

AT THE CROSSROADS

Arab and African film-makers are winning an increasing number of international plaudits. But as the Carthage Film Festival wound down in Tunis last week, Hadani Ditmars found that the battle for funding continues

As the Carthage Film Festival of Arab and African Cinema wrapped last week, there was a feeling that 1994 has been a turning point for both industries.

Moufida Tlatli's *Les Silences Du Palais*, a Tunisian film chronicling the life of a young woman at the dawn of the country's independence from France, won the event's top prize; and Merzadik Allouache's *Bab El Oued City*, a portrait of life in FIS-dominated Algiers, was runner-up. The two films were also successful at Cannes earlier this year, which had already underlined the growing artistic kudos being credited to directors in Arab and African countries.

But film-makers still face an uphill struggle. Funding is scarce and distribution networks are nascent. The lack of infrastructure forces them to lead a schizophrenic existence as they seek funding from "the North" (largely, but not exclusively, France) to work in "the South".

This dance between continents does not always have a negative impact. Co-productions can create greater co-operation and intercultural understanding. But, by and large, northern funding dictates southern cinematic content.

Once a film is produced, there are considerable Arab and African distribution problems. North Africa is leading the way in distributing independent indigenous cinema, but the market is dominated by the Egyptian production industry. The Egyptian industry is undoubtedly the most commercial in its approach, but its moves to protect its market share cause complaints among its neighbours similar to those levelled against the activities of Hollywood in Europe.

In the southern half of the continent, South African distributor-exhibitor Ster-Kinekor is committed to creating wider audiences for



Above: Merzadik Allouache's *Bab El Oued City* repeated the success it had earlier this year at Cannes

African cinema, but most local film-makers are still dependent on securing deals with the majors.

In 1992, Carthage introduced two mechanisms to run alongside the festival to help Arab and African producers develop, fund and sell their projects through the event.

The first, the *Marche International des Produits Audiovisuels de Carthage* (MIPAC), is a market designed to increase contacts between film-makers and distributors. This year, more than 400 films and videos were registered and available for viewing by buyers.

The second, the *Project Workshop* (*Atelier*), sends concepts being developed by Arab and African film-makers out to potential backers at production companies and broadcasters. This year, 14 projects were promoted through the workshop, with interested producers and distributors being brought together for discussion and, hopefully, some deal-making.

Both initiatives have begun to bear fruit, most notably the *Atelier*, whose first outing platformed both *Les Silences Du Palais* and Guinea-Bissau director Sana Na Nhada's *Xime*, the winner of Carthage's 1994 jury prize.

This year, the *Atelier* hosted South African film-maker Jeremy Nathan's project *Hottentot Venus* — about a black woman captured by an Afrikaner in 1807 and paraded across Europe as a circus freak. Part of the first South African contingent invited to the festival, Nathan said the workshop had allowed him to "achieve everything I wanted to" in terms of seeking funding for what is sure to be a controversial film.

The South Africans, generally, believe that they have an important role to play in developing a cinema of "the South", in terms of both production and distribution. Richard Ismail, of South Africa's distributor the Film Resource Unit, came to MIPAC to buy new African films to feed a growing domestic market and found interesting product from both Senegal and Zimbabwe.

However, film-makers believe there is more to be done. Moroccan director Mohamed Tazi, whose film *In Search Of My Wife's Husband* was shown in competition, was also at MIPAC. He found that although some Egyptian distributors were interested in the piece, there was an overall lack of "reciprocity".

On one level, Tazi says, national distributors are concerned with protecting their domestic industries rather than developing outlets for works from across the Arab and African nations. Tazi also believes that the structure of northern funding for southern production leads European buyers to pick up only those co-productions in which their countries have invested.

Tazi sees satellite television as a potential saviour. With Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, South Africa's M-Net and France's Canal Plus all developing pan-continental services for the area, Tazi forecasts a rising demand for Arabic- and African-language films to fill broadcasting time.

However, the demands of such services are oriented mostly towards straight-down-the-line "dish drivers" that will convince people to pay the connection charge. Against this challenge, Tazi says that even if satellite television can boost the production sector, a key issue will be local film-makers' ability to create and then sustain an independent sector that is not solely concerned with "burlesque".

This struggle was clearly illustrated as Carthage came to an end.

The structure of funding leads European buyers to pick up only those co-productions that their countries have invested in



Above: Moufida Tlatli lifted top honours with *Les Silences Du Palais*

Despite its good intentions and Tunisia's comparatively well-developed industry, the day after the festival films finished their runs at Tunis's cinemas, most went back to their regular diet of US actioners and soft-core pornography. Nonetheless, there are encouraging signs that Arab and African cinema is beginning to stand its ground against the raft of Universal Soldiers and Virgins From Hell. □