'The Responsibility is insane'

Dubai may be one of the wealthiest parts of the world, but it's never had a film industry - until now. PHIL HOAD reports on the production of its first ever big budget movie

"Are you f*** crazy?" A whole film crew looks aghast as its producer sprints alone up a section of empty motorway, waving his arms and screaming. It's 11pm, and someone is drooping. The crane arm of a cherry-picker platform tilts nonchalantly over the road, in front of the 20-car motorcade poised to drive right over that spot. "Raise that thing now!"

The brand-new exit ramp has been borrowed for three February nights by the makers of City of Life, Dubai's first big-budget film. Part of the insane Scalextric frenzy of the Sheikh Zayed road, the highway that runs between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, this bit of tarmac is where the film's storylines wrap around each other in a multicultural pileup. Underneath the flyover, next to dormant piles of girders and wiring, are a huddle of Portakabins. This is nothing less than base camp for an attempt to create a film industry out of the sand; a cultural kickstart you can only imagine happening in Dubai.

All night, the crash is filmed in sequential segments down the ramp, like giant stop-motion animation. Early on, the crew gather for "blocking" - establishing basic positions in the scene - around a cardboard model road filled with toy cars. "No one talk during this, OK," says Tim Smythe, the stern producer. A young man sits discreetly among the huddle of technicians, smoking, looking drawn and concerned, a keffiyeh slung around his neck in what might be hipster affectation; except for the fact that, being the film's writer-director, Ali Faisal Mostafa bin Abdullatif, he actually is an Arab.

Son of an Emirati architect and an English florist, Mostafa finds himself, at the age of 27, with only one previous 20-minute short and a handful of commercials to his name, shooting the United Arab Emirates' first major production (there have only been three other full-length features) and the first with government funding. "The responsibility on my shoulders is insane," he says, grinning. The hope is that City of Life will create a striking precedent in the fledgling Dubai and Emirati film industry, simply "to make people understand it can be done", as he puts it.

Mostafa's lead characters are an Indian taxi driver, a Romanian air hostess and a privileged local; he is clearly aiming to give voice to his native city in the same borderless internationalese being spoken by Alejandro González Iñárritu and Fatih Akin. The cast includes Alexandra Maria Lara, Bollywood star Sonu Sood and Jason Flemyng - "not names, but faces" designed to trawl a global demographic. Born and raised locally, Mostafa has no time for the city's detractors. "The amount of press I've read - the majority of it coming from the UK - saying that Dubai is this fake piece of shit, and who the hell does Dubai think it is - talking to the city as if it's a person. Sometimes I say to myself, they have no idea what the hell they are talking about. [Often] they've never visited the city. They've never spoken to a local. And [the coverage] sometimes isn't just negative, it's cruel."

The rumour is that City of Life will cost $5m-$7m, but no one wants to confirm the exact amount - an odd level of reticence in a town notorious for its extravagant approach to almost everything. But real-estate-drunk Dubai has never quite got its head around the film game. The city started a film festival in 2004, but with little homegrown Emirati work to showcase, it has had trouble building international credibility. Soundstage facilities at Dubai Studio City are still way behind schedule. Ironically, there is a mushrooming cinema audience in the UAE. There were only 40 screens in Dubai in 2003; now there are around 100. At any given time, about 75 per cent of them will be occupied with Hollywood fodder, with a smattering of Bollywood, Iranian films and Egyptian comedy - but, of course, nothing Emirati. But, again, the grassroots are teeming: college film courses are booming, and Tanya Wagner, Filmworks' head of PR, was struck by a room full of women, potentially the next generation of film-makers, firing questions at Oliver Stone at December's film festival. Here's the whole paradox: there is no urgent need to build the infrastructure without the films, but the films won't come without the infrastructure.

With high living costs draining production costs and its thorny censorship laws, you might not blame Joe Hollywood for thinking the weather in Romania doesn't look so bad after all. But choose Dubai, and what you certainly need is a fixer. I'm introduced to Nasr, a sturdy,