

From Salaam Bombay to Little Zizou

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She juggles many hats.

As a photographer, her work has been displayed around the world's top galleries, including London's Tate Modern.

As an author, she's written and shot for a coffee table book -- Parsis: the Zoroastrians of India -- A Photographic Journey -- that fellow Parsi and legendary conductor Zubin Mehta calls 'the finest documentation of the life and achievement of our community in 20th century India.'

And, for the last 20 years, **Sooni Taraporevala** has also been a screenwriter, writing landmark films like Salaam Bombay, Mississippi Masala, and, most recently, The Namesake.

Now, with Sooni readying for her first film, **Raja Sen** catches up with her at her Mumbai home, talking about Mira Nair, adapting a book you love, and her imminent directorial debut. Accompanied by snapshots from Sooni's on set experiences.

So the scriptwriter finally turns director. What's your film about?

Bombay. Mad, mad Bombay. It's got an ensemble cast of 34 actors, and the film is about following your dreams, no matter how crazy. We're going into production by the end of April, and having the film ready by the end of this year. It's a collaboration between Studio 18 and our very own production house -- with my partner Dinaz Stafford -- called Jigri Dost Productions.

And what genre would you say the film falls into? Do you have a name for it yet?

It's part drama, part fantasy, part fable. And it's called Little Zizou.

Like the footballer? Nice. So when you wrote this script, did you always envision directing it yourself? Or did you think about shopping for that later?

Actually, this is my first script in 20 years that hasn't been commissioned by anyone. I haven't taken on this project, I've written it myself. I wrote the first draft over 10 days in June 2005, and now I think it feels ready.

Is there a particular reason why you chose to do Little Zizou yourself instead of giving it to another director?

I think it's set in worlds that I feel only I know well.

Coming back to your current success, let's first talk about the director. Is it easy writing for Mira Nair?

It's a lot of fun. Mira and I know each other for over 30 years now. We went to college in America together, and obviously share a great kind of rapport. And as a writer, I'd say the best kind of experience is writing for a director like Mira, because we've reached a level now where we have become vision-compatible.

We know what we both want, which is fabulous.

How different is adapting a novel for the screen? For The Namesake, you had Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, Mira's distinct vision, and your own way to connect the dots. So how much of each did you follow?

I think what really helped this film was that I loved the book. I know Mira loves the book and I'm such a reader, and I don't think I'd adapt a book I don't feel strongly about. And because I like and respect the source material, I feel the need to be loyal to the book, to its spirit.

It's obviously necessary to change the book around quite a bit for the screen. Did Jhumpa come aboard at any point, as a consultant perhaps?

No, I think she was just done with it after finishing the novel. She left it in our hands. Now, the thing about adapting a novel is firstly that of length. It's a big novel, spanning a lot of time -- and

pages. Here, a lot has to be telescoped. Severely. We cut it down to a script of about 120 pages. And it isn't an editorial decision, it's dictated to us by the format we work in. You cannot film a book as it is.

And yes, there are some departures from the novel. (Tabu's character) Ashima's a singer in the movie, which she isn't in the book. And we've moved the location from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, because Mira wanted to contrast New York of the 1970s with Calcutta of the same period.

And you feel these alterations are fine, as long as they stay true to the film's spirit. But who gets to make that call?

It all depends on how good the book is. In this case, it's an excellent book and we really didn't want to change much. The Namesake had a massive captive audience before we even decided to work on making it a film, so we tried really hard not to disappoint them.

So how do all the raves feel, now that critics are hailing the film as being better than the book?

Fantastic! It's wonderful because Jhumpa has loved the film. And the international response has been exceptionally overwhelming. Someone told me that they queued up for hours in line in New York to watch The Namesake, and that's extremely touching. It's also the kind of film that tends to make most people very emotional.

What would you call the challenges specific to this adaptation?

Well, it's a very internal film. Also, it's not plot driven. Which are both things that make it very hard, in terms of narrative.

It's also, pardon the expression, 'a very Bengali book.' Did this distance you from the characters in any way?

True, it definitely is a very, very Bengali book, but it's one that has a tremendous worldwide audience. And the novel does a fantastic job in detailing the cultural nuances. The vital thing, I think, is that Mira and I connected with the emotional landscape. On both levels.

I connected with Gogol because I too studied in America, and, when I came back after 6 years, my parents didn't really recognise me. And I connected with the parents, because, well, I'm one myself now. It's a story that reaches out to all the generations, and I think this adaptation came at a time I was ready for it, when I could completely relate to all of the characters.

How did you like the performances in the film? Are there any actors who surprised you?

Tabu, Irrfan Khan, Penn. Really. All three of them are spectacular -- and they're all very difficult roles to get just right.

A longtime screenwriter now making her first movie, when do you still find the time for photography?

Oh, it's completely pushed to the back of the line. And very happily so. Because now I'm taking pictures only for myself. I'll always love photography, and I like the idea of doing it when I can.

Do you watch a lot of current Bollywood films? Are you in the loop, so to say?

I do, but I don't watch everything. I watch films that come heavily recommended by people I trust. I loved Lage Raho Munna Bhai and Eklavya. I really want to watch Honeymoon Travels Pvt Ltd. Oh, and Omkara was incredible.

A lot of current filmmakers see Bollywood right now at a point of flux. Multiplexes are making independent cinema feasible, a lot more avenues for funding have opened up...

Yes, it's a very exciting time to be in films, in India. You don't have to worry about filling up a large theatre, you don't have to 'commercialise' your film just to get it out and there a lot of interesting filmmakers doing exciting work.

I'm thrilled by people like Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar -- whenever she does get around to directing her film -- Raju Hirani and Vishal Bhardwaj.

Would you, given the chance, write for Bollywood directors?

Sure, if I felt I could contribute. But honestly, I'm not sure that I can. In fact, I'm not sure if I want to continue screenwriting at all. It's been a while, and you do come to a sort of saturation point.

Over 20 years, I've written 20 scripts out of which 6 have been made into movies, and each of those scripts had at least 3, 4 complete drafts. So, as you can imagine, that's a lot of drafts.

Right now I'm looking forward to making my own film, with dread and anticipation.

And as you mentioned earlier, you're doing this with a group of buddies. Tell us more about Jigri Dost Productions.

The name came from Mira. Dinaz Stafford, who's producing my film, is a director herself with films like Kisses On A Train and Still, The Children Are Here. The thing about Jigri Dost is that it's made up of several people who actually broke through with Salaam Bombay.

There's Nitin Desai, now the leading art director; Hasan Kutty, the continuity expert; Mulchand Dedhia, a superb gaffer; and Anil Tejani, director, resident guru, and, for Jigri Dost, a Consultant & Cheerleader, the man who told me I must make a film.

And all these people are tied together by Salaam Bombay. It was either their first film or the film they broke through with. And now we're all friends, making films together.

About that 1988 film, don't you think there's a tremendous chance you'll always be labelled as 'the woman who wrote Salaam Bombay?'

Yes, but it's a good label to have, isn't it?

That movie was a cultural phenomenon, and not just in terms of critics and commercial acclaim, but in terms of getting the issues the right kind of spotlight and raising awareness. I don't know if many people have actually watched Salaam Bombay, in the sense, at least not as many who have heard or read about the film.

It is an important film which had an impact, and I'm very proud of Salaam Bombay.