

A Correct Heart

By Siddharth Dhanvant Shangvi | Elle Interview | February 2009

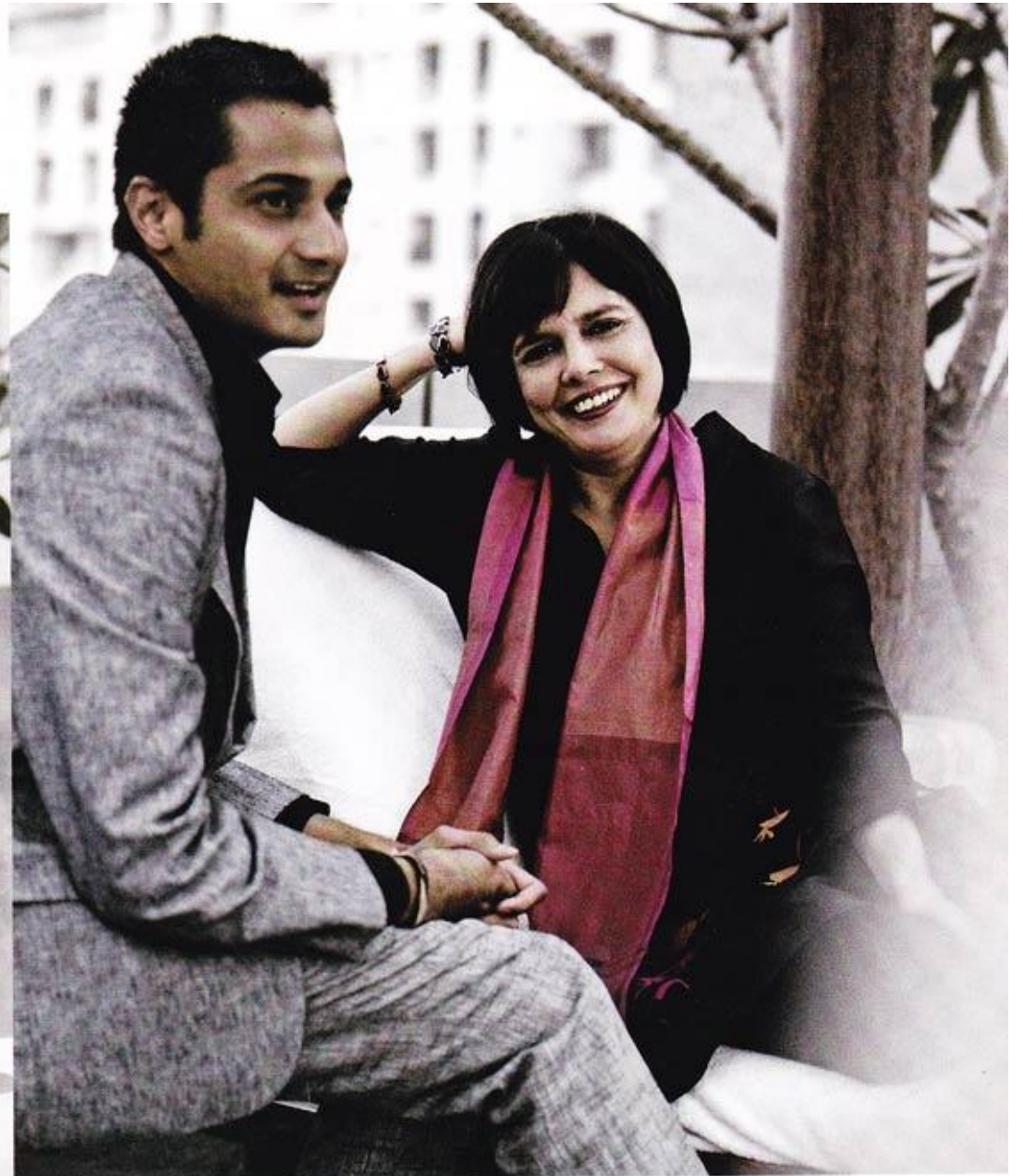
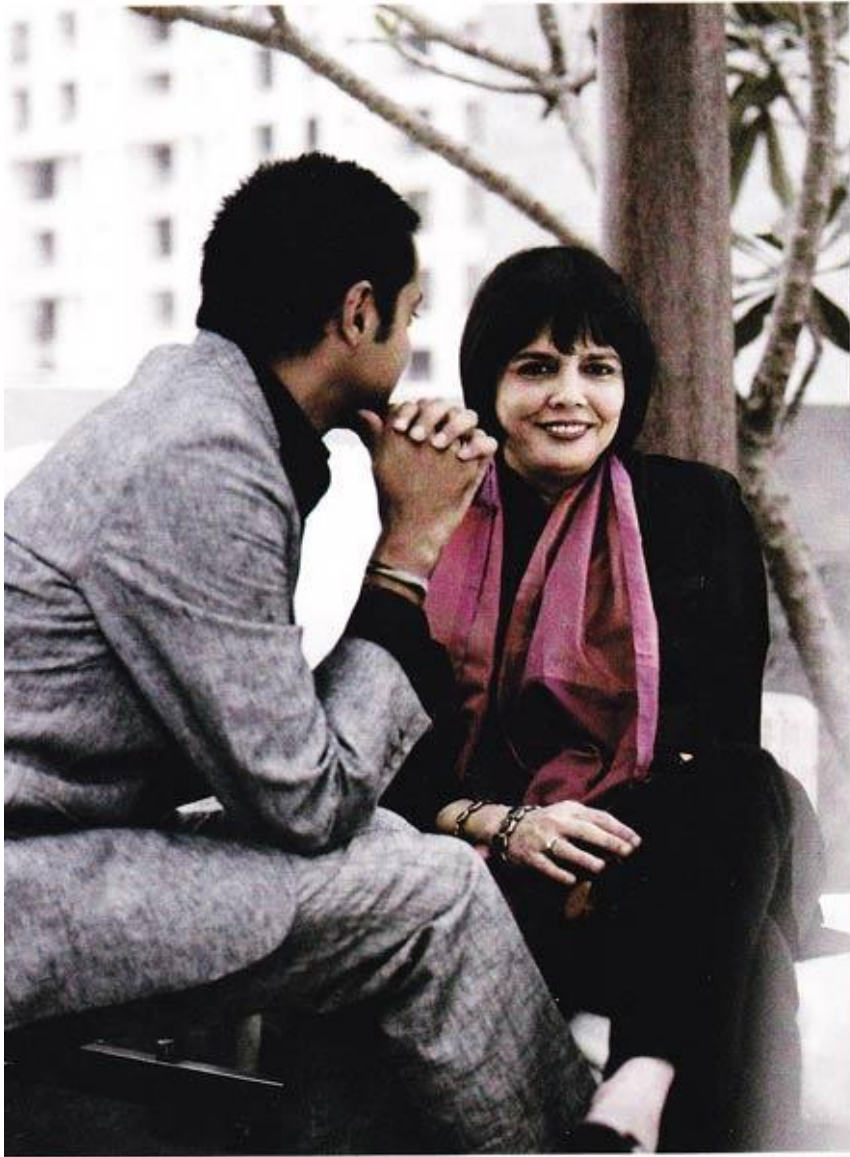


a correct heart

FILM-MAKER SOONI TARAPOREVALA'S GENIUS LIES IN HER EMPATHETIC INTELLIGENCE, SAYS AUTHOR SIDDHARTH DHANVANT SHANGHVI

PHOTOGRAPHER R BURMAN

at the start of Sooni Taraporevala's wry and elegant new film, *Little Zizou*, young Xerxes (Jahan Bativala) is on a bed, tracing the photograph of his dead mother. As Xerxes prays to his mother to bring the legendary footballer Zidane to Bombay, absurd longing gleams in his eyes. Against this quiet orphan's agony unravels neurotic fundamentalism: Xerxes's father, Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir), is a preacher of crude, epic dementia. Xerxes – and his brother, Art (Imaad Shah), a cartoonist – frequently flee their father's craziness to hide out at the home of Khodaiji's



arch rival, Boman Pressvala (Boman Irani), who publishes a community newspaper that takes pot shots at self-proclaimed messiahs, key amongst them Khodaiji. While football-obsessed Xerxes longs for his mother to make her existence manifest in his life, Art secretly aches with love for Pressvala's oldest daughter. A deceptively simple story about rivalry between two families revolves like a Rubik's cube, presenting dark squares of hilarity and loss, rage and gaiety which, the director ensures, never quite fit neatly together. An occasional flamboyant dash of magic realism, in the vein of Jeunet's *Amélie*, made me wonder if the director had fallen asleep reading Marquez and had been woken up to the laughter of Mel Brooks.

When I ask Sooni how the script came into being – not only has she directed *Little Zizou*, she has also written the script – she tells me that in 2005, after two weeks on the sets of *The Namesake* in Kolkata, she finally had some time on her hands. She started tinkering with ideas, then began work on the script, the first draft of which she finished in 10 days. Then, she spent the next two years on a further 16 drafts.

"At its core, *Little Zizou* is a film about love." Sooni, 52, has perfect skin, mindful eyes, and

cheekbones of devastating loveliness. She leans forward to add, "And faith. And hope. About fake religiosity versus true spirituality. About childhood, and following your dreams no matter how crazy they may be – it's about the fun and heartache of life. And it's about the city I grew up in that I still love madly, truly, deeply – it's about my Bombay."

The film belongs to two actors. Boman Irani, as Boman Pressvala, sparkles: Sometimes an ember, other times a comet, demonstrating the various ways of irradiating the screen with presence and absence, a kind of artistic coruscation that left me breathless. "I think greatness in any artistic field has to do with ease and simplicity and effortlessness – even if it's not easy, it looks easy. Boman is that kind of actor," Sooni says. "He brought so much to a role that was the most underwritten in the script. Good people are never as interesting as wicked ones. But he managed to make Boman Pressvala lovable and fun without making him into a giant bore. I gave him certain tools and, boy, did he run with them."

As we discuss the work of the other actors – including a cameo by John Abraham – and Sooni shares an insightful or poignant comment about her crew, I tell her that part of Imaad Shah's job was to bring to the film a young man's awkward engagement with love's solitude; he does this with the incandescent brilliance of a lit joint, gradually infusing the film with a kind of crepuscular intoxication. Imaad's glorious uncertainty – perhaps the consequence of someone who is so comfortable in his own skin he can pretend not to be – reminded me of Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (which Smith later disparaged with the typically brazen humility of the insuperable: "The literary equivalent of a hyperactive,



ginger-haired tap-dancing 10-year-old"). On a performance scale, I was frequently reminded of Imaad's contemporary, Michael Cera, the Canadian actor of *Juno* and *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*. Both boys offer the same sincerity and awkwardness, the same Pinterian pauses and a calculated drizzle of brooding words.

Sooni says her connection with Imaad goes back a long way: In 1987, she was a still photographer on the film, *A Perfect Murder*, where she photographed Imaad's debut. His parents, actors Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak, were playing Inspector and Mrs Ghote in the film; and Imaad played the three-month-old baby Ghote. "Twenty-one years later, he was in my debut film! I love that circle of life," she says, beaming. "Imaad, in real life, is actually very much like the character he plays; not in his love life at all, but in his quiet presence. He doesn't say much, and when he does it's always something intelligent. He was very quick to understand his character as well as the larger story and he was an absolute dream to work with. I hope we can do this again sometime before this ancient aunty hangs up her directing boots!"

“ I SEE LITTLE ZIZOU NOT AS A 'PARSI' FILM, BUT AS A FILM THAT DEALS WITH THE NECESSITY OF LOVE IN THE TIMES OF DANGER ”

Sooni has been one of the most expert and detached documentors of Zoroastrians, and her book, *Parsis: A Photographic Journey* (Good Books, 2000) is considered "an invaluable record", not just by Rohinton Mistry but by the Parsi community the world over. However, Sooni's fierce love for the community and her inspired concern for the tribulations it currently faces – dwindling numbers; a deep-rooted resistance to racial cross-pollination – inform but do not confine the scope of her film. "While *Little Zizou* does confront the key issues faced by the Parsis in India, I would hope that these issues have resonance in the wider world. What we face as Parsis is a microcosm of what is happening in other communities – namely the tussle between the forces of fundamentalism and tolerance for the soul of the ordinary human being. I saw this struggle happening everywhere; it's one of the scourges of our so called 'modern' world." She clears her throat. "I see *Little Zizou* not as a 'Parsi' film, but as a film that deals with the necessity of love in the times of danger. If we don't start loving each other, we will surely self-destruct. I wonder if this is a female perspective; some people have told me that it is. Perhaps because only a woman would be naive enough to hope for love in our testosterone-filled world?"

But Sooni is not to be the only Indian woman on the giant cinematic ship of testosterone. On the global scene, Indian cinema finds itself more ably represented by women directors from India than men, most eminently, Deepa Mehta, Aparna Sen and, of course, Mira Nair, Sooni's artistic collaborator for 33 years.

"You must be heartened with the emerging presence of women directors out of India?" I ask her.

"I think women are natural directors," she says. "They know how to multi-task, they are good managers of people, they have emotional intelligence – which is crucial when you are working with so many people – and they are instinctive as well as creative. But, as I know from personal experience, what I was lacking until this late stage in my life was confidence. If we can find a way of instilling confidence in young girls, we might see more women stepping up to the plate to direct."

Sooni points out that 2009 is the year of debut women directors in India: Zoya Akhtar with *Luck By Chance*, Nandita Das with *Firaaq – In Such Times*; Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat*. Her eyes gleam with laughter before she adds, "There may be others I haven't heard of. It's only a matter of time. Watch out guys! Here comes the Behenji Brigade!"

After I watched *Little Zizou*, I felt it succeeded so brilliantly because it is the story of one boy looking for his mother: No matter how old we grow, a part of us will always be hunting for the one who was to grow us up. And no matter how our mothers have been – arch, compassionate, erratic, absent, or ridiculously tender – at some private point, we are all holding photographs, asking to be reminded that our mothers exist, as do we. □

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