

# In the footsteps of Wim Wenders

A passion for German cinema took Shaheen Dill-Riaz from Dhaka to Berlin | By Ruth Ciesinger

Shaheen Dill-Riaz's new film "Iron Eaters" has just opened in German cinemas. This story of workers breaking up ships in the scrap yards of Bangladesh has won him many prizes. As a man who knows the luxury of a Western life-style, Dill-Riaz feels he shares the responsibility for the injustices of the global economy.

The people at the French cultural institute were simply not nice enough. Otherwise, Shaheen Dill-Riaz might be producing his movies in Paris instead of Berlin. Back then, in the 1980s, lots of people in Dhaka wanted to learn French. Dill-Riaz was one of them. He had just survived the harsh drill of cadet school. He and his friends were moving aimlessly through the gigantic, chaotic capital, feeling a little lost in the big city but at the same time, alive and hungry for everything new. It was a feeling they relived in the dark auditoriums of the movie theaters. That was the start of a long-distance love affair with European cinema – and the desire to speak the language of the nouvelle vague. But that enthusiasm was dampened by the French cultural institute in Bangladesh which had become "rather stuck up and actually quite expensive." But at the Goethe Institute, which had a Wim Wenders retrospective on offer, the teachers were happy to get enthusiastic language students. A particularly good one like Dill-Riaz was even able to get a small scholarship to travel to the Berlin Film Festival in the early 1990s.

Dill-Riaz is sitting at a wooden table outside a café in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg. The street sweeper does its morning round, and sparrows peck at a cookie on a plate. The 39-year-old Dill-Riaz has lived in this area for years – lots of artists live here because the mood is tolerant and because he sometimes thinks of his old home. "In Dhaka, a lot of things are dirty and out of control," he said, spreading his hands. "And Berlin

is not yet as shiny as Munich or Düsseldorf." He likes that even though the romantic charm of Prenzlauer Berg's dilapidated old buildings is more and more making way for clean, renovated facades.

When he came to Berlin 16 years ago, he was captivated by the German language and by

tied to any particular country or any particular culture." Perhaps he is even saying something about himself. Dill-Riaz is not tied down but he has arrived – with considerable success. His film, "Iron Eaters," started its run in German cinemas just a few weeks ago.

It is his third major project since completing his final movie

tion. For that, "Iron Eaters" has won many prizes: in Paris, Tel Aviv, Katmandu – and in Berlin.

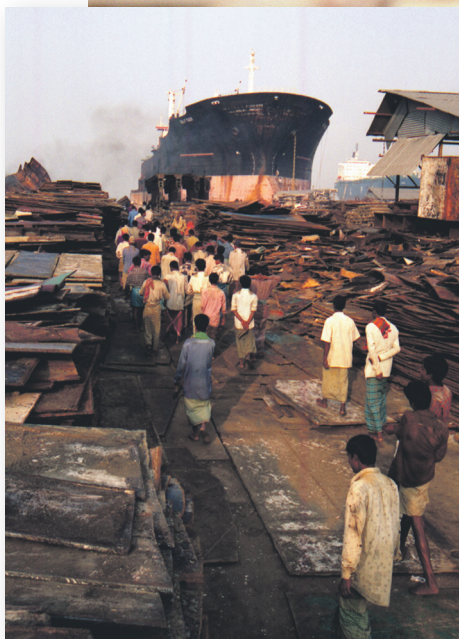
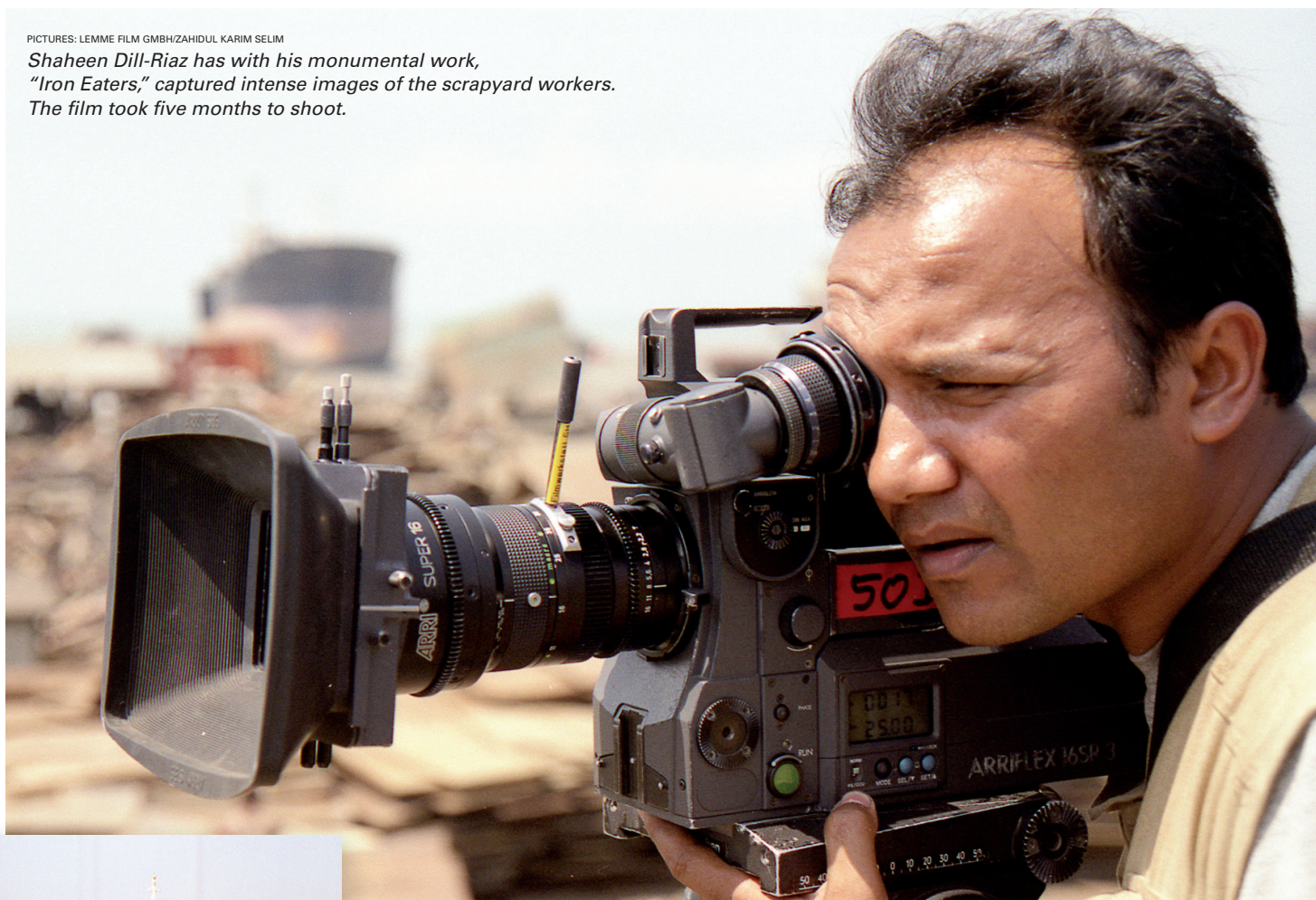
That success will help the new film that Dill-Riaz is currently editing with the cutter Andreas Zitzmann. They work a few streets away from where he lives in Prenzlauer Berg, in an apartment that has been converted

from the fact that somewhere else, people are working for peanuts to provide all of this. That makes this friendly man furious.

But here in Germany, he can draw attention to the problem. And he wants to stay, particularly because he has friends here and a fantastic team in his producers, Kathrin Lemme and Michael

PICTURES: LEMME FILM GMBH/ZAHDUL KARIM SELIM

Shaheen Dill-Riaz has with his monumental work, "Iron Eaters," captured intense images of the scrapyards workers. The film took five months to shoot.



at the Potsdam film school six years ago – a documentary that tells very personal stories and yet crosses international boundaries. "Iron Eaters" describes the life of several very poor workers in Bangladesh, whose fates even the majority of Bangladeshis hear little about. The "iron eaters" use nothing more than steel cables and welding torches to break up the world's biggest oceangoing ships in the scrap yards on the docks of Chittagong. They work plate by plate, until these giants made of

thousands of tons of metal have disappeared and the raw materials go back into circulation in the global economy. If the worker is still alive, he sends a few hundred takas – a couple of euros – back to his family. It is a quiet film, deeply sad but restrained. Dill-Riaz does not confront us with opinions; he always allows space for observa-

tion. Video cassettes are stacked up on shelves; a map of the subcontinent is hanging next to one of the computers. Once again, the subject knows no bounds. Dill-Riaz simply went around Bangladesh visiting Koran schools, where young, often very poor people learn the Koran by heart, thereby obtaining a kind of basic Islamic education. But since September 11, madrasses have been widely regarded as hotbeds of hatred against the West in Dill-Riaz's adopted homeland.

This kind of story caught the attention of television producers and that secured the financing. But it is about more than that, even if this sentence sounds a little unusual coming from the mouth of a slender Bengali: "As a Western European, I feel partly responsible," he said. Because Dill-Riaz lives the privileged life of the many millions here who drink Thai beer and wear T-shirts made in China and who benefit

Weihrauch – that is very important for his films. But he also wants to stay because he has perhaps always been a bit of a loner. The lack of space in overcrowded Bangladesh may have become too much for him. "When I'm there, I always need two or three days to get used to it," he said. The mere fact that in line at the supermarket, a complete stranger will lay a hand on his shoulder – and not take it away – is part of that. In Berlin, no-one just asks, 'so, how are things going with your wife?' Here, your private life is private.

The city leaves you alone with your feelings, for better or worse. It is a challenge that has only ever made Berlin more important to Dill-Riaz. And, because a part of him always goes into his films, he wants to make a movie about Berlin soon. It will be about couples, about city people. Perhaps it will be a bit like the movies that drew him to Germany 16 years ago. ■

