

Mom calls the shots

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Taraporevala who directed her kids in first movie, will let them choose career once they're 18

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Last week, I met Sooni Taraporevala for coffee in the Union Square Park in Manhattan. It was a chilly, but sunny morning. "It's like being in the Delhi sun during winters," Taraporevala, the lifelong Mumbaier, said.

She was in New York for the world premiere of her first directorial venture — *Little Zizou*, a madly funny and exhilarating film, inspired by the energy of Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*. The film has a warm heart and solid performances from an array of actors — Boman Irani, Sorab Ardeshir, Shernaz Patel, Zenobia Shroff, Immaduddin Shah, Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal and John Abraham in a special guest appearance.

In the center of the film are two delightful performances by Taraporevala's own children — 13-year-old Jahan Bativala, playing the lead role of Xerxes or *Little Zizou* and his 11-year-old sister Iyanah, as his neighbour and friend. *Little Zizou* is produced by Dinaz Stafford, who has been friends with Taraporevala since the time the two were young, attending ballet classes in Mumbai.

Little Zizou and Taraporevala received



Sooni Taraporevala directing Jahan, her son, in *Little Zizou*

two awards at New York's Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council (MIAAC) film festival — for the best screenplay and the best director. The film had two sold out performances, attended by several New York celebrities, including Salman Rushdie, Suketu Mehta, Madhur Jaffrey and Taraporevala's friend from the time she attended Harvard University — Mira Nair, who also lends her name as 'presenting' the film.

Taraporevala wrote *Little Zizou* in 2005 — her first non-commissioned project. "I was just reacting to all the crazy stuff that was going on in the name of religion," she said. "Whichever religion you look at has its specific fringe and I just felt that Parsis were also jumping on to the bandwagon. I don't think traditionally Parsis have been like that. With the current state of affairs, this is gaining legitimacy. Where before

you may hesitate to speak in a certain way, now it is no holds bar."

Although Taraporevala found the task of directing her first film somewhat daunting (the night before the first day shoot she felt as if she was ready to appear for her ISC examinations), she surrounded herself with friends and family and project became a lot smoother. A large section of the film is shot in the street where Taraporevala grew up. Her parents still live in the neighbourhood. Her husband Dr Firdaus Bativala makes a small appearance, and even the family dogs and a set of new-born puppies are in the film.

Taraporevala knew from the beginning that the film would center on Jahan's character and that Iyanah would play a significant role in it. "They had been reading the pages and by the time we

had financing, they were already a bit tired of it," she says with a laugh. "I kept showing them Iranian films and what I thought was good acting. They also kid around and joke about really bad acting when they see it. They rose to the occasion. They improvised so much. My jaw dropped a couple of times when they came up with things that I hadn't written."

But Taraporevala also made a deal with her husband. *Little Zizou* will be Jahan's and Iyanah's only film, until they turn 18 and then make their own choices.

"It was a unique experience, but it is not a career option for them as kids," she said. "My son doesn't want to act. It was very hard work for him. He is in a lot of scenes and there were long night shoots."

While Jahan has not caught the acting bug, he sure is enjoying being in the limelight. "On the (MIAAC) red carpet he was asked, how he felt and he said, 'You know, I never got so much attention before,'" Taraporevala recalls with a chuckle.

Little Zizou will be screened in the Indian Panorama section at the Goa film festival next week. Studio 18 is scheduled to release the film early next year. Meanwhile Taraporevala is completing a commissioned project — a script based on Mark Shand's book *Travels on My Elephant*.

