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Eisenfresser

A film by
Shaheen Dill-Riaz

press kit

LEMME FILM

A Lemme Film GmbH production

in co-production with
BR, RBB

in collaboration with
Arte

International Distribution
Telepool

Financed by
Filmförderung Hamburg
Kuratorium junger deutscher Film
Nordmedia
Filmbüro Bremen
EED / EZEF

Technical Information:
Production Format: S16/HDV
Running Time: 85 mins

Format: 35mm
Colour/Dolby SR

English/Bangla with English subtitles

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Short Synopsis (brochures / festival catalogues)

The annual famine in the north of Bangladesh forces Farmers Kholil and Gadu to leave their homeland along with many of their relatives. They hire themselves out as seasonal labourers at the shipbreaking yards in the south of the country.

In the yards that line the beaches of Chittagong, they dismantle the garbage of the Western World by hand: oil tankers and vast container ships.

Director Shaheen Dill-Riaz is witness to a systematic exploitation, which only very few of the workers can escape: these seasonal workers from the poverty stricken north not only do the most dangerous work in the yard, but they are also trapped into inescapable debt.

Synopsis

In Bangladesh, decommissioned oil tankers and container ships meet their end on the once white beaches of Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal: in the shipbreaking yards, thousands of labourers dismantle these ocean-going leviathans by hand. Barefoot, they use heavy cables to pull the massive ships onto the beach. These workers are known here as the “Lohakhor” – the “Iron Eaters”.

PHP stands for “Peace, Happiness and Prosperity“ and this is the name of the yard where peasant farmers Kholil und Gadu have been seasonal workers for years. They recruit young men for their employers, mainly members of their own families, and take them on the long journey to Chittagong in the south. The annual famine caused by flooding in the rainy season forces these men to leave their homelands.

Director Shaheen Dill-Riaz exposes an exploitative system that only a few of the workers can escape: the seasonal workers from the north not only do the most dangerous work in the yards, but while they are there, they are also forced into debt and become trapped in the system.

The yards lure them with a complicated array of advance payments and loans, but they are forced to buy their food on credit from local grocers – incurring debts that will later be deducted from their wages. Often, there is so little money left over that the workers can't even afford to pay for their journey back home.

“I wanted to know who these people are, who come to us in the south and work for months on starvation wages” Director Shaheen Dill-Riaz, who grew up in the Chittagong area himself, explains what moved him to make this film.

Exhausted, exploited and broken, only a handful of the workers he has accompanied manage to escape the system. Survival at the yard is governed by a deadly vicious circle of desperate need and callous exploitation.

Production Information

Shaheen Dill-Riaz filmed IRONEATERS with a Bengali crew between January and May 2005. He lived with the workers and filmed them for a total of five months.

The film was edited in Berlin by Andreas Zitzmann and post-produced in Hamburg.

Festivals:

Dokfest Munich 2007, Munich, Germany

Film South Asia 2007, Katmandu, Nepal

24. Kasseler Dokumentarfilm- und Videofest, Kassel, Germany

31. Mostra de Cinema Sao Paulo, Brazil

docLisboa 2007, Lisbon, Portugal.

Nürnberger Filmfestival für Menschenrechte, Nürnberg, Germany

Le Festival International Du Film D'Enviornnement, Paris, Frankreich

Max-Ophüls-Festival, Saarbrücken, Germany

Awards:

Grand Prix 2007, Festivals Le Festival International Du Film D'Enviornnement

1. Prize international competition, Film South Asia in Katmandu, Nepal

1. Prize: One-World-Film-Prize NRW 2007

The Director

Shaheen Dill-Riaz was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1969. He was one of the organisers of the Dhaka International Short Film Festival and has worked as a film journalist in Bangladesh. In 1992 he was awarded a cultural fellowship by the Goethe Institute and moved to Berlin. After studying Art History at the Free University of Berlin, he commenced studies as a cameraman at the HFF Konrad Wolf Film School in Potsdam-Babelsberg.

His graduation film SAND AND WATER (2002) shows the life of the people living in the Jamuna River Delta. Shaheen Dill-Riaz accompanies the inhabitants through drought and flooding, and provides stunning observations of how they have to adapt their lives to fit in with the rhythm dictated by the water. "Sand and Water" was awarded the DAAD Prize of the Year and the Babelsberg Media Award in 2002. In his second film THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD (2005), Shaheen Dill-Riaz follows the daily lives of four young people in the mega-city of Dhaka and describes their hopes and yearnings.

IRONEATERS (2007) is his third feature-length documentary film.

Filmography (selection):

- 2005 / 2007: Director, Camera und Script for IRONEATERS, 85 mins documentary film, a cinema co-production: Lemme Film and Bayerischer Rundfunk/Arte, supported by FilmFörderung Hamburg, Kuratorium junger deutscher Film, Nordmedia, Film Büro Bremen and the EED. World distribution: Telepool Munich.
- 2002 / 2005 Director and Camera for THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD, 90 mins, documentary film, a cinema co-production: Lemme Film and ZDF - Das kleine Fernsehspiel, supported by Nordmedia and FilmFörderung Hamburg.
- 2002 Director and Camera for SAND AND WATER, documentary, 110 mins, Digital Betacam: awarded the ORB documentary Film Prize 2002, best graduation film and the DAAD Prize of the Year for outstanding artistic achievement.
- 2000 Camera for MUMBAI-MASALA, Director: Eva Wolf, documentary, 90 mins, Digital Betacam.
- 2000 Camera for HEINZ MEVIUS, Director: Uli Gaulke, documentary, 17 mins, Betacam SP for NDR
- 1999 Camera for GDINYA, Director: Bianca Bodau, drama, 15 mins, 16mm
- 1998 Director and Camera for AUGEN HÖREN, OHREN SEHEN, drama, 8 mins, 16mm
- 1998 Camera for ZUGZWANG, Director: Werner Fernengel, drama, 21 mins, 35mm
- 1997 Camera for MUTTER ORTHESE, Director: Claus Amler, drama, 4 mins, 35mm
- 1997 Camera for GELBLAND, GRÜNLAND, Director: Uli Gaulke, documentary, 15 mins, 16mm
- 1995 Director and Camera for EIN TAG, JEDEN TAG, Bangladesh, drama, 19 mins, Hi-8

An Interview with Shaheen Dill-Riaz (interviewer: Silke Schütze)**1. How did you come across the IRONEATERS' story?**

I've known the place where the ships are dismantled since I was a child, it's not far from my home village, but even then, access to the yards was strictly forbidden for anyone who didn't work there. But we heard lots of stories about the huge ships and the serious industrial accidents. Two men who had been my schoolmates in Junior School were killed in an explosion at the yard, they were working there as Gas Cutters.

Those of us on the outside knew next to nothing about the real working conditions in the yards, but this was also because the workers themselves never talked about everything they experienced in there.

How the ships were actually dismantled was more or less a mystery for us, and that's also how it remained in my memory. My decision to make a documentary about this subject and to investigate the mystery surrounding it was triggered by evocative pictures made by the Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado on the subject, but also by an article by William Langewiesche in "The Atlantic" magazine. I started researching in 2001 and wrote the treatment for the film.

2. Where did you shoot, for how long, and how big was your crew?

We filmed exclusively at the PHP yard. PHP stands for Peace, Happiness and Prosperity. I didn't seek out this yard in particular, I had requested shooting permission from the "Bangladesh Shipbreakers Association" (BSBA) and they suggested the location. I'm very happy that the yard's administration allowed us nearly four months of unrestricted shooting. In total it was a seven-person crew, but there were usually four or five of us on location: the Camera Assistant, the Loader, the Sound Recordist and myself. As well as that, we visited the workers in the north several times. It was very important for me to see and to show where the workers came from.

3. What were the greatest difficulties you had to face while you were shooting?

Getting shooting permission was already hard enough. The most important point I had to get across to those in charge was that I wasn't making a film about environmental pollution. That was their biggest worry. Nevertheless, I had to wait a long time before I could commence shooting. While we were filming, we were faced with the same problems the workers themselves had. At the end of the day, we were observing extremely difficult and even life-threatening working conditions. We stood barefoot with the workers in the mud, balanced on rotting beams and went down into the extremely dangerous innards of the ships. I still can't understand to this day why nothing happened to us. Were we really so careful? Or were we just simply lucky?

4. You point out some sensational social evils in this film: what does the IRONEATERS' situation look like today?

Nothing much has changed since we finished shooting. As far as I know, the ILO (International Labour Organization) provided some courses on safety at work, which many workers have attended, but the actual working conditions at the yards have remained the same. The workers see these courses, which happen every couple of years, as being just a sham.

5. Do you have a vision of how the IRONEATERS' lives could be improved?

The workers' situation can only be improved if the ship owners and shipbreakers stop avoiding their responsibilities. There needs to be a lot more pressure put on by the international community. Both the shipbreaking industry and the ship manufacturers know very well how they could improve the lot of these people.

But it's not enough just to know that, they have to want it. Instead of forcing the workers into debt, those responsible should admit that there is something essentially wrong here. Anyone who has seen these people at work knows that they are paid far too little and that the dangers they face everyday could be easily avoided. There are technical solutions that could reduce the life-threatening risks the workers are exposed to, and there are enough experts who have already approached the yard owners with suggestions for improvement, but these are continually ignored.

6. Can film influence politics and history? How do you see your role as a documentary filmmaker?

I believe that film, like all other art forms, can draw attention to social issues and describe them from a completely new perspective. Whether that can influence politics or history depends very much on the content. There are enough films that have been made with the goal of influencing certain situations, but I don't want to thrust the emotional content down the throats of the viewers, I prefer to deliver a factual record of my observations and hope that the undeniable reality of the images will encourage people to remain aware of the issues. Apart from that, politics are "driven" while history is "written". Personally, I don't believe that politics and history allow themselves to be influenced by art nowadays. My main desire as a filmmaker is for my films to touch the audience and to communicate with them on an emotional level that is rooted in unquestionable reality.

7 Is your new film the antithesis of your film-portrayal of "The Happiest People in the World"?

Lots of viewers have said that the people I portray in "The Happiest People in the World" were not at all happy really. That's true, but they had dreams of how they could become happy. The viewers could identify with these dreams. For me, the workers in "IRONEATERS" are just as unhappy as the workers in a Chinese textile factory. The film addresses a universal theme. We have all obviously resigned ourselves to the fact that our lives are determined by the stock exchanges. So we shouldn't be surprised by the results. For me, "IRONEATERS" shows the consequences of this global attitude.

8. The political documentary is experiencing a renaissance at the moment: how would you explain this trend?

I believe that nowadays feature films tend to deal with political themes very discreetly and subtly. Filmmakers have become very cautious when making any statements. But there is a need for us to adopt clear attitudes and positions regarding the political

issues that face us today, and documentary filmmakers are trying to satisfy these needs. Unfortunately, the way they usually deal with these subjects is too sensationalist for my liking. That might make their films more conspicuous, but they also lose their credibility.

About the Title “IRONEATERS”

IRONEATERS (LOHAKHOR) is a nickname for the people who work in the yards and make a living from dismantling the ships. They are said to be obsessed with iron. LOHA means ‘iron’ and KHOR means ‘addict’, or someone who eats excessively.

Director’s Statement:

With this film, I wanted to immerse myself in a world which had been closed to me for a very long time. I was curious and I had expected to discover something new. But the unbelievable working conditions that the film shows were not the greatest surprise for me, but rather the administrative structure, which drives the people into a deadly debt trap. Even more appalling for me was the realisation that the attitude of this exploitative system is founded on the basic elements of the economic system in which we all live. “IRONEATERS” shows just how far this can go.

The Producers

Lemme Film was founded in 2002 by Kathrin Lemme in Hamburg. The Berliner Cameraman and Dramatic Adviser Michael Weihrauch joined the Lemme Film team in 2004.

Emphasis is put on the production of feature length documentary films. Following the documentary THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD, IRON EATERS is the second successful collaboration between Director Shaheen Dill-Riaz and Producers Kathrin Lemme and Michael Weihrauch.