

ARAB FILM ON THE RISE? PATIENCE, PLEASE

A closer look at the players building the film market in the region

DOHA, QATAR - BY DAVID LEPEska

When he first read "South of the Heart," a little-known novel about the search for oil in Arabia, Tarak Ben Ammar fell fast in love, optioning the story straight away. Yet it wasn't until a serendipitous visit to the Gulf some 25 years later that everything fell into place.

"When I saw the desert of Qatar, I knew it was right," says the veteran Tunisian producer. Jean-Jacques Annaud soon signed on as director and the pic, now called "Black Gold", was a go. "You have to wait and see sometimes."

The same could be said of film in the Arab world. The opportunity is undoubtedly great - 350 million Arabs, two-thirds under 30 years of age, a growing middle class - and signs of progress are ubiquitous. But hopefuls and industry vets have learned that building a serious film industry in this region requires a great deal of patience.

Since its beginnings nearly a century ago, Arab film has been concentrated in Egypt, though smaller industries sprung up in Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Over the past decade wealthy Gulf nations have also thrown their hats into the ring.

But in recent years an explosion of piracy, the extended economic downturn, various forms of political instability and an era that often sees Arabs playing the bad guy have combined to make life difficult for the region's moviemakers. As industries in neighboring India, Turkey, and Iran have matured, Arab cinemas have been shuttered as many filmmakers have given up or moved away.

"We need to build a market for our stories and films in our own region," says Ben Ammar. "It's the most important thing we can do."

The construction of that market is well underway.

Among those leading the charge is Imagination. The \$1b firm, launched in 2008 by the government-run Abu Dhabi Media Company, spearheads the developing film industry in the UAE, and possibly the Gulf. The outfit has partnerships with a range of high-profile producers like Participant Media, National Geographic Films, Hyde Park Entertainment and Warner Bros and has helped produce the Bollywood hit "My Name is Khan", Doug Liman's "Fair Game", and Jodie Foster's "The Beaver", among others.

Imagination also focuses on local filmmaking and has set up an Arabic content division to develop stories from the rich Middle Eastern tradition. Imagination supports Emirati filmmakers such as Ali Mostafa, whose "City of Life" about Dubai, received wide release and positive reviews last year.

Last June, Imagination launched an online portal to discover local acting talent and cast several cast members of its first major feature, "Sea Shadow", via the site. The firm's new internship program helps young Emirati filmmakers develop their skills with hands-on experience. Late last year Hussein Shaheen, 29, spent a month on the set of Participant Media's "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel", starring Judi Dench and Tom Wilkinson and directed by "Shakespeare in Love" helmer John Madden.

Imagination is based at ADMc's twofour54 media and film compound along with a handful of other outfits. C Sky Pictures has been producing features and docs that aim to bridge the West-Islam divide for more than 15 years and has won awards at film fests in Chicago and Houston. Its latest production, "Tora Bora", has a budget of more than \$3m. Mahmoud Kaabour's Veritas Films produced the award-winning Grandma, A Thousand Times.

To help train local filmmakers, Abu Dhabi has set up

the New York Film Academy-backed Abu Dhabi Film School and put together a top-notch film program at the recently opened New York University Abu Dhabi. The annual Circle Conference, which takes place during the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, brings together hundreds of filmmakers, financiers, producers and executives to collaborate on future film projects. The Abu Dhabi Film Commission oversees year-round training workshops and hands out \$100,000 screenwriting grants and post-production funding.

helped a handful of young filmmakers script, shoot and edit 10-minute shorts, with workshops that included director Shekhar Kapur and producer Ted Hope (For more, see Qatar in Film story on page...).

Even ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia has inched forward, recently opening its first movie theater in more than 30 years, in Dammam. Now the country's handful of young filmmakers may be able to show their work to a local audience. Haifaa al-Mansour, for one, plans to start shooting her debut feature, a coming-of-age tale



Dubai has made great strides as well. Tecom Investments, controlled by the emirate's ruler, Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, is putting the finishing touches on Dubai Studio City, a 22 million square foot compound that includes production and post-production facilities, hundreds of film and media companies, broadcasters, commercial offices, and world-class sound stages as well as a film school.

The organizers of the Dubai International Film Festival helped Emirati filmmaker Abdulla Al Kaabi make "The Philosopher", a short starring Jean Reno. Co-produced by Oursinfilms' Paris and Dubai offices, the 200,000 Euro production was shot in Paris with experienced international producers like Bernard Grenet of "The Fifth Element".

"The Dubai International Film Festival is the reason behind this film," the 24-year-old Al Kaabi said at a November media briefing. "DIFF gave many talented nationals a window into the international film industry, and made us believe in ourselves as filmmakers and in the UAE as home to a viable film industry."

Though Egypt's industry has suffered, the Cairo International Film Festival this year launched a competition called Cairo Film Connection, which aims to help finance films originating in the Arab world. Ten scripts competed for a LE100,000 prize for pre-production, while two projects in post-production competed for additional funding for completion.

The Qatari government supports local film via the Doha Film Institute's focus on education. DFI last year

of a feisty Saudi girl's quest for a green bicycle, this year.

Jordan stands out among the rest, a result of foresight and happenstance. While scouting for locations for "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" near Petra in 1989, Steven Spielberg was taken up in a helicopter. His pilot happened to be Jordan's current leader, King Abdullah, then a prince. The two struck up a friendship and years later Spielberg helped set up the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts, in Aqaba.

Opened in Sept 2008, it is the first and only MFA accredited filmmaking program in the Arab region. Partnered with USC film school, RSICA has hired accomplished faculty like Baha Othman. The Amman native was part of the Oscar-winning sound team on "The Hurt Locker", which was shot in Jordan.

The institute graduated its first class last May. Over the next five years, the city of Aqaba will use input from 20th Century Fox and DreamWorks to build a hi-tech, 32,000-square-metre complex with two sound stages.

Some observers complain of a lack of regional collaboration, but that may also be changing. Doha-based Alnoor, which is producing a \$150m trilogy on the life of the Prophet Mohammed, recently partnered with the Turkish firm Calinos to produce a \$75m feature film and TV series about Mehmed II, a revered 15th century Ottoman sultan.

The Dubai film fest's new Dubai Film Market initiative aims to foster greater collaboration between Gulf, Arab and international financiers, producers and filmmakers.

DIFF has also partnered with the Lebanon-based Beirut DC, a promoter of regional filmmaking, to provide a \$10,000 incubating fund to Beirut DC's documentary course. And since its launch at the 2007 DIFF, the Dubai Film Connection has funded 26 Arab films, including Lebanese and Jordanian productions. Several have gone on to play at regional festivals.

DFI, meanwhile, helped finance Mahmoud Kaabour's film, "Grandma, A Thousand Times". The Doha Tribeca audience award winner, which was shot in Lebanon, produced in Abu Dhabi and partially funded by a Doha-based firm, is now talking with several distributors.

"A young talented filmmaker needing funding – a dire situation and a film that wasn't going to get finished," said DFI executive director Amanda Palmer. "This film represents what's happening all over the world – with that very small bit of money a film can be made that makes an impact."

And of course there's "Black Gold", with Qatari and Tunisian firms working together. "This is the first time I've ever produced with an Arab film company," says Ben Ammar.

But the most exciting collaboration may be "Shankaboot", a highly popular Beirut-set web series about a moped delivery worker named Suleiman. "Shankaboot" is produced by Lebanon's Batoota Films, with funding from the BBC World Service Trust, a non-profit organization, and the UK's Welded Tandem Picture Company.

"Shankaboot" won best web series at Geneva's Cinema Tous Ecrans festival in November and some 300,000 people have watched episodes on Youtube – a huge number considering Lebanon has a population of 4 million and the series is made in Arabic.

Each webisode is fast-paced, less than 5 minutes long and youth-oriented. Shows have addressed domestic worker abuse, drug use, and sex and relationships. The producers recently launched Shankactive, a portion of the show's website that includes blogs and viewer-generated videos and photos.

"Producers have been able to package this product and create content that actually resonates with their audience, both in Lebanon and to some extent internationally," says Mahyad Tousi, co-founder and president of BoomGen Studios in New York, who works regularly in the region. "That is a very healthy sign of industry moving forward, perhaps more than these festivals."

Yet many signs point in the opposite direction for regional film. Film industries in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon have festered in recent decades due to conflict and instability, while Syria has embraced television production. Ben Ammar says the number of movie theaters in Tunisia, his homeland, has fallen from 65 to three as more and more locals have taken to downloading new releases off the Internet. Apart from wealthy Gulf nations, which just recently began adding cinemas, most Arab countries have seen similar drops.

As a result, film production has dropped sharply, even in Egypt, the Hollywood of Arabia (as of 2008, Egypt had produced more than 2,600 feature films, while the second most prodigious Arab producer, Lebanon, made less than 200). Last December's Cairo film festival, for example, screened only three Egyptian films. The Mubarak government is considering a slew of anti-piracy measures and has stepped in to fund Egyptian filmmakers and producers.

"Piracy, this could be a killer for the future," admits Ben Ammar. Yet the entertainment and media market in the Arab region is set for 16.5 percent annual growth for the next five years, the world's highest, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers. So there are dollars to be made as wide swathes of society from Morocco to Sharjah become active consumers. The problem is that hubs like Cairo, Dubai and Beirut remain incapable of producing Hollywood-caliber features that will draw audiences away from big budget extravaganzas.

This is partially due to smaller budgets, but also because the region has few Hollywood-caliber

producers, filmmakers, cast and crew. "Standards are improving, but there is still quite a way to go with high-calibre developed infrastructure," says Tim Smythe of Filmworks Dubai, one of the region's leading producers, who worked on the recent "Mission Impossible 4" shoot in Dubai. "There needs to be a stream of productions to attract the people to the region, allowing them steady employment."

Michael McDonough is president and co-founder of Dubai Film Productions, a five-year-old multi-national firm with offices in Dubai, San Francisco and Los Angeles that aims to produce smaller budget films that foster understanding between the West and the Muslim world.

After several years in Dubai he recently returned to the States because none of DFP's handful of film projects garnered adequate funding. "The market to fund, produce, distribute and view these more positive stories is not yet there," says McDonough. "They can build Dubai Studio City and invite the international film industry to come to Dubai and set up shop...However, unless they support filmmaking, filmmakers won't come."

Even though Arab nations have been making films for decades, commercial filmmaking has long been criticized in certain circles as a sign of Westernization. And the conservative societies of the Gulf have historically had little cultural appreciation for film. That's starting to change, but private investment dollars are still hard to find.

The result is minimal risk-taking, a real problem when the margins are so slim. "In the Middle East, it is close to

"We need a CAA of the Arab world, to help actors," says Ben Ammar, who looked for Arab actors to fill other key roles but failed to find the necessary looks, talent and English language facility.

It's also a matter of economics. "This is a 40 million Euro feature, but it will likely only get 0.5 percent of its money from the Arab world in terms of box office grosses," says Ben Ammar. "Given that, the film has to appeal to audiences in Europe, Asia and America."

The Arab region has an estimated 800 screens, half of them in Egypt, so only films with budgets of up to \$2m have a decent chance of turning a profit. To break even, some producers have begun selling to satellite channels that specialize in features, such as Rotana and Melody Aflam.

With nearly 1000 Arab channels, television may offer a viable short-term alternative to help develop and nurture a young industry – particularly considering the popularity of series during Ramadan, when up to 25 million watch certain shows.

Smythe and McDonough have called for incentives for international filmmakers, such as the 20 to 40 percent rebates offered by Toronto, Australia, Poland and others. They also call for government-backed film funds for local filmmakers, such as those in France and Spain, which are funded by box office returns and broadcaster fees. These funds support local filmmakers with the goal of preserving and highlighting local culture and language, rather than profit.

"For even a limited growth it is imperative for young



impossible to get a return on investment if your budget for your film is over \$5m as there are just not enough screens to get released on," says Smythe. "Therefore unless you are planning on an international release – extremely difficult for any independent film and even more difficult for an Arabic language film – you cannot realistically approach investors and project a return on investment."

An additional problem is the dearth of Arab film stars outside Egypt. Consider "Black Gold". Produced by Quinta and DFI, the story focuses on an Arab prince and the discovery of oil in the Arabian desert in the 1930's. Its cast is led by British actor Mark Strong, the Spaniard Antonio Banderas and Indian former model Freida Pinto, of "Slumdog Millionaire" fame. The lead is played by up-and-comer Tahar Rahim, a French-Algerian and the lone Arab among the leads.

film makers to have access to funds that are made available to develop the industry," says Smythe. "It is also imperative to have attractive subsidies to attract international work."

The problem with international films – such as "Mission Impossible 4", which recently shot in Dubai – is that they often propagate negative Western stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, a practice that may have accelerated in the post-9/11 era. Thus, an additional benefit of productions like "Shankaboot" and "Black Gold" and institutes like RSICA and the Abu Dhabi Film School is that they can help destroy the view of Arabs as "belly-dancers, bombers or billionaires."

"If we do not invest in our culture," wonders Ben Ammar, "who will?"