

The making of an empire

Historical epic *Fetih 1453: Battle of Two Empires* has smashed box-office records to become Turkey's biggest film ever. Released in the UAE this week, **Rob Garratt** asks director **Faruk Aksoy** what makes the movie so special

It is unrivalled in its scope and ambition. After three years of filming, with a reported budget of Dhs60 million, *Fetih 1453* far outweighed any movie made in Turkey before. But to director Faruk Aksoy, it wasn't money, but a deep-seated faith that got the movie made.

The 160-minute epic is a dramatisation of the 1453 siege of Constantinople (which later became Istanbul) by the 21-year-old Mehmet the Conqueror. That conquest saw the Ottoman Turks take control of what was then the centre of the Byzantium Empire, signalling the end of the Roman's 1,000-year-rule of the region, redrawing the political and religious landscape forever. For both the Turkish population and the wider Muslim world, it's an event that still holds a great significance.

'Istanbul is the most beautiful city of the world,' the 48-year-old Turkish director tells us. 'The victory created an empire which was the most powerful politically, and you could say this victory led Turkish people to rule all the world. But the conquest was very important not only in Turkish history, but also in terms of world history. This conquest closed the Medieval period and opened the new age. It drew a line to the Christian world's expansionist policy, and led to the spread of Islam to the West both as a civilisation, a religion and a type of architecture.'

Naturally, filmmakers have been keen to create a cinematic adaptation of the siege for years. But for long-time producer and director Aksoy, it was more than just his lengthy CV that got him the job. 'This event offers an opportunity for magnificent visual cinematography and was a dream of many directors and producers in the world,' he says. 'Allah – my supreme Lord – predestined this movie for me and I'm very thankful.'

The three-year battle to get the movie made wasn't without its travails. Filming with a commitment to authenticity with real swords, a number of stars suffered blade injuries. Others fell off horses, breaking ribs. Aksoy himself suffered a broken arm after falling off a quad bike, soldiering on for a month while the injury healed. Filming also continued during the Holy Month of



Ramadan. Aksoy says: 'The hardest scenes were those with thousands of warriors attacking each other naturally. A portion of these scenes were shot during Ramadan with people who were fasting, and had to run and fight with 20kg of armour on, in the very hot weather conditions, by force of devotion and faith.'

Aksoy's efforts did not go unrewarded. The movie, now being released in the UAE with the longer title *Fetih 1453: Battle of Two Empires* on Thursday September 27, went on to thrash box office records

movie is about an event which Turks really wish to see on the screen. It was said that while Americans cast a lot of movies about their short history of 500 years, why don't we (do the same)? So it was apparent that the movie would break audience records. Of course the numbers are important, but I was concerned more



Released internationally as *Conquest 1453*, the film saw a limited release in Europe and USA. But to Aksoy that was more than enough.

'The movie was watched with interest in Europe,' he added. 'More importantly, wonderful news was published about the movie in the most important newspapers and websites in Europe, the United States, Russia and even in China. For the first time, a Turkish movie occupied the agenda of world media. I hope it will attract considerable attention in the United Arab Emirates, too. And I wish everybody to enjoy the movie.' *Fetih 1453: Battle of Two Empires* is in UAE cinemas from Thursday September 27.

'The film tries to explain how the conquest of Istanbul changed the political, religious and military scheme of the world'

at home, selling more than six million cinema stubs – the equivalent of one to every ten people in the Turkish population. But Aksoy isn't phased. 'No, I'm not surprised,' he says. 'The

about what feeling the audience would get when they watch the movie. The emotional relationship that our audience established with the screen made me so happy.'

► **NEXT WEEK:** Why you should make the trip to Abu Dhabi for the upcoming film festival