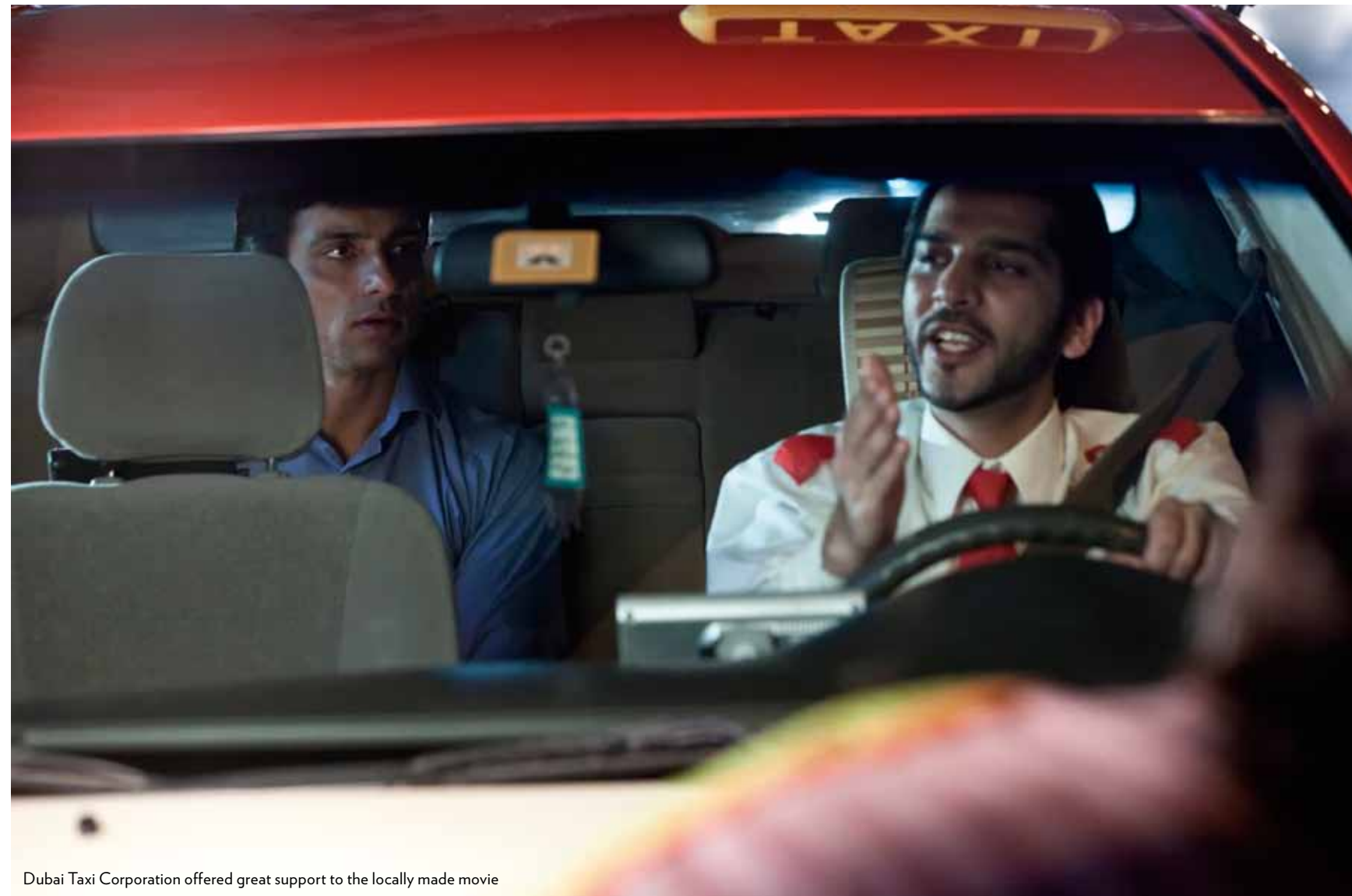


Our greatest Ali?

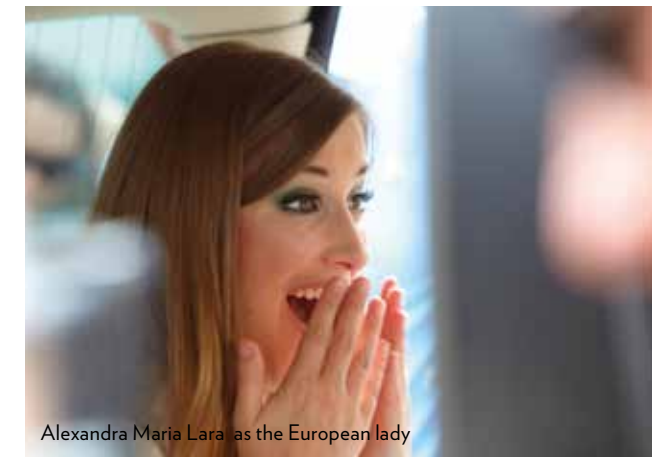
THE GROUND-BREAKING DEBUT FILM BY ALI F MOSTAFA IS SET TO PUT DUBAI ON THE FILM INDUSTRY MAP



Ali F Mostafa



Dubai Taxi Corporation offered great support to the locally made movie



Alexandra Maria Lara as the European lady



Lights, camera, action in Dubai

When Emirati director Ali F Mostafa decided to make the leap from commercials to feature-length films, it was always going to be a challenge. Yet when he decided to make his movie entirely in the UAE, and focus purely on varying cultures within Dubai, his feat was viewed as out-right impossible.

Defying the odds, Mostafa took a chance and set about tackling not only ethnic barriers, but also filmmaking restrictions within the Middle East. With a budget of US\$5m he created *City of Life*, an award-winning urban drama (it won Special Achievement Award at the recent Gulf Film Festival) tracking various interactions of a multi-lingual cast – Hindi, English and Arabic – and looking at how random encounters impact others.

Despite the film's release colliding with screenings of major blockbusters, including *Clash of the Titans*, the film went straight to number two in the Dubai box office. While 6,000 were expected on the opening weekend, 15,000 tickets were actually sold. Now, as the eyes of the government and investors eagerly track how the film



Emirati culture is explored

“Despite the film’s release colliding with screenings of major blockbusters, the film went straight to number two in the Dubai box office”

fares globally, Mostafa’s victory is viewed as not only a personal one, but as an achievement that’s pivotal to the future of Middle Eastern film industry.

How did you get into filmmaking?

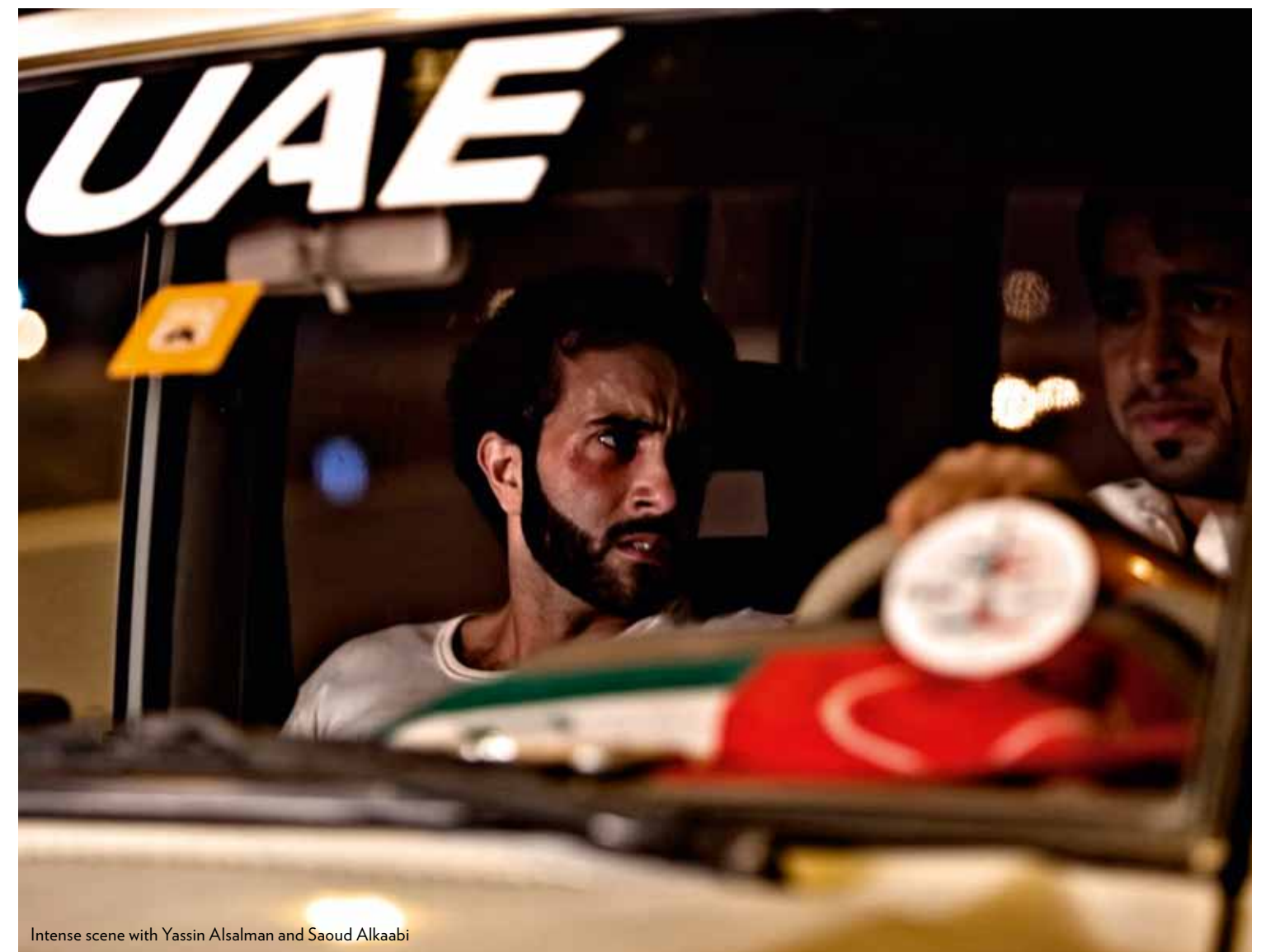
I come from a creative background, my father is an architect and my mother owned Blooms, one of Dubai’s oldest flower and events company. I started filming when I was nine years old, but after high school I got into interior design. I opened a division of my mum’s company called Blooms Interiors. I did that for a couple of years, saving money, until I applied to The London Film School. From there I pursued my career as a filmmaker.

How did you choose the storyline for *City of Life*?

I always wanted to write a film about Dubai, but didn’t know where to start. I decided on the Indian character after hearing about a place in Dubai where Indians, who look



Alexandra Marie Lara with co-star Jason Fleming



Intense scene with Yassin Alsalman and Saoud Alkaabi

“Dubai has never been a place that breeds filmmakers. It was never really viewed as a career choice, so there was never much support”

like stars, perform. So, the main idea was all about this guy trying to make it as a Bollywood actor. I then added the main Emirati character, whose story involved a combination of personal experiences and fantasy. The last character, the European lady, was largely fabricated.

Why was it so important to make a film based entirely in Dubai?

We host many film festivals here – Dubai International Film Festival has been going for six years now – yet we don’t have enough local films at an international standard. That’s always been my goal, to make a film that puts us at a high enough level to compete in the festival.

Why do you think this hasn’t been done before?

Because no one has really tried. Dubai has never been a place that breeds filmmakers. It was never really viewed as a career choice, so there was never

much support for young directors. However, there’s a lot more initiatives now. As the industry here grows I’m sure there’ll be a growth in film schools.

How easy was it getting funding?

It took a couple of years to collate. About 30 per cent of the budget was acquired through brand sponsors. The rest of the money came from a silent investor. Also Dubai Taxi Corporation helped us a lot by allowing us to use their taxis and also their locations. Although they didn’t give us money, they helped save us a few hundred thousand dirhams.

How will the film affect Dubai tourism?

We did a test screening in England and asked people to fill out a feedback form. One of the questions was: Would you visit Dubai after watching the film? The majority said they would. I think it’s because Dubai comes



Acclaimed actor Sonu Sood

INTERVIEW ALEXANDRIA GOUVEIA IMAGES AFEM FILMS/FILMWORKS

“Calling Dubai ‘artificial’ upsets me. This is a real place – I was raised here!”

across as authentic, more of a real city rather than its reputation as a haven of bling.

Dubai is often described as “artificial”. How do you feel about that?

Even people who’ve never been here think that. Calling it “artificial” upsets me. This is a real place – I was raised here! That’s why this film is so important to me – I want to reveal the Dubai I know.

What are your plans for the future?

I want to set myself another challenge and make something with a smaller budget. I would love to experiment with a genre that’s completely different, so maybe a comedy set in the Arab world. ■ *City of Life* will preview at the following festivals: Vancouver, Australian Arab Film Festival and LA Arab Film festival.