

The Serious Laugh Junkie

By Manjula Narayan | *Tehelka Magazine: Vol 6, Issue 9* | March 07th, 2009

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Sooni Taraporewala, whose *Little Zizou*, will be released on March 13, tells **MANJULA NARAYAN** that her film is a comedy about big issues

*When you meet Sooni Taraporewala (52), who scripted *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masala*, among other films, at her study-office in south Bombay, she is trying to be cool about the release of her first film as director. The space is full of sepia photographs of her mother's sisters as gentle-faced girls in ringlets and lacy dresses, film stills, pictures of Sooni's children Jahan and Iyanah Bativala, who play central characters in *Little Zizou*, quaint bric-a-brac and plenty of books. In between munching on Britannia biscuits dunked in chai, you learn about Sooni's motivations in taking up direction, the growth of the story, how her family views the project that has dominated their lives for two years and how her work always has a core of seriousness. Excerpts from an interview:*

How did you decide to move from scripting to making a film?

I've been a scriptwriter for 20 years. I started with *Salaam Bombay* and that was also totally by chance. In 2005, I was on the sets of Mira's (Nair) *The Namesake* in Kolkata. I came back and started with an idea and it grew. I found I had a script that I had written in 10 days, for the first time in 20 years, for myself. Because I wrote it with certain actors in mind, certain locations in mind, I thought that since this was a world that I really knew well, that I was confident I could direct it. That's how the journey of this film happened. It's kind of like a fairy story because I had no traumas making the film and I had no traumas financing it.

Would you say that *Little Zizou's* world is essentially your world?

It's my world in the sense that it's about a Bombay that I grew up in, that I still live in. Its characters are not based on people as such but, you know, as a creative person you get inspired by certain things... So in that way it's my world. But, of course, it's also fiction and though it's set in the Parsi community, I'm hoping that it has resonance in the outside world because it's very much inspired by what's happening in the world today, which is this tussle between people who use religion for their own ends and people who oppose that.

You've scripted so many films. Why didn't you take to direction earlier?

I was quite happy writing scripts and it was going well, so there was no reason for me to stop. Also, I don't think when I was younger I had the confidence. I thought that I didn't have the personality of a director because I thought you need the hustling, the aggression, etc. But I found out from making this film that you don't have to be that way. I was 50 when I made this film. There is so much riding on you as a director — so much money, so much responsibility, so much stress. I don't think that when I was younger I could have dealt with that.

How different is direction from scripting?

I don't think you can understand it till you've done it. The director is on the project from right in the beginning to right in the end. It's the director's headache, it's the director's baby. I appreciate directors a lot more after having directed my first film.

Was it difficult to direct the cast?

I had a lovely time with my cast. I had a huge ensemble cast. Of course, I took a lot of tips from Mira. One of the things she said to me really stuck: "Soonie, use whatever you enjoy seeing in an actor. If you enjoy it, the audience is going to enjoy it." I had written the script with a lot of actors in mind, so I actually wrote it for them — for Boman Irani, Sohrab Ardeshir, Shernaz Patel, Imaad Shah, Kunal Vijaykar, Cyrus Broacha, Mahabanoo Kotwal, Kurush Deboo...

You knew you wanted these people while you were writing it?

Yes, they are all in the film. I never cast against type, so I never cast someone who I would then have to show how to do a role. I always cast so that they were comfortable playing that role.

This film is unlike anything I've done before because it's a comedy. The closest I've come to a comedy earlier is *Mississippi Masala*, which is a comedy about a serious issue. This is even more so. It's a light hearted look at a serious issue and it helped that I had actors who are great at improvising. Everyone had fun making the film, and when people watch it that is conveyed. I have seen the film now with audiences in New York, Washington, Rome and in India, and everyone seems to have a rocking time watching it. That's the greatest thing about making this film — I've become a total laugh junkie.

What was it like to be directing your own children?

I wrote the roles for the kids and they were completely wonderful and they've charmed every audience that has seen the film. It was very much written with my kids' personalities in mind, with stuff I've seen them do.

Was the family always discussing the film?

They are pretty fed up of this film! Because I've been doing this since 2005, they've been through every stage of it. My son's grown during the film — he's got a little moustache and he's a teenager now. My daughter's also grown. Someone asked Jahan at a Q&A in New York, "What was it like being directed by your mother?" and he said, "It was very nice because she was much kinder on set than she is at home!" That got a huge laugh.

So does all this mean you going to direct a film again?

I had resolved not to, I thought very righteously that I'd do it when my kids grow up... Then my husband said, "Soonie, you're 52 years old. If you have a thought about doing this again, you better do it now!" So let's see (laughs). It certainly beats writing.

Was there was a lot of improvisation?

Making a film is totally about improvisation. You do shot breakdowns that get thrown out of the window as soon as you are on set. Everything is improvised and that's what I love about film; like photography it's very much in the moment. You're making snap decisions and changing things that can have far reaching consequences, but you keep moving forward. That adrenaline rush is really fun... and stressful.

Do you think there's a thread that runs across the projects that you do?

I guess it would be up to other people to see the thread. One thing I know is that, for some reason, I've never written a bad mother character. I was telling my mum that and that's a compliment to

her, actually. Every film that I have written has a certain issue at its heart, so I guess that's the thread. Even this one does even though it's disguised as a comedy. It's about tolerance and religious fundamentalism.

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