



Fast-growing Middle East Film and TV Sector Seeks Global Markets

Hampered by a lack of funding and a comparative shortage of outlets, the burgeoning Middle East film and TV sector is looking to attract far greater international funding and wider distribution, while also seeking to woo global audiences.



The Worthy: Looking to find a global audience for Arab cinema.

Since its launch 2004, the *Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF)* has established itself as the largest such event in the Middle East and an unmissable networking platform for the region's filmmakers, producers and distributors. In addition to the festival proper, which screens all the latest Arabic-language cinema as well as a selection of films from the rest of the world, *DIFF* also hosts the region's leading industry event – the *Dubai Film Market (DFM)*.

With an agenda similar to the other major international film markets, *DFM* features *Dubai Film Connection (DFC)* – a co-production and financing market – video screenings, exhibition stands and a seminar programme. This year, it also introduced a sidebar on virtual reality (VR) filmmaking. On top of that, it oversees and administers the *Enjaaz* fund, which offers production and post-production financing for Arab-led film projects.

All of this activity is geared towards supporting the region's film industry – which continues to grow, albeit from a relatively small base – and its increasingly dynamic TV production sector. According to a presentation by *PWC*, the global management consultancy, on the first day of the event, the Middle East and North African (MENA)



region had a media market worth US\$26.4 billion in 2016. By 2020, it is expected to have grown by a further 7.4%, taking it to \$35bn. This makes it the second fastest growing media market in the world, behind Africa, but ahead of the Asia-Pacific region – although obviously growing from a much smaller base.

A large proportion of the region's media revenue comes from television advertising. The Middle East is home to a substantial number of strong pan-regional satellite broadcasters, including *MBC* and the *Rotana Group*, as well as several pay-TV networks, notably *OSN* and *Etisalat's IPTV* service. While these networks all currently broadcast a large amount of Western content, the *PWC* presentation highlighted the growing demand for Arabic-language films and television programming.

Underlining the significance of this trend, Jayant Bhargava, the Head of *PWC's* Middle East Media and Entertainment division, said: "Local content is winning when it comes to content preferences and it's now available on multiple platforms.

"*YouTube* and the MCNs [multi-channel networks] are catering to that demand, but traditional broadcasters are also carrying more local content. The number-one category watched in the region is Gulf-produced TV series."

Mostly produced in Egypt – and, at one time, Syria – Arabic-language television serials are popular across the region, especially during Ramadan when families tend to watch television together after breaking their fast for the evening meal. Typically, storylines revolve around family dramas, doomed romances or figures from Islamic history. Non-scripted Arabic programming, including talk shows, reality shows and local versions of international talent shows – such as *Arab Idol* and *Arabs Got Talent* – are also on the rise.

At present, pay-TV and video-on-demand (VOD) services still only account for a tiny proportion of the region's media revenues, but they are starting to grow in significance. The challenge here, as in the other emerging markets, is to convince viewers to pay, especially as the online-payment infrastructure is still being developed.

Explaining the singular nature of the local market, Kaswara Alkhatib, Chief Executive of *Uturn Entertainment*, a Saudi-based video-content provider, said: "This region is different to the West where viewers are used to paying for content. In the US and Europe, viewers have been in the habit of paying for cable TV subscriptions for many years. In the Arab world, though, everything started with free-to-air satellite channels, so viewers don't expect to pay."

Uturn Entertainment is one of a growing number of MCNs that are tapping into the demand among younger viewers in the region for the kind of Arabic-language content that speaks to their generation. Mostly comprising short videos funded through brand tie-ins and sponsorship, *Uturn's* content includes drama, comedy, satire and a popular talk show hosted by Hatoon Kadi, a Saudi-based female comedian.



Little Eagles: Egyptian art-house.



Theeb: International award-winner.

Later this year, the company will relocate its headquarters to Dubai as part of its push to expand across the region and beyond. Expanding on its strategy, Alkhatib said: "We intend to go global in a similar way to *MiTu*, the US-based Hispanic network. It is our aim to become the number-one network for Arabic speakers all over the world."

By contrast to television production across the region, film production in the Middle East is not particularly strong, partly because the costs involved are far higher than those required for internet broadcasts. The sector is growing, however, largely thanks to support from Gulf-based film festivals, regional cultural funds and a number of European co-production deals.

One of the biggest problems faced by local film producers is that the region remains under-screened, making it difficult to distribute films widely and recoup production costs. Most cinema screens are concentrated in the more affluent GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, although the Gulf state with the largest population – Saudi Arabia – banned movie theatres many years ago. Although reliable box-office figures for the region are difficult to come by, it's estimated that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – including the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi – accounts for about half of the total annual Middle East box office.

When it comes to mainstream cinema, Egypt has long been the region's production powerhouse – producing about 80% of the Arabic-language films screened in the UAE, Lebanon and Egypt, the region's three biggest markets. Now, though, filmmakers across the region are also starting to make independent feature films, as well as shorts and documentaries that explore a range of social, personal and political issues. Although Egypt is also strong in the independent production sector, many of these films are emerging from countries not usually known for their cinematic output, including Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and, increasingly, the Gulf states.

Typically, funding comes from *DIFF's Enjaaz* fund or from the *Doha Film Institute*, which offers grants to first and second-time filmmakers across the MENA region. At one time, the *Abu Dhabi Film Festival* used to operate the *Sanad* fund, financing earmarked for development and post-production, but both the festival and the fund have recently been shut down. The Lebanon-based *Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)* is still around, however, and has provided funding for a number of independent films.

Many Arab filmmakers, though, maintain that these regional grants alone are not enough to support this expanding industry. Offering one solution, Hala Lotfy, an Egyptian director-producer, said: "We also need to access funds in Europe, through co-productions with European producers if necessary. A European co-producer can also help get films



distributed in Europe as well as in the Arab world, where we don't yet have enough screens."

While Arab independent films may struggle to find cinemas in the region, they are starting to make a mark at international film festivals, frequently winning international awards. In early 2016, *Theeb*, Naji Abu Nowar's Jordan-UK co-production, won the *BAFTA* for Outstanding Debut by a British Director. It was also nominated for an *Oscar* in the best foreign-language film category.

Meanwhile, among the Arab films currently on the festival circuit are two from Egyptian filmmakers – Tamer El Said's *In The Last Days Of The City*, set in Cairo just before the 2011 revolution, which premiered at Berlin; and Mohamed Diab's *Clash*, which looks at the aftermath of the uprising and had its premiere in Cannes.

In addition to funding Arab films and showcasing them throughout the festival, *DIFF* also supports them through its *Dubai Distribution Programme*, an initiative that encourages Middle East distributors to select one film each from the *DIFF* line-up and give it a theatrical release. Securing distribution, though, is an uphill battle when most mainstream multiplexes – especially those in the Gulf – prefer to screen the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

As a way of tackling this particular problem, a group of independent art-house cinemas and cultural organisations have united to form the *Network of Arab Alternative Screens (NAAS)*, dedicated to the distribution of art-house films, both from the region and the rest of the world.

In line with this, one *NAAS* member – Cairo-based *Zawya Distribution* – is releasing *In The Last Days Of The City* in Egypt in the first quarter of 2017. During the course of the *DIFF*, the company announced it had also picked up *Little Eagles*, a documentary by the Egyptian filmmaker Mohamed Rashad. At present, *Zawya* operates one art-house theatre in downtown Cairo, but also works with a number of other cinemas to expand the release prospects for independent films.

Explaining its approach, Ahmed Sobky, *Zawya's* Head of Acquisitions and Sales, said: "We've been holding workshops designed to help people who want to screen art-house films in their cities, some of whom are currently renovating old cinemas. We share our resources and experiences with them and also provide them with films." As a result of such initiatives, the company's bigger titles will be released in a number of other cities – including Alexandria, Ismailia and Port Said – in addition to Cairo.

While initiatives such as these are clearly helpful for the lower-budget and more artistic films, there are now moves to make slightly bigger and more commercial Arabic-language movies in the region, films that could potentially find a far wider audience. In line with this, *Image Nation*, the Abu Dhabi government-owned production company, invests in both Hollywood films and in larger-scale Emirati productions – most notably Ali F. Mostafa's *The Worthy*, which received a red-carpet screening at the *DIFF*.

This dystopian thriller follows a band of survivors hiding in an abandoned factory compound housing one of the world's last remaining sources of uncontaminated water. It premiered at this year's *BFI London Film Festival* and has been warmly reviewed on its festival outings. The big test now will be whether it can draw box-office receipts from across the Arab world and beyond or if any of its ensemble cast of Arab actors can move



on to become truly international stars.



DIFF 2016: Funding, promoting and screening the best in Middle East cinema.

The Dubai International Film Festival 2016 took place from 7-14 December at the Madinat Jumeirah Resort in Dubai.

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