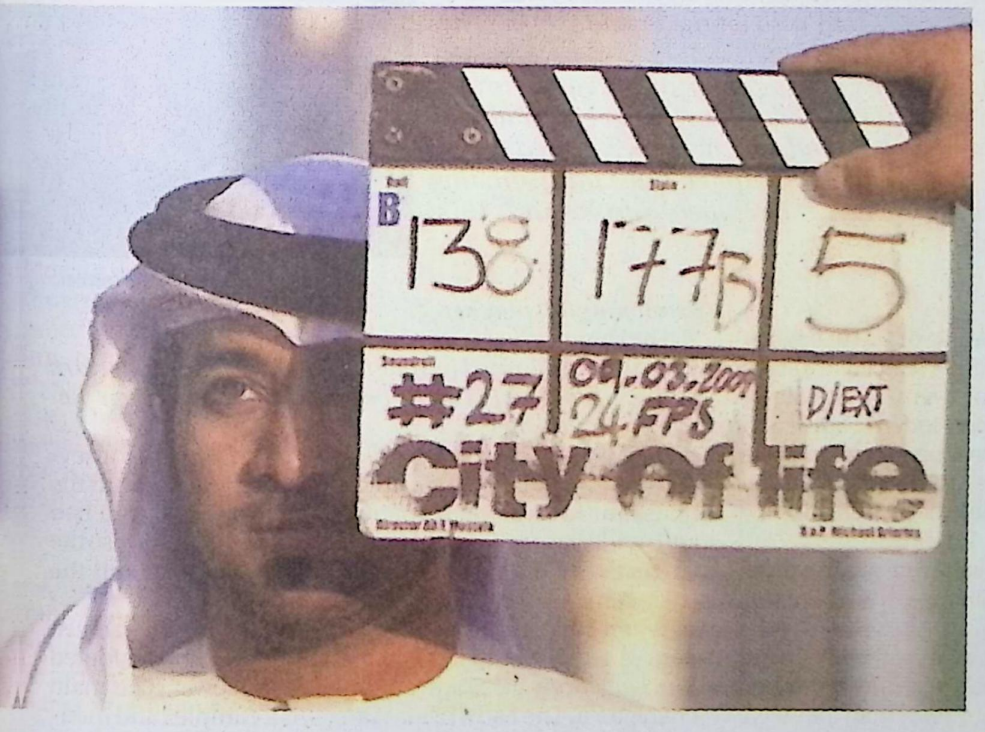
cheerful Yemeni in traditional dress who is connected to the city police force. Nasr trades in the key lubricant here: not oil (Dubai never had much anyway), but wasta. There remains a distrust of the written word among Emiratis, and much gets settled by spontaneous agreement; wasta can be translated as "connections", the inside influence needed to get institutions on side. Earlier today, it was Nasr who got the lights switched on above this virgin bit of tarmac. I ask if fixing is difficult work. He folds his arms, smiles and says, gnomically, "This business is power, and your heart strong."

Getting results isn't easy, even when you're from other Arab countries. Ramy, the Lebanese casting supervisor, sparks up another cigarette, says he's going to quit smoking after what has been a tough shoot. He reckons the Emirati families who dominate society here are "embarrassed" to be seen on film, which makes it difficult to cast local actors. Other people disagree about the stigma, some saying it just means age-old parental anxiety about their kids' job choices. Saoud al-Ka'abi, who plays Faisal, the film's rich Emirati, is from one of the families in question, and as the presenter of the Gulf region's most popular TV programme, al-Maidan (a kind of Arab Pop Idol based around a traditional dance), is a bona fide Arab celebrity. On the screen since he was nine, he has no qualms about fame. "It's something in the blood now - I can't live without it. I'm trying to get more and more into this thing."

The censorship body, the National Media Council, doesn't do hard metaphysics, but everything filming in the country is subject to script approval. With some tinkering, the City of Life script passed. But there are eyes everywhere, real and imagined. On set, no one is sure who Nasr works for. Some speculate whether he is actually secret police, and hanging around to observe as much as assist. Mostafa is nervous about the first screening, at which his benefactors will be present and expecting. "The council said, 'Ali, if a western person was going to come here and do a film about locals and it was negative, well, it's through a westerner's eyes. But if a local person is doing it, it has to be true.'"

No wonder Emirati directors - almost all under 35 and lacking any predecessors - band supportively into tightly knit collectives: Mostafa is good friends with al-Khaja, 31, as well as Mustafa Abbas, 23, another preternaturally confident tyro. The atmosphere on the City of Life set is amazingly easygoing and friendly, a seamless blend of 30 nationalities; a hopeful sign from the people who are not just showing it "can be done", but who aspire to be a modern Dubai, speaking to the world after its adolescent growth spurt, full-voiced for the first time.



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It's now 5.30am, and Mostafa is still trying to get his eight-lane, widescreen vision straight. The lead taxi has been fitted with an air-pressure "bomb" that will flip it on to its back. Helga from makeup frets about fitting the wig on to the dummy that will sit beside the stuntman: "All I need is for it to fall off, and that's the end of my career." A fine mist filters in from the sea through the skyscrapers; a cry goes up, warning about continuity. Mostafa lines the cars up again at the top of the ramp and prepares for the biggest shot of his career. It's not the time to hold back. "We need to take that step and show that we are not people who are self-conscious and try to hide in a bubble. We're not."

SOURCE: GUARDIAN.CO.UK