

The Creative Powerhouse

By Akanksha Gupta | Platform | March-April 2009



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introspective

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Sooni Taraporevala

A storyteller who has transcended many boundaries, Sooni Taraporevala has covered an array of subjects, delved into miscellaneous characters and explored varied genres. For someone who thought she had no ambition, Sooni found her voice and calling when she scripted Mira Nair's first film *Salaam Bombay!* Her cinematic debut won her the Lillian Gish Award and her second screenplay *Mississippi Masala*, won her the prestigious Golden Osella Award at *The Venice Film Festival*. Maintaining a will to experiment and soak herself in intense research and prolific scripts, films like *Such a Long Journey*, *My Own Country*, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar* and *The Namesake* followed, making her the leading voice of contemporary crossover Indian cinema.

Her creativity is not restricted to the world of words and she is known to narrate stories as effectively through her photography, a passion that has been with her since her college days at Harvard University. Over the years, her photography has been exhibited around the world including London's Tate Modern gallery and in 2000 she self-published her photo-book titled *PARSIS: The Zoroastrians of India: A Photographic Journey*, the first visual documentation on the community, which is today a highly reviewed and much sought after coffee table book.

After penning scripts and capturing still life for 20 years, 2008 saw her in the director's seat with her debut film *Little Zizou*, which has begun the festival route and is fast picking up awards, praise and appreciation. In a candid interview this creative powerhouse gives us an insight into her life as writer, photographer and now filmmaker...



Film Skills from *Little Zizou*



What was it about photography and film that drew your attention, and how did you get involved in both?

Photography is a very in-the-moment thing, while writing is very different because you have to revisit, revise and reflect. So, at various times in my life I like doing one or the other, or both. Both allow me to enjoy the flexibility of life... My father was an amateur photographer and photography was something I just grew up with. I never did a formal course in photography, but while I was at *Harvard*, I did do the more independent courses on the subject. Film was another medium I was completely intrigued by, so I also attended some courses in filmmaking, which concentrated on film criticism and theory. After graduating from *Harvard* I enrolled in NYU and studied cinema more seriously, but my course made me realise that I wasn't cut out for the world of filmmaking. I was more comfortable being on my own with my camera rather than commanding troops, and I went into still photography.

So, when did you first realise you were a writer and how did screenplay writing happen?

I think I was in the fourth standard when I wrote my first story; it was from the viewpoint of the lone survivor of a nuclear holocaust, but that fact wasn't known until a sudden twist right in the end! Mira Nair was with me in *Harvard* and we had always wanted to work together, so I landed up writing my first script, *Salaam Bombay!* I had not studied script writing

and I am glad I didn't because everything I have read about writing a script is either too confusing or too formulated. My approach to screenwriting was more indirect, through literature and watching films. And when my first attempt at screenplay writing was a big success I found that I had a new career.

Your association with Mira Nair goes back a long way. What has this relationship meant to you?

Mira continues to inspire me, even after thirty long years of knowing each other. She is one of the most amazing people I have ever seen. Working with her is different because we are such close friends. While writing I keep sending her papers, which I don't do for anybody else. With other people I discuss, write, give them a draft, they comment and then I rewrite. I have grown with every film of mine. I think growth, however, is a question of age.

After 20 years as a scriptwriter what made you take the director's seat?

Earlier I didn't have the confidence or the personality to direct. Also, I never really wanted to; I guess I was happy as a writer and photographer. But, direction hasn't been a conscious career move. For the last two decades I have written on a wide variety of subjects, from street kids to people suffering from HIV/AIDS, to the Afro-Americans of Mississippi and brothels of Nevada. With



Little Zizou

Little Zizou is a comedy for all ages and audiences; about two battling Parsi families in Bombay. Little Zizou is a soccer-loving boy whose fervent wish is that his idol Zinedine Zidane visit Bombay. His older brother Art is a talented artist whose wild fantasies come to life in surprising ways. Their father, Khodajji, is a self-proclaimed protector-of-the-faith who thrives on attention (donations) of his hopeful believers. Art burns with unrequited love for his father's archrival Mr. Presswala's elder daughter. And to the extreme displeasure of the other daughter Liyana, Zizou adores the maternal Mrs. Presswala. But the real fireworks start when Presswala writes a scathing critique on Khodajji in his liberal community newsletter. The conflict leads to a tangled web of hilarious incidents and touching realisations and revelations. A film that comes straight from her heart, it is evidence of her prolific scriptwriting. However, it is Sooni's own children, Jahan and Liyana, who play Little Zizou and Liyana; who steal the show.



Little Zizou I return to my backyard. I wanted to talk about a global phenomenon that we're witnessing around the world — the tussle between the forces of fundamentalism or people who use fake religiosity for their own ends versus truly spiritual people who are not wearing their religion on their sleeves. But I didn't want to make a preachy film, or an overtly intense one either; so my take is light-hearted and softly mocks fundamentalism. While writing the script, I was doing it like a director, because I had certain actors and locations in mind. I knew exactly where I wanted it to go with it. It was my first baby in the sense that it was the first script I wrote for myself, so it was hard for me to give it to anyone else.

***Little Zizou* is an extremely different film in terms of treatment. What kind of an audience and reception did you have in mind while making this film?** All one hopes for when making a film, is for large amounts of people to watch it and enjoy it. It is not a conventional story. It goes from one feeling to another, it's funny but also sad in parts, and has a very vast canvas of characters as well. The audiences in India have changed a lot, and so far the youngsters seem to get it, and like it a lot. Today's generation is used to this kind of narrative because they're used to multi-tasking; you're on the phone, listening to music and checking facebook at the same time. They are used to

the kind of life where they are not just following one thing. But what was really amazing was the reaction of people in Rome — they weren't Indian; but they were laughing and picking up on the subtext and subtleties conveyed in the film. You feel like you have communicated well. I have always believed that one has to be local, in order to be global.

As a screenplay writer which film is closest to your heart and which the most challenging? My first, *Salaam Bombay!* and my latest film, *Little Zizou*. You are the freshest for your first and you don't know what the limits are, so you just plunge in. The magic created with the first of anything can never be replicated. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* has been the most challenging film for me. For one, the project took nine years! Also his followers are so devoted and love him so unconditionally and in such an educated way that they know everything that is there to know about him. So, the research had to be very concrete. He was such an amazing man; it was tough to cover all that ground in the space of a screenplay.

Where do you place yourself in the contemporary Indian film industry? Totally on the margins. I have always been at the margins and I am happy to be there!_