

**'I'm allowed to make a film with a happy ending**By Shashidhar Nanjundalah | *The Indian EXPRESS - CHALO Mumbai* | November 28<sup>th</sup>, 200820 *The Indian EXPRESS*

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**'I'm allowed to make a film with a happy ending'**

Internationally acclaimed screenwriter SOONI TARAPOREVALA recently made her debut as a director with *Little Zizou*, which premiered at New York's Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council (MLAAC) film festival.

Through the narrative of a nine-year-old, the film portrays the Parsi community's anxiety over extinction and the insistence of fundamentalist forces within the community to retain its ethnic 'purity'. Taraporevala is best known as the screenwriter of *The Namesake*, *Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*, and *Such a Long Journey*.

Taraporevala's eyes light up with enthusiasm and pride as she chats with SHASHIDHAR NANJUNDAIAH about *Little Zizou* and her first time experience as a director.

**■ What compelled you to make this movie?**

I have been a scriptwriter for 20 years, in all those years, all my scripts have been commissioned. This was the first story I wrote for myself. And I had such a good time, I finished it in 10 days, after which it took 17 drafts over the next two years. But it's very much a film that sort of came from within. As I was writing it, I would meet people and situations that would work themselves into the script. So it was written with certain actors in mind, certain events that happened, and certain people I met.

**■ Can you give us an example?**

The flight simulator is one. My husband's friend has actually made one in a deserted ma-



Director- screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala

ternity home in Bombay. Then I met someone at a party whose face I really liked, and that is Tknow Francorsi, who plays Tino Fellini in the film. I had no idea whether he could act or not, and found out much later he could.

**■ Evidently all of them could act. Making the kids act may have been a challenge?**

Actually, that was the easiest part of making the film-because they were totally natural in front of the camera. They knew I didn't want any artifice or filmi nakhras. They got that. And they were so good at im-

provisation. In one scene, Jahan Bativala, who plays Xerxes Khodaiji, is picking his nose and sticks the snot to the refrigerator. That was so spontaneous.

**■ Were some of the scenes candid?**

My crew was most wonderful and made the kids feel at home. The kids loved not only what went on in front of the camera but also what went on behind the scenes. That also helped. They were all friends around the sets. Nothing was candid though. It was just that they all felt very comfortable in front of the camera.

**■ You seem most comfortable with the theme, since you're Parsi and familiar with the Bombay Parsi's dilemmas?**

Yes, I am comfortable with the milieu that I come from, because I know it very well. For me, though, I don't see it as a Parsi film alone. It is set among the Parsis, but these are themes and issues that exist in communities everywhere. It's an allegory. You have the crazy, lunatic fundamentalist, and you have people who stand up and speak up for what they think is right.

**■ How did the milieu fit into the narrative?**

I can give you a specific examples I go to Udawada very often. I used to take walks on the beach and stay at the Majestic Hotel in its heyday. I had no idea that the hotel would become so decrepit. I decided that if I ever made a film, I would find a way to use

this as a location.

**■ How do you weave characters into the script? The dialogue sounds casual and real, so was this a loosely scripted film?**

In terms of scripting, for example, Boman Irani's role was the most under-written. He brought in a lot of nuance and texture, a whole of lot of subtext. The film was tightly scripted. The trick is to write a tight script, and then give your actors freedom. As a writer-director, you can do what you want with the script. I gave the actors the freedom to improvise, consequently the dialogues have a very casual feel.

**■ It's a child's narrative, isn't it? For example, his father is shown as this grotesque and burlesque, comic-book-like character.**

Yes, it is. The first time Xerxes is shown in front of his father, there is a comic-book effect to the scene with an exaggerated figure of his father looking down at him. Xerxes tells a story from his brother's comic book. I also felt that if a character like Sohrab's (Ardeshir, who plays Xerxes's father) was not portrayed in a comic-book style, with such a heavy theme, he would have become too heavy and demonic. This film is not about that. It's a feel-good movie, and for once in my life, I think I am allowed to make a film with a happy ending!

**■ Who's your audience for this film?**

The world!