

Abu Dhabi grows global film presence

Emirate invests big in media projects, partnerships

By ALI JAAFAR



MINARETS AND MARKETS: The traditional architecture of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque co-exists with Abu Dhabi's growing media businesses and infrastructure.

In the two years since Abu Dhabi announced its intention during the 2007 Cannes Film Festival to become a global film player, those ambitions have started to become a reality -- and a team is in place to turn the emirate into the regional production hub outlined in those initial blueprints.

Recent months have seen the high-profile appointments of former Tribeca exec director Peter Scarlet as the exec director of Abu Dhabi's Middle East Intl. Film Fest and David Shephard, previously a film commissioner at U.K. regional agency South West Screen, as head of the newly created Abu Dhabi Film Commission.

The org, which falls under the auspices of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, will nurture emerging film talent in the emirate and serve as the central conduit for Abu Dhabi's various film initiatives.

It will also take over running film financing and training program the Circle, a confab Oct. 9-11 set to run during Abu Dhabi's Middle East Intl. Film Festival. Circle will once again offer six Middle East filmmakers a shot at winning the \$100,000 Shasha screenwriting grant.

Last year's winner, Moroccan helmer Hicham Ayouch, subsequently inked a deal with Fox.

Third edition of the fest, which unspools Oct. 8-17, will still offer \$1 million in prize money. But Scarlet is keen to manage expectations. "We don't want people getting off the plane and expecting a pot of gold to be waiting for them," he says.

The tapping of Shepherd and Scarlet comes on the back of developments at the Abu Dhabi Media Co., which last September launched its \$1 billion film production arm Imagenation.

The deep-pocketed shingle has since inked separate \$250 million pacts with Jeff Skoll's Participant Media and Ashok Amritraj's Hyde Park Entertainment

Imagenation also has signed a \$100 million deal with National Geographic Films to develop, finance and produce 10-15 features in the \$5 million-\$60 million budget range over the next five years.

The company has likewise invested coin in Breck Eisner's "The Crazies" and Roger Kumble's "Furry Vengeance" for Participant; Peter Weir's "The Way Back" for National Geographic; and in a project for Hyde Park.

In July, the Abu Dhabi Media Co. will launch TV station National Geographic Arabia, the first free-to-air National Geographic-branded channel in the Middle East, and multilingual radio station Star FM.

"There's something about the city and the economy here in Abu Dhabi that lets you work and achieve things you couldn't elsewhere," says Imagenation topper Ed Borgerding.

Last October Abu Dhabi unveiled Twofour54, a multibillion-dollar hub for content creation across all media that is aiming to lay the building blocks for a sustainable film, TV and new-media industry in the Middle East.

The outfit's funding arm, Twofour54's ibtikar, has started a partnership with the U.K.'s 3Line Media to co-produce kids' skein "Diver Dan's Story Train" in both English and Arabic.

The unit will also develop and produce original stories from Arab authors for its local-language version rather than simply dubbing the episodes into Arabic. Its ventures plan offers between \$500,000 and \$5 million to media entrepreneurs and businesses in need of startup or early capital. Ibtikar also has launched a separate kids unit to develop and produce content for Middle Eastern tykes.

Twofour54 has inked partnerships with Arab shingles Rotana Studios, which is owned by Saudi billionaire maven Prince Al Waleed bin Talal, and Kuwaiti producer-filmmaker Walid Al-Awadi's C-Sky Pictures.

Rotana is prepping 12 feature-length TV pics, while al-Awadi is in post-production on a \$5 million, 30-episode TV skein titled "Tora Bora" about an elderly Arab couple who travel to Afghanistan in search of their son who has gone to fight with Al Qaeda. It is being edited in Twofour54's post facilities.

"Our main priority is to establish an Arabic content creation hub that will service this region and develop a talent pool in a center of excellence by Arabs for Arabs," says Twofour54 CEO Wayne Borg.

Twofour54's first production studios are set to become operational in August, along with its 22 post suites.

Progress has been slower at Imagenation. While the shingle is bearing the first fruit out of its clutch of deals with Participant, Hyde Park and National Geographic, no coin has yet to be invested in a Middle Eastern project. That has led some filmmakers in the region to question Imagenation's commitment to them.

That may change, however, following the news that Imagenation will partner with Abu Dhabi's film commission on the Circle confab, with this year's Shasha grant winner being offered a first-look deal with Imagenation to develop and produce the project.