

PEOPLE: INTERNATIONAL

WORD OF MOUTH

# Emerging from the shadows

By the standards of his closest associates Silvio Berlusconi and Rupert Murdoch, Tarak Ben Ammar keeps a low profile. Following a series of smart deals that may be about to change



PATRICK FRATER

**T**arak Ben Ammar is urbane, utterly charming and, in a reserved suit and tie, is overdressed by today's consciously casual film producer standards. He also does a good line in humility, the kind that comes only with genuine power and supreme self-confidence. But then Ben Ammar comes to film production from a different angle.

At 55, he is beginning his second career in production having corralled the support of Europe's top politicians and media moguls. Not without influence from the start — he was born into a prominent Tunisian family with his father a government minister and an uncle **Habb Bougouba** the country's first president — Ben Ammar has become a deal-broker and financial consultant at the highest level. Among other things he is investment advisor to Saudi prince **Al-Waleed Bin Talal Bin Abdul Aziz's** \$10bn media portfolio.

"I've been lucky. I met good people. I was not completely successful at the beginning. And as I was not in London, or L.A., good scripts did not come my way easily. But I have used my experience to advise investors and learned lessons along the way," says Ben Ammar.

In the last three years he has transformed Quinta Communications, which he owns with **Silvio Berlusconi**, from a disparate collection of facilities and co-production operations into a vertically-integrated conglomerate with a particular emphasis on post-production, which the company dominates in Ben Ammar's adopted France.

This kind of clout scares some people in the French industry, but many more have never heard of him. That is probably their mistake. "I'm a player now. I'm finally able to offer everything from finance, production, post-production to distribution."

Ben Ammar first became involved in production in the late 1970s when he set up Carthago Films, and built studios in Tunisia. These attracted a number of Hollywood 'runaway' productions including **Steven Spielberg's Raiders Of The Last Ark** and **George Lucas's Star Wars**. Later, under his own steam, he became directly involved in production and co-production, making **Roman Polanski's Pirates** and **Franco Zeffirelli's La Traviata**, for which he still has a soft spot.

By the 1990s his operations had become more focused on investment advice and on TV production. He formed Paris-based Quinta, which was involved in audiovisual licence trading, buying up US produc-

tions that were sold on to a number of leading European commercial broadcasters. Quinta was also the investment partner of Lux Vide on big-budget mini-series including **Jesus Of Nazareth** and **The Bible**. In the mid-1990s Quinta also produced **Michael Jackson's History** concert tour and his **Blood On The Dance Floor** album.

The move into production services came after that with investments in the Hammamet studios in Tunisia, the acquisition of Datacine, a French post-production and laboratory group and a majority stake in special effects house Duran Duboi. He also traded in and out of Italy's Roma Studios, buying them from Credit Lyonnais and selling them last year to Cinecitta, with which they have now been integrated. To the confusion of some observers, he says he never intended Roma as a long-term investment.

However, 2004 has been the year in which the Ben Ammar patience and connections paid off and the strategy became clear. He began the year with a major coup, spotting and boarding the year's biggest indie hit, **Mel Gibson's The Passion Of The Christ**. Ben Ammar has known Gibson for many years and was involved in the early stages of its genesis. Ben Ammar says that Gibson was close to shooting the film in Tunisia, but wary of the effect of the 9/11 terror attacks, he switched the shoot to Italy. However, when established French distributors collectively shied away from handling the film for fear of *Last Temptation*-like street violence, Ben Ammar saw an opportunity to pick up rights in France and 14 other territories. The film garnered a healthy 1.76 million admissions in France and kicked-started Quinta Distribution.

Last month Ben Ammar leveraged his investment in the French technical sector. Having bought most of the businesses from the courts for little initial outlay, Quinta has tipped in some \$26.7m (£20m) of refurbishments and restructuring, he struck a deal with the giant French electronics group Thomson.

Described as an 'exclusive partnership agreement covering post-production and film release activities in France' Quinta has at a stroke given itself access to the newest technology from Thomson's Technicolor and Grass Valley subsidiaries, eliminated a much larger competitor and effectively given itself an international network with which to attract multinational film productions.

"Thomson was keen to invest in France and Technicolor currently does not print in France, but it was competing with us from London and Rome," says Ben Ammar.

Clearly the economies of scale could have played against him. Technicolor processes 1.6 billion metres of film a year. Deluxe (which also has UK and Rome branches) 1.2 billion m, compared with Ben Ammar's LTC, which handles only 200 million. "This way Technicolor will provide



me with some business.

We adopt their standards and processes and we are Thomson clients for equipment."

With most of the acquired businesses now back into the black — helped by work on films, including **Jean-Pierre Jeunet's A Very Long Engagement**, Duran Duboi is showing a 56% year-on-year increase in turnover — Ben Ammar is now able to turn up the gas on his production ambitions.

Quinta's large, sleepy offices with their net curtains and middle-aged staff are now set for a new era and a new broom with Canal Plus' former film buyer **Evi Fullenbach** as head of film production. Instead of making one film ever three or four years, Ben Ammar is now setting the company's sights on production of three or four per year.

"We don't need to produce 10 films a year. My labs are full. I want to be involved in the kind of films where we can make a difference. I pick films on the basis of script, budgeting and value for money," says Ben Ammar. "My whole career has been about providing services to other people and saving them money. I do not intend to be the lead producer. Anyway, France is a very expensive place to produce. But I do want to co-own the negative."

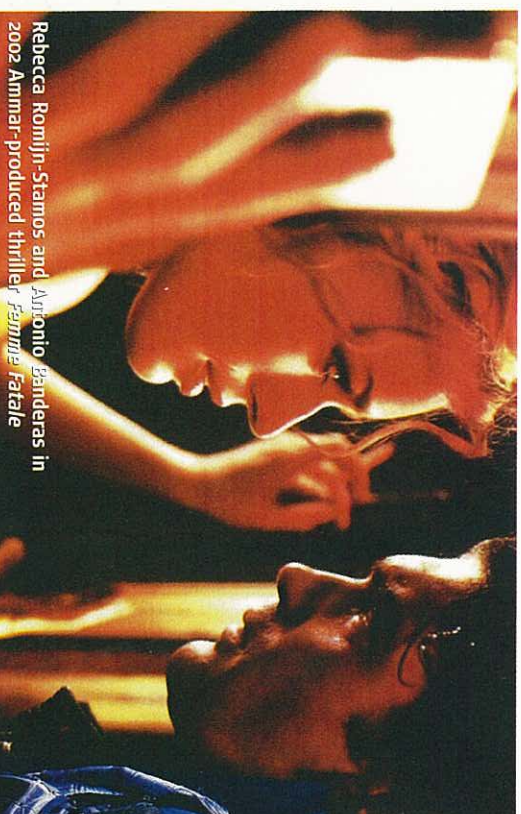
To this end, Quinta now has a three-picture deal with Dino De Laurentiis covering films with a combined production budget of some \$200m. They span a new version of *The Decameron*, which **David Leland** will write and direct, action fantasy *The Last Legion* and *Young Hannibal*, the fourth instalment in the Hannibal Lecter series to be directed by **Peter Webber**. "We are involved 50:50 on the first two and will co-finance some territories on *Young Hannibal*. Both will use post-production in France," says Ben Ammar.

Quinta is also co-producing *Chromophobia* with **Ron Rotholz**. Directed by **Martha Fiennes**, the \$13m dark comedy drama stars **Penelope Cruz**, **Kristin Scott Thomas**, **Ralph Fiennes**, **Rhys Ifans**, **Ian Holm** and **Ben Chaplin**. "The project was brought to us by Lumina Films and we are doing the sales. I liked the cast, the script and the concept. I will fully finance it and present it as an event movie," says Ben Ammar. (The film, which may be ready for Cannes next year, is 70% financed by Quinta with a further 25% from the Isle Of Man.) "I want UK product. The British are so innovative. *Chromophobia* could have had a strong UK partner, but it didn't happen. I have a tendency to want to keep the rights."

With the film production slate now at the scale he wants, Ben Ammar says that further expansion is now likely to be targeted at the TV channel management end of the spectrum. He picked up channels from **Murdoch**, when Sky Italia was forced to sell some in order to comply with monopoly regulations. With Eurosport, the subsidiary of another long-term ally France's TFI, Quinta is aiming to launch a sports channel covering 83% of Italy.

AMMAR ON FULLENBACH

"Evi Fullenbach brings with her massive understanding of the market having bought for France, Italy and Poland. As a German national, she brings another sensibility, too. She manages our connections and gives us credibility with directors and producers. She's my film specialist. I need that now that we've become a distributor and a video distributor"



Rebecca Romijn-Stamos and Antonio Banderas in 2002 Ammar-produced thriller *Femme Fatale*



Lucy Liu in *Ballistic: Ecks vs Sever* — Ammar was executive producer