

ABU DHABI READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP

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Rania Abouzeid

ABU DHABI // Fadel al Muhairi is busy scouring his hometown for locations for his first feature film, a social drama about a young man's quest to find his role in society.

Armed with a Dh90,000 (US\$24,500) grant from the Emirates Foundation, a joint private and public sector national endowment fund, the Emirati filmmaker believes that he is in the right place at the right time.

"We're opening a big door to cinema in this region," he said. Mr Muhairi, 28, is the type of cultural entrepreneur that Abu Dhabi, and the UAE in general, is heavily investing in as part of an ambitious plan to develop the nation's budding film industry.

The country is rapidly putting in place the infrastructure to become an entertainment hub in the Middle East. Both Dubai and Abu Dhabi host annual film festivals, drawing Hollywood box office stars such as George Clooney and Sharon Stone. In February the prestigious New York Film Academy (NYFA) opened a branch in Abu Dhabi, which now boasts 200 students, many of them Emiratis.

John Sammon, the director of NYFA's Abu Dhabi branch, said the academy expected to double that figure in two years and eventually to have a student body as large as its New York campus, which has 850 students.

"The New York Film Academy is approached by a different country every day to put down a campus," said Mr Sammon. "Here it made sense. We saw an emerging region for filmmaking and it was a good time for us to grow."

The UAE may not be the most obvious place to develop an international film industry. Both Lebanon and Egypt have a long history of movie and video production, as well as a pool of local talent and a wide variety of attractive locations. Jordan is also making a concerted push to attract foreign filmmakers through its Royal Film Commission project.

But the UAE has other draws, said Abdalla Bastaki, the director of the annual Emirates Film Competition. “Competitors don’t have the kind of budgets we have,” he said.

Hollywood heavyweights such as Warner Bros and Universal Studios have caught the wind of opportunity blowing through the country. In the past year several studios have signed multimillion-dollar deals in partnership with Emirati companies to build entertainment and filmmaking facilities in the UAE.

It is not just editing rooms and sound stages the studios are seeking. They are also looking at the billion-dollar market for movie studio-branded theme parks.

Tatweer, a member of Dubai Holding, will construct theme parks in Dubai based on the blockbuster Universal Studio and DreamWorks brands. Ruwaad Holdings will create a Paramount Pictures amusement park in the emirate at a cost of Dh9 billion, while Al Ahli Group is planning to open a themed complex in Dubai in 2011. It will bring to life a host of Nickelodeon characters as well as Marvel’s collection of superheroes, including Spiderman and X-Men.

In late March, the Abu Dhabi-based property developer, Sorouh, partnered with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, and the Jordanian multimedia and animation company, Rubicon, agreed to develop “a broad and varied entertainment platform” in the emirate, according to a joint press statement.

Sorouh declined to clarify the exact nature of the entertainment platform and how much the deal was worth.

The other major Hollywood collaboration in Abu Dhabi between the property developer Aldar, Warner Bros and the Abu Dhabi Media Company, will include a theme park, a hotel and a chain of multiplex cinemas. Abu Dhabi Media Company is the owner and publisher of The National newspaper.

The deal also includes a US\$1bn film financing fund, which will be split equally between making movies and developing video games.

The fund, a 50-50 venture, calls for the “development and production of mutually agreed upon, broad appeal films, with Warner Bros retaining worldwide distribution options/rights”, the three companies said in a statement.

Warner Bros will also collaborate with the Abu Dhabi Media Company to develop and produce Arabic films for Middle East distribution.

“Abu Dhabi presented us with such a rich, creatively rewarding opportunity that we couldn’t pass it up,” said Scott Rowe, a spokesman for Warner Bros in California.

Mr Rowe would not be drawn on the type of incentives the emirate offered the Hollywood studio, but Mr Bastaki, who is also a member of the Abu Dhabi Film Commission, said there were a number of enticements the UAE could extend to studios.

The state-run Abu Dhabi Film Commission, through the Abu Dhabi Film Fund, which it administers, would help to finance Hollywood blockbusters, said Mr Bastaki. The value of the fund has not been disclosed.

“We won’t pay more than half of the original budget, but we’re still working on the numbers,” he said. “We get a share of the revenue. All we want is our money back. We’re still working on whether there should be tax-free incentives ... we’re still scratching the surface.”

But the money does come with strings attached. Films have to promote Abu Dhabi, show the UAE “in a good light” and showcase

some aspect of the country's culture and heritage, Mr Bastaki said. Films dealing with politically charged issues or culturally sensitive topics, such as sex, may have to be averted if the big Hollywood studios are to get financiers in the Gulf to back their projects.

It is a line that Mr Rowe said his studio could live with. "We accept this as part of doing business on a global scale and view it as part of being a responsible business partner that is willing and dedicated to working with local industries and governments to further local cultures and nascent entertainment industries," he said.

In addition to joint ventures, the UAE wants to fund directors making commercially viable movies locally.

"We are trying to adopt the quality of foreign filmmaking and install it into developing our own infrastructure and cinema," Mr Bastaki said. "We want to build studios, editing laboratories, offer scholarships for study. We're even going to hand out equipment for free."

Dubai, meanwhile, has forged ahead with laying the groundwork for production and broadcast companies, as well as filmmakers, with yet another industry-themed zone.

Dubai Studio City is a sprawling, 22-million-square-foot area that will include 14 sound stages, a backlot for outdoor shooting, commercial offices and post-production studios, as well as pre-built studios and a business centre. More than Dh3bn has been earmarked for infrastructure development in Dubai Studio City this year – 18 boutique studios have already opened and work is continuing on the site.

"There is money, there is passion, a system for grants in place," said Mr Sammon. "But it takes more than a building to make a successful industry," he added. "They're going to need talent ... a grassroots surge of talent from the inside out. That's where we come in."

That is also where Mr Muhairi comes in.

He established his own production company, Tent Pictures, a few months ago and has just started shooting his first feature film. Although he does not expect to make any money on it, he said that was not the point.

“I’m very optimistic,” Mr Muhairi said. “My goal is to collaborate through my small company with Warner Bros, or whoever is coming, to produce something here. Five years from now, I’ll have something, a big film, because once you see it in your head, you’ll do it.”