

Carloco didn't have the money - will take off at TriStar at around the same time.

Potentially most interesting of the bunch, however, is German-born Roland (Stargate) Emmerich's *Independence Day*. The story of an alien invasion which happens on 4 July, destroying New York, Los Angeles and Washington, Emmerich's film will be unique among recent sci-fi epics in relying on good, old-fashioned model work rather than computer wizardry. Will Smith (*Bad Boys*), Jeff Goldblum, Bill Pullman and Mary McDonnell star.

Emmerich may also be who gets to direct Fox's US version of *Godzilla*, which the same studio dropped when the irascible Jan De Bont, director of *Speed*, declared last summer that he couldn't do it for under \$120 million.

MRB is fond, from time to time, of playing around with production statistics, since they are often more revealing of changes in the industry than study of the films themselves.

One undeniable trend during the 90s is the increase in the number of co-productions between the UK and Europe. In 1988, there

were only nine; in 1994, there were 24.

A lot of this has to do with the determinedly European stance of the soon-to-depart head of British Screen, Simon Perry, not to mention the £2-million-a-year European Co-Production Fund he somehow persuaded the notoriously Little-Englishish Department of National Heritage to guarantee for five years (which ends in March 1997).

But even this would not have been possible without the funds emanating from the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe initiative, Eurimages, which - despite recurring criticism for its ponderous, bureaucratic procedures - has promoted pan-European productions more effectively than any other body. Of the £54,179,000 spent on the films in which British Screen was involved in 1994, £29,577,000 - 54.5 per cent - came from Europe, making film one of the most European-oriented of all British industries.

The government must have noticed this, since it pulled Britain out of Eurimages at the end of November, citing the £5.5 million the UK has had to hand over to Strasbourg over the past three years as an unnecessary drain on the nation's resources. Since this resulted in Eurimages investing around £12.5 million in films with British producers over the same



War satire: Emir Kusturica's 'Underground'

period - generating, according to industry estimates, some £40 million in film-making activity - that doesn't sound like a bad deal.

To claim that the UK's withdrawal from Eurimages will completely cut us off from Europe is, of course, an exaggeration. But, given the increasing legal, fiscal and organisational complexity of co-production arrangements, there being now no framework in which to insert them will undoubtedly scare off many European co-production partners (currently involved in over half the films

produced in this country). European investment in British films shot up by 15 per cent after we joined Eurimages in 1992; so an equivalent drop can be expected now the Portillo factor has struck.

All in all, another triumphant piece of cultural policy.

Greater injustices are doubtless committed hourly in the former Yugoslavia. But since this is a film journal, forgive Mr Busy for focusing on the underhand campaign being waged against Emir Kusturica's masterpiece, *Underground*, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes this year.

When it opened in France at the end of October, the film came under attack from French sources - plus a few in Kusturica's native Bosnia - for refusing to toe the international party line (that the Serbs were the aggressors and this was all we needed to know about the past three-and-a-half years).

Since Kusturica's film is a satirical history of the whole of post-war Yugoslavia (its original title was *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*), this amounts to no more than projecting factional interests onto *Underground's* broad canvas - a knee-jerk reaction, in other words. But Kusturica was so upset by the personal nature of some of the attacks that he announced in December that he would make no more films.

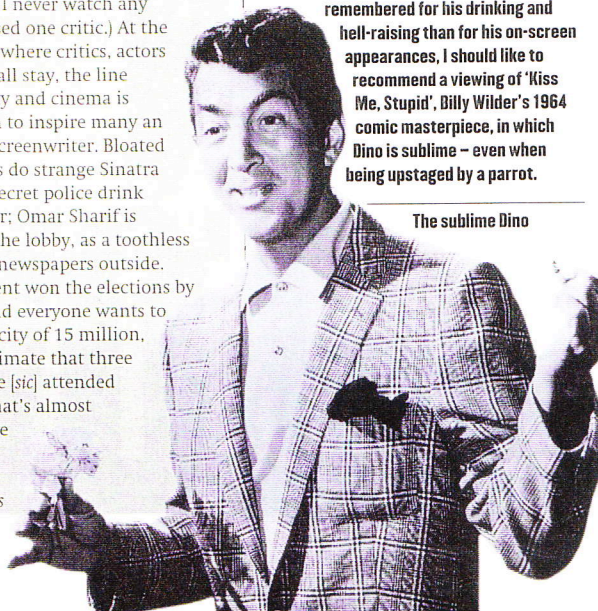
Later that month, CiBy 2000, the Paris-based production company that funded the film, withdrew it from a pre-Oscar screening at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (where it was the official 'Yugoslav' entry for this spring's Best Foreign Picture Oscar), on the grounds that they didn't know which version was being shown, one being potentially libellous.

I don't give a stuff whether *Underground* is shown to the members of the Academy, who can always be guaranteed to hate anything which doesn't resemble a remake of *Cousin, Cousine*. But the notion that Kusturica should be forced out of film-making by bigoted reactions to his finest film makes me profoundly depressed.

Finally, in reaction to all those obituaries which suggested that Dean Martin was an essentially lightweight actor better

remembered for his drinking and hell-raising than for his on-screen appearances, I should like to recommend a viewing of 'Kiss Me, Stupid', Billy Wilder's 1964 comic masterpiece, in which Dino is sublime - even when being upstaged by a parrot.

The sublime Dino



CAIRO NOTES

Nile dreams

Coinciding with national elections and an earthquake (5.2 on the Richter scale), the nineteenth Cairo Film Festival began auspiciously and continued for two hectic weeks, fuelled by chaos and sheer numbers (200 films, 1,962 screenings in 23 theatres, according to organisers).

Although many foreign films were shown (the winner of the official competition was the American Chris Gerolmo's *Citizen X*) and Sarah Miles and Indian actress Shabana Azmi were on the jury, the Festival is really a showcase for new Egyptian cinema. There were several films of note. Some say that this new boldness is largely due to the declining influence of Saudi money since the end of the Gulf War. Others point to a young generation of Egyptian film-makers refusing to accept the status quo.

One is Osama Fawzi, whose *Asphalt Kings* was in the Festival's Naguib Mahfouz Competition for first films. A cross between *Taxi Driver* and an Egyptian melodrama, it's about a mini-bus driver and his friends and family, and explores the theme of love crossing class lines. Not an unusual subject in Egyptian cinema, but the brutally honest way Fawzi exposes social hypocrisy is daring. Interweaving stories of adultery involving the bus-driver's parents, sister, neighbours and best friend, Fawzi reveals the complicity of the Egyptian working classes in maintaining the status quo that oppresses them, with barbed wit and irony. But the state censor has yet to give his blessing. (Fawzi confesses that the censor's "corrections" to the original screenplay were ignored: it



was filmed without any deletion of "offensive" material.) Some Egyptian audiences at the festival were shocked by Fawzi's disregard for social and sexual taboos, but there was significant interest from European distributors. But how to get the film past censors into Europe? Says Fawzi, "We're in for a real battle."

The censor's hand was evident in another film in competition, unfortunately mediocre: Amaali Bahnasi's *The Switch*, the tragic story of a man - a victim of official corruption - unjustly imprisoned, tortured and killed for a crime he did not commit. Although it seems contemporary - the style, dress, music all quite 90s - Bahnasi was obliged to add a kind of cinematic disclaimer at the beginning implying that the events took place in the Nasser era. Even bad cinema, it seems, can be dangerous.

Also in competition was Magdy Ahmad Ali's *My Sweet Life*, brave in its subject matter, if somewhat saccharine in style, exploring social hypocrisy from the point of view of three working-class Cairo girls, and virginity, adultery and Islamic fundamentalism. As the girls struggle for emotional and financial

survival, the film lurches between soap opera and female buddy film: flawed, it is sensitive on women's lives, and a certain universality transcends its Egyptian-ness.

Raafat El-Mihi's *Let's Kill Dad* offers comic relief: an over-the-top farcical account of a married couple adopted as brother and sister by a rich old bachelor. Highlights include a pseudo-Indian movie dance number and a re-enactment of an old folk tale of incest and divine retribution. Though its satirical intent is obvious, there are also some oblique socio-political references: in-jokes for (certain) Egyptians, rather too coded for other audiences (or perhaps censors) to understand.

But in truth the films at the Festival are almost incidental; ambience is all. ("It's the only festival where I never watch any films," confessed one critic.) At the Nile Sheraton where critics, actors and directors all stay, the line between reality and cinema is blurry enough to inspire many an enterprising screenwriter. Bloated lounge singers do strange Sinatra covers while secret police drink Johnny Walker; Omar Sharif is ushered into the lobby, as a toothless old man sells newspapers outside. The government won the elections by 80 per cent and everyone wants to be a star. In a city of 15 million, organisers estimate that three million people [sic] attended screenings. That's almost as many as live in the Cairo graveyards.

Hadani Ditmars