *Little Zizou*, Sooni Taraporevala's first directorial attempt, with a certain measure of suspicion. One more *Khatta Meetha* we do not need. It is good, therefore, to report that this fine scriptwriter has turned out a film that has its fair share of charm — this is never a problem if you get a bunch of Parsis together — but it also takes an acerbic look at the community.

For when there are only 25,000 people left, there are three ways forward. You can get used to the idea that you're not going to last as a tribe and so lie down and metaphorically die. You can allow intermarriage and make sure that some people are still called Parsis in the future. Or you can turn into Aryan supremacists, invent a back story in which you are the greatest race ever, call everyone else 'parjaat', and generally pretend that there's something to your gene pool other than a greater tendency to inbreeding.

Little Zizou (Jehan Bativala) is a football-mad Parsi boy. He has an elder brother, a graphic artist, who is known as Artaxerxes (played with elegant restraint by Imaad Shah). Their mother is dead; their father, Cyrus II (Sorab Ardeshir, adequate), is a Parsi supremacist who thinks nothing of sending his minions out to terrorise old ladies who have married Italians and are living in accommodation meant for Parsis. Zizou takes refuge with the enemy, the family of Boman Presswala (Boman Irani having a blast), the editor of a newspaper that regularly ridicules Cyrus II.

And while a huge drama is played out on the macro-level, the film goes down to the eye-level of an eight-year-old who has lost his mother to death, his father to a following of admirers and has only an ersatz family in the Presswalas. To make matters worse, Artaxerxes is in love with the elder Presswala daughter and divides his time between escorting her to her dates and hanging out with a bunch of young men who want to rebuild a Boeing 747 cockpit. (This is a real-life story. Ask photographer Farrokh Chhothia, a frequent MW contributor.) The love he receives is resented deeply by the younger Presswala daughter Liana (Iyanah Bativala).

Taraporevala, first-time director of a film that has picked up some serious praise and won a couple of international awards and who has earlier written the screenplays for *Mississippi Masala*, *The Namesake* and Oscar-nominated *Salaam Bombay*, all directed by Mira Nair, knows she isn't going to be popular with certain sections of her community. She knows the Aryan supremacists are not about to take all that lying down. "I did set

out to upset them and every other supremacist from other communities/religions who hold similar views. While the details are peculiar to Parsis (all other fundamentalists want to convert to their cause — not shut them out) — the mentality is the same. There's us. And there's them. And never the twain shall meet. I was inspired by real life — as I always am — which I then fictionalise. The racist dialogue that Cyrus II spouts on stage was actually taken verbatim from the transcript of a meeting held to caution the flock about the invasion of the Russians and Brazilians. In fact, the film was initially titled *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* My homage to that wonderful film — which actually is sort of like *Little Zizou*? A comedy about a serious issue — the cold war in this instance.

"The reason I could also make this a comedy is because as you well know — Parsis must have the most benign form of fundamentalism going. We are not issuing fatwas and burning buildings. Not yet at least! There still seems to be a spirit of 'We agree to disagree'.

"Many years ago I had attended a meeting at Birla auditorium where I was the only person who dissented about a very emotive issue. I thought I'd be lynched at the end of it. Instead, everybody calmly got up and went home peacefully to their dhansak." The Parsis, you have to love them.

What catalysed the transition from scriptwriter to director?

I wanted to be a 50-year-old debutante! But seriously — I've had an odd career as a screenwriter. *Little Zizou* was my first spec script. Somebody else had commissioned all the other scripts I wrote in the past 20 years. I've written for a wide variety of directors, producers, studios — of course, my main collaborator has always been Mira Nair. And there never was a good enough reason to say no to any of them. In 2005 after visiting *The Namesake* set in Kolkata, I was back home in Bombay with some time on my hands. I began writing, this time for myself. I had been vaguely keeping notes and collecting material for an idea I had. I started with a kernel of an idea, which grew as I went along. I finished the first draft in 10 days. I wrote with specific actors in mind, locations in mind. I was writing it like a director. Since it was a subject and a milieu that I felt I knew best — I also thought I'd be the best person to direct it. So that's how it happened. It wasn't a conscious career move. Having said that, I must also say I was getting a bit tired of screenwriting.

What were the major challenges of being the director?

The responsibility of so much money. Even though ours was a small budget — it's still more money than I've ever seen in my life! And then we were scheduled to shoot 170 scenes in 42 days on location in Bombay in the awesome heat of summer. For me, the biggest challenge was how to get what I wanted without compromise at the

same time sticking to the schedule. The only way I managed was thanks to my crew who were the best any film-maker could ever hope for.

Every night I would go home and watch the tapes from the video assist to see what we had shot, whether I had covered everything. The forward momentum of a film production on a tight schedule can be very nerve wracking. You either have it or you don't. There's no going back. And since I was often making on-the-spot changes — cutting, adding — it was crucial for me to reassess at the end of each day what I had.

I fell ill in the middle of the shoot. In retrospect I think it was probably stress related — caught a virus. My worst nightmare. I tried ignoring it — even wore a mask to work so as not to spread the

He was just that — at my expense!

But he was so right. On set they were my actors and I treated them like I did all my other actors — with love and patience. Not like a mom yelling and nagging and losing her shirt! So they had a ball on set. A kind mom and a kinder crew. My kids have always been more interested in seeing the behind-the-scenes footage than the actual film! They made their own films using the crew's cellphones — starring the crew — with human cranes who would pick them up. When their spirits would flag — especially Jahan's as he had many night shoots — my First AD Nitya Mehra would dispatch her assistants to play football with him.

One of the central relationships in the film is that of the two brothers, Artaxerxes and Zizou.



Taraporevala on the sets of *Little Zizou*

ON STAGE IN NY AT THE WALTER READE THEATRE SOMEONE ASKED JAHAN WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE DIRECTED BY HIS MOTHER. "IT WAS GREAT," HE REPLIED, "SHE WAS MUCH KINDER ON SET THAN SHE IS AT HOME."

virus — Boman said I was scaring him and to take it off! But then, when I started throwing up on set Dinaz Stafford, the producer, mercifully cancelled the shoot for the day. I was feeling terrible — not only from the virus but at the thought of what this had done to our schedule. I had just squandered a precious Boman day. Thankfully we were able to make up the lost day and Boman very sweetly rescheduled.

Was it easy to work with your own children as actors?

Working with my kids was the easiest part of the shoot for me. They were terrific and I speak as a director — not as a mom. Their roles were tailor-made based on what I had seen them do, heard them say, what I knew they were capable of doing. And they had lived with the script for two years — they knew it inside out. What really amazed me were their improvisations on set. On stage in NY at the Walter Reade Theatre someone asked Jahan what it was like to be directed by his mother. "It was great," he replied, "she was much kinder on set than she is at home." (I had told him to be forthcoming and funny with his answers.

How did you sculpt that?

I don't know where and how that came about. It's just one of those things that happened in the writing. I'm also very interested in sibling relationships — perhaps because I'm an only child. I used to make up stories when I was a kid about an elder sister in Poona — that my mother would have to endorse when my friend came over.

About Xerxes and Artaxerxes — they were both neglected and therefore could lead lives that were in a way a fantasy. No parental supervision. They both sublimated their situations — Xerxes with his faith in angelic moms, and Artaxerxes with his blog and drawings. And his unrequited love. And both of them hankering for and finding the family life they never had in their own house — in the home of their father's arch rival.

I did grow up with older cousins and I've always been familiar with the way older siblings treat the younger ones, casual bullying, teasing and non-verbal affection. And I'm also familiar with the younger siblings' ways of winding up the older one. So I put all these things into the relationship between the brothers.