



## Malta Daniel Rosenthal

Though government support for local filmmakers continued in 2008–09, with one narrative short and three documentaries tapping the Ministry of Finance, Economy and Investment's €230,000 development and production fund, the vast majority of film and TV production in Malta continued to come from visiting projects. They were lured by the islands' varied locations and the ministry's incentive scheme, which offers a cash rebate of up to 22% on EU-eligible expenditure in Malta by qualifying productions.

Luisa Bonello, Malta's Film Commissioner, said that apart from the first few months of 2009, when a number of Malta-bound projects lost their financing in the credit crunch, 2009 'had been a pretty good year. We picked up momentum in the spring and have kept going since then.' At press time, a €15 million European feature film was prepping for a two-month shoot early in 2010, with Malta doubling for Iraq, while the island also stood in for Istanbul for British television's *Poirot: Murder on the Orient Express*.

Other notable visitors in 2009 included two German television projects, mini-series *The Golgotha File*, a series, *Father Kastell*, and a



Bollywood romance, *Will You Cross the Sky?*, shooting in Birgu

Russian television series, *The Last Meeting*. Joining the long list of Bollywood productions to have filmed in Europe in recent years, **Will You Cross the Sky?** (Vinnai Thankdi Varuvaya), directed by Gautham Menon and featuring music and songs by Oscar-winner A.R. Rahman, used Maltese locations, including the streets of Birgu and the coast of Gozo, for its youth-oriented love story, starring Trisha Krishnan and Simbu, whose characters, Jessica and Neru, enjoy a romantic interlude on the islands.

*Malta. Original sets...*

*just add dressing.*



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Yevgeny Pashkevich's Latvian feature, **Gulfstream Under the Iceberg**, which tells three love stories linked by a mythological, time-travelling figure, Lilith, used several locations and the water tanks of Mediterranean Film Studios (MFS).

Other productions at MFS in 2009 included Moby Dick and a major Japanese TV series. The former is a \$25.5m German–Canadian two-part television film of Melville's classic nautical adventure, directed by Mike Barker (*To Kill a King*), scripted by Nigel Williams and starring William Hurt as Captain Ahab, Ethan Hawke as first officer Starbuck and Gillian Anderson as Ahab's wife; the latter is the epic, 13-part *Cloud Above the Slope* (*Saka no ue no kumo*), co-directed by Takafumi Kimura and Taku Kato. The series dramatises the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05. Four months of pre-production work went into the building of two 40-metre sections of warships and several interior sets at MFS, for about an hour's worth of scenes. Four years in the making, this production from NHK, Japan's largest broadcaster, also filmed in Japan, Russia and London.



*Alejandro Amenábar's breakout Spanish success, Agora*

Spaniard Alejandro Amenábar's epic *Agora*, which in 2008 built massive sets on Malta to replicate ancient Alexandria, and used Maltese landscapes to double for Egypt, became a major box-office success in the director's native country in autumn 2009 and was scheduled for release in other countries in 2010. Finally, the second series of the Norwegian/Swedish reality TV show *Champion*

of *Champions* (*Mesternes Mester*) took up residence on Malta in September 2009, filming at numerous locations as teams of former champion Norwegian and Swedish sportsmen sought to avoid elimination in a series of physical and mental challenges (running, a giant game of checkers), while also being filmed cooking and relaxing in their luxurious villas. The first, Spanish-shot series produced extremely high ratings, which explains why the Malta Tourism Authority, sensing a huge promotional opportunity across 12 hours of prime-time television in Norway and Sweden, had fought to bring this show to the islands against rival bids from Greece, Sicily and Spain.

### Quote of the year

'Sometimes journalists asked why we filmed *Agora* in Malta. I say this was the only place this film could have been shot the way we did it.' *Agora* director, ALEJANDRO AMENABAR.

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