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City of Life shows symbiotic Dubai

Filmed entirely in Dubai, it is an ingenious story of three people of different nationalities

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Ali Mostafa briefs actors before filming a scene in City of Life. The young Emirati director wants to show Dubai as a real city

Image Credit: Gulf News archive

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The focus of attention at this year's Dubai International Film Festival has rightly been on City of Life, the first major film aimed at promoting Dubai to the world through quality drama that shows more than cliché characters and situations.

Filmed entirely in Dubai, it is an ingenious story of three people of different nationalities — Emirati, Indian and British — who impact on each other's lives without ever meeting. But there is a colourful mix of other characters too, from the highest to the humblest, with varied dialogue in English, Hindi, Arabic and Emirati dialect.

Any attempt to portray a realistic 'slice of life' in this way may run into controversy. Some have complained that the film runs counter to the official showcase view of Dubai and so may work against the interests of the city.

But my first scrutiny of the reviews indicates that the film-going public would rather have this 'slice of life'. One of Dubai's biggest strengths is its mix of people from different cultures and continents.

"Everybody living in the UAE will be able to identify with the film," says its writer-director and co-producer Ali F. Mustafa.

A 28-year-old Anglo-Emirati, trained at the London Film School, Mustafa, had already gained credit with his short film *Under the Sun*, which won distinctions at various international festivals, and won 'Best Emirates Film 2006' in the Annual Emirates Film Competition in Abu Dhabi.

Raising the finance

Even so, raising the finance for *City of Life* was a long job, and Mustafa realises that his timing was fortunate. Only a little later, the credit crunch could well have made the task impossible.

No doubt Mustafa is right in saying that everyone living and working here will be able to identify with what is being billed as Dubai's first home-grown feature film — which will hopefully exert a unifying effect on disparate groups.

But he is also strongly aware of certain international perceptions of Dubai, and he regards it as a sort of crusade to correct the distorted visions of the city he loves.

In this, he accords directly with my own view. As an unofficial honorary Emirati who gives keynote presentation and training courses all over the world, I have been treated to so many conflicting images of Dubai that I can hardly believe these people are all describing the same place. (But of course, most of them have never been here, as is immediately apparent.)

Widespread tendency

One widespread tendency is to dismiss Dubai as a Disneyland (Mustafa's own word), something flimsy and superficial, literally 'built on sand'.

It is true that the standard photographs of the city can suggest this quality — a blinding dazzle of tropical sun against sheer glass towers, and no suggestion of life on the human scale, simply because most people have stayed indoors out of the heat. The other tendency, possibly rooted in envy, is to condemn it as a city of hubristic greed and cynicism.

But perhaps Mustafa would agree with my own optimistic view of Dubai, very much linked to its multi-racial makeup, as the City of the Future, where a multi-racial civilisation is slowly working out its identity.

I, myself, think Dubai itself is an epic that definitely will run and run.

In a nutshell

First homegrown film portraying a realistic 'slice of life' drama of Dubai
Director Ali F. Mustafa seeks to correct distorted global views of the city
The racial mix can be divisive but perhaps eventually a unifying feature