

## Being Parsi

By Shradha Sukumaran | Sunday Mid Day | March 15th, 2009



Boman Irani says *Little Zizou* is the story of any and every community, even though it's rooted in a Parsi Bombay

BY SHRADHA SUKUMARAN  
shradhas@mid-day.com

Xerxes, Boman, Artazerxes and Zenobia could be people straight from your neighbourhood Parsi colony with quaint houses, with the smells of mutton *dhansak* drifting by. Yet here, these names belong to characters from Sooni Taraporevala's new film *Little Zizou*. Boman Irani, also a Parsi and an actor in *Little Zizou*, reveals, "In many ways, yes, it was easier to identify with this role. But *Little Zizou* is not just about my community; it's a story from every community. It's a statement on the world scenario. It shows what happens when you use religion and go into a rabid state. Sooni has placed it here because she understands this world best."

That's true. Sooni the scriptwriter has collaborated with Mira Nair on films like *Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake*. Sooni the photographer has chronicled her community, Mumbai's intrinsic Parsis, in a gorgeous coffee table book that has gone into a second edition. Boman, himself a recognised photographer, is all praise for Sooni's book. "I cut the ribbon for the book's reissue and feel it's a great gift to give anyone. Sooni has put Parsis out there for the world to see. She's a fabulous photographer, but it's more than framing and light there. In the images, you see her deep deep love for the community, her forefathers, the walls, the furniture. It is an essay on who she is and what she loves."

## CYRUS AND ZIZOU

Sooni now turns director with *Little Zizou*, the story of motherless boy and football fanatic Zizou, who stands up to a bully. In it, Boman plays Boman Presswala, a publisher of a community paper that stands up to rabid fundamentalist and Zizou's father (Sohrab Ardeshir).

"My community is very dear to me and all that it represents," explains Boman, "but it is a genuine, honest film and I hope it entertains. If it influences anyone, it's a bonus."

Boman has played a Parsi before — like his boorish turn in Homi Adajania's *Being Cyrus*. But that one, Boman points out, was a dark film with no redeeming characters, even though it was fun. *Little Zizou*, in comparison, is a "film of hope".

## MISTAKEN IDENTITIES

The actor is currently shooting in Hyderabad for Shyam Benegal's untitled film, where he has been holed up for the last two and a half months. He has missed the buzz *Little Zizou* is creating here, especially amongst his own community.

Indeed, how Boman first met Sooni is a delightful anecdote. After watching his performance in *I'm Not Bajirao* as an 80-year-old Parsi eight years ago, Sooni called up to meet Boman for a role in *Such A Long Journey*, that she was then slated to direct. "When she said, 'Sooni Taraporevala', I heard it as Sunita. So she sees me and says, 'You're not old.' I was 35 then. And I say, 'Hi Sunita.'"

## MERA DOST PARSI

Even though Sooni didn't end up directing *Such A Long Journey*, she wrote *Little Zizou* and roped Boman in. "I would have done it without reading the script," he confesses,

"Sooni is a darling. You do films for good, bad and whatever reasons. This came from an original head with a pure intent, so I was kicked."

The actor says he did find it easier to identify with the milieu. "When people say, 'Mera dost Parsi hai', I feel so proud. Parsis are open-minded, fun, not prudish, can crack jokes with their uncles and it's all done with love. I love that they don't stand on ceremony with their kids. I've been scolded by my kids more! Everyone should throw away rulebooks — they only restrict us."

## 'DON'T BE TOUCHY'

As with any community, Parsis deal with stereotypes too, even in films. If every Malayalee says 'simply' and every Gujarati is seen as a number-crunching stockbroker, then Parsis are often labeled 'mad Bawas'. Boman takes selective offence. "If anybody calls me that with affection, like a friend, I can take it. But if it's derogatory, I'd ignore it instead of jumping at his throat and looking like a 'mad Bawa'. That's what makes the world so rabid. Everyone's so touchy. I feel like saying, 'Stop it. Just enjoy yourselves.'"

Parsis, like any other community, have their share of radicals or purists. Among the upheld beliefs is that if a Parsi woman marries outside her community, her children aren't considered Parsi. Boman accepts it's a much larger debate, but states his stand. "God has a simple rulebook — I go by that. Society's rights and wrongs creep into this, but I don't agree with that. Don't complicate God's rulebook."

## NOT JUST A NUMBER

What's more, there's been endless deliberation over the diminishing number



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of Parsis. Extinct, dying — just some words the community has grown used to hearing about themselves. It's also felt that Parsis are on the fringes of society — their opinions seldom considered.

Boman feels the concern, but points out that the numbers don't matter. The actor says he's more interested in Parsis shining around the world. "We've been hovering around this number for years. But I think we make a noise in every field — there are so many eminent Parsis. We make ourselves felt. We fit into society, are a part of the fabric, have intertwined ourselves.

Everyone in Bombay has a Parsi friend, a connection. There are, what, 50,000-60,000 of us? And yet, everyone would have had a meal with a Parsi. That makes me proud."