

Ah, those Harvard days

By Roshmila Bhattacharya | Hindustan Times Café | March 15th, 2009

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Mira Nair and Sooni Taraporevala go down memory lane with Roshmila Bhattacharya

They met as undergraduates in the American university and forged a bond that has only grown stronger over the last quarter of a century. After penning several screenplays for Mira Nair, Sooni Taraporevala has just turned director with *Little Zizou* that Mira is presenting.

So Mira, what's the first take on *Little Zizou*?

Mira Nair (Smiling): It's a funny, charming unseen tale of warring families. Sooni has published a monumental book, *Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India—A Photographic Journey*, and the movie brings the 24-year labour of love to life. It's a portrait of her beloved Bombay.

Has the city changed much?

MN: The barber's shops and mom and pop stores that were scattered through the streets when we shot *Salaam Bombay* have made way for *tandoori* joints and beer bars. Sooni Taraporevala: But certain streets in Nana Chowk are completely unchanged.

Did *Slumdog Millionaire* remind either of you of *Salaam Bombay*?

MN: I liked the beginning. Loveleen (co-director in *India* Loveleen Tandon) made sure the scenes shot in Bombay looked authentic. I'm pleased for *Slumdog*, but not thrilled to be called a slumdog.

And I marvel at the fact that 25 years ago, when we walked the red carpet at the Academy Awards, India was barely known. (Smiles) We were the mothers who opened the doors.

ST: I still prefer *Salaam Bombay* though. Mira will be re-releasing it in a couple of months.

Mira, what's your favourite moment in the film?

MN: There's this wonderful sequence where the two boys, Xerxes and Art, drop in on Boman Pressvala to find him and his whole family doing different kinds of Mambo. (Smiles) It's Fellini come down to Bombay.

ST: I grew up in an extended family, loving and informal. Dad was usually in his pyjamas. My family, including my dog and her puppies, are in the film.

MN: Mine was the *Monsoon Wedding* kind of family. Everyone worked hard and partied harder.

Were you impressed with Sooni's children, Jahan and Iyanah Battivala, who played Xerxes Khodaiji and Liana Pressvala respectively?

MN: To be honest, I wasn't sure initially if these kids whom I've seen grow up before my eyes from the time they were born, would be able to shoulder the heavy weight of lead roles on their still slender shoulders. But my *bachchas* have done well.

ST: I had full confidence in my children but I have to say they surpassed my expectations, slogging it out through the summer months of May and June.

My favourite moment is a scene between Xerxes and Liana on the beach, when they've just turned from foes to friends. He complains, "My father doesn't tell me anything." She responds with an,

"Oh!" I loved that "Oh". I know my children well and I know just how truthful that moment was.

MN: (Smiles) My husband (Mahmood Mamdani) who is an academician and far removed from films, came out of a screening and told Sooni, "Jahan is adorable but Iyanah will eat up your son."

ST: (Laughs) Jahan was a revelation too. There was this one scene when Xerxes was supposed to be completely devastated.

I was wondering how to get him into the mood when his father told him to imagine that his favourite football team had lost the premier league. And he was instantly shattered.

Did the movie bring you closer?

ST: (Laughs) Yeah, it was only after I stepped into her director's shoes that I realised what Mira really goes through.

MN: She says I'm an angel but I was more like her chief sidekick.

Didn't you ever fight, over the editing may be?

ST: (Chuckles) When I thought the movie was done, I showed it to Mira and she was like, "Darling, you're not done yet."

MN: Well, it needed more shaping. An ensemble cast film is like a see saw. It's all about balance.

Did *Little Zizou* bring back memories of the Harvard days?

MN: Not really but I remember we were these two young scholarship students at Harvard, slogging 20 hours a day. I had landed a job as a projectionist and Sooni was the skinniest security guard I had ever met.

ST: One day, she was running Satyajit Ray's *Kanchanjunga* at a film society screening. I dropped by to find her knee deep in film reel.

MN: I didn't know what to do after putting the reel up so I just let the film unspool around us. It crept up our ankles, knees and by the time the film ended, we were waist deep in *Kanchanjunga*. I wondered what Manikda (Satyajit Ray) would have said if he had seen us. He certainly wouldn't have been amused! Maybe we should think of making a film on the Harvard days next.

Right now you're working on a Hollywood adaptation of *Munnabhai MBBS*, *Gangsta MD*, and I'm told you're not too happy with what your screenwriters have come up with. Will you enlist Sooni's help?

MN: Why didn't I think about it before? She's written beautiful

screenplays for me.. *Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*, *My Own Country* and more recently *The Namesake*.

Sooni, can you go back to writing?

ST: I could provided I could get away from all those Hollywood eyes peering over my shoulder and asking for a rewrite. After 25 years, I'm fed up of the script 'development' hell.

MN: I never put you through that, ever.

ST: Direction is more fun even though you're on the hot seat.

Is *Shantaram* still on?

MN: I hope so. The Writers Guild strike couldn't have come at a worse time. Johnny Depp now has been snapped up for the next two years.

Don't look so sad. You have *Amelia*, a bio-pic on the life of Amelia Earhart, the first aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic coming up..

ST: It's a wonderful film. My husband is a keen aviator and hard to please. But even he admitted that Mira had got it absolutely right.

How has the friendship flourished over 33 years despite the cross continental divide?

ST: You can stay in touch through emails. And we speak to each other a couple of times a month.

MN: A year from now, when my son goes to college, I'll be spending more time in India, with Sooni. May be we can then plan a sequel to *Little Zizou*.

PHOTO: SATISH BATE/HT

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