

FILM REVIEW

A Mercenary Prometheus Serving Iraq's Nuclear Ambitions

By DAVE KEHR

The central figure in "Stealing the Fire," a video documentary by John S. Friedman and Eric Nadler that opens today at the Cinema Village, is one Karl-Heinz Schaab, a deceptively drab German technocrat whose only discernable character trait is a weakness for bad wigs.

Mr. Schaab is a colorless man who says little and reveals less. In a Munich court in 1999 he was convicted of selling German nuclear technology to Iraq: specifically, appropriating the secret plans for an array of centrifuges used to produce weapons-grade uranium.

The filmmakers attempt to follow Mr. Schaab's trail in Iraq, where he met with Khidhir Hamza, the former director of Saddam Hussein's nuclear project (who has since defected, and is interviewed in the film) and in Brazil, where, the filmmakers say, he was involved in a plan to build a Brazilian nuclear submarine.

Most of Mr. Schaab's story is told through his defense lawyers. As the film cuts back and forth among Rio de Janeiro, Munich

STEALING THE FIRE

Produced and directed by John S. Friedman and Eric Nadler; director of photography, Slawomir Grunberg; edited by Susanne Rostock; released by CinemaNation. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 95 minutes. This film is not rated.

and Baghdad, with side trips to Zurich and elsewhere, it takes on the exotic coloration of a postwar espionage thriller, something the novelist Eric Ambler might have conceived on a tramp steamer crossing the Black Sea.

Adding a bitter paradox is that the centrifuge technology was first developed by scientists working for the Third Reich's atomic bomb project. Several of those scientist went on to work for the Soviets, the Americans or both during the cold war. The Nazis' corporate partner in their atom program was Degussa, a multinational corporation that continues, the filmmakers say, to peddle atomic technology to governments like those of Iraq and Pakistan. Degussa's corporate history, the film says, includes a contract with the SS to process the gold and



CinemaNation

"Stealing the Fire" follows the trail of Karl-Heinz Schaab, right, shown with a lawyer.

silver fillings taken from the death camp inmates, as well to manufacture Zyklon B, the gas used to murder many of them.

The material is disparate and wide ranging, and it is often difficult to follow Mr. Friedman and Mr. Nadler down all the side streets and back alleys of their investigation. Their credibility is not helped by the corny

rhetorical devices running through the film, including exaggeratedly low camera angles out of "The Third Man," goofy digital stop-motion effects and a percussive score that casts an aura of "Our Man Flint" over the proceedings. But the original reporting at the heart of "Stealing the Fire" provokes questions that demand further investigation.