

## ‘The Big Uneasy’ Unleashes Maddening Flood of Vital Information

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Some of the best documentaries are spawned directly from the raw outrage of a filmmaker intent on sharing vital truths with the unenlightened public. Every frame is fraught with a sense of urgency that keeps viewers on the edge of their seat much like an engrossing popcorn thriller. Yet great passion alone does not make for great cinema.

“The Big Uneasy” is a rather unfortunate assemblage of excellent footage in need of a stronger editor, writer and director. The layers of muck raked in by this film are entirely convincing and deeply infuriating, but they have been thrust onto the screen in jarringly artless fashion by Harry Shearer, a wonderful actor and humorist whose heart is obviously in the right place. He admits in the film’s production notes that he made “Uneasy” in a short period of time in order for it to be completed by the fifth anniversary of the flood. A nice gesture, to be sure, but the film could’ve easily benefited from more post-production tweaks.

As it stands, the picture is an ungainly barrage of statistics, soundbites, diagrams and exhaustive analysis pertaining to the manmade cause of the New Orleans flood. Though various media outlets and government officials (including President Obama) declared Katrina’s path of destruction as a “natural disaster,” Shearer’s film sets out to prove that the historic tragedy could’ve been prevented if the US Army Corps of Engineers had done its job. By guiding the audience step-by-step through the human failings and design flaws that led to the disaster, Shearer does an effective job of building his case against the Army Corps, which is clearly more interested in rebuilding its image than fixing its mess. With better pacing and an assured sense of tone, Shearer could’ve knocked this film out of the park. But alas, “Uneasy” lives up to its name in more ways than one. The picture drags when it should be catching fire, lurching from one sequence to the next as if the filmmakers were merely flipping index cards. Rather than find a cinematic way to explain the backgrounds of various interview subjects, Shearer awkwardly cuts to a close-up of himself as he gets the viewer up to speed. Instead of melding its segments into a cohesive whole, the film consists of episodic segments that never truly gel. “Uneasy” plays more like a promising outline than a final cut.



Harry Shearer’s New Orleans doc The Big Uneasy is now available On Demand.

*Photo credit: The Notions Dept.*

And yet, I suspect that this problematic picture will benefit from being viewed on the small screen rather than in multiplexes. This is the sort of film that Video On Demand was meant for. “Uneasy” lacks the attention-grabbing style that’s essential to sustain interest in a darkened theater. But on television, the film resembles an extended news special uninterrupted by commercial breaks. It’s ideal viewing for moviegoers



equipped with a pause button to momentarily cease the relentless onslaught of information. U.C Berkley professor Robert Bea and former Louisiana State University Hurricane Center deputy director Ivor Van Heerden each conducted scientific investigations into the disaster preparations that were in place prior to the flood. Their solemn voices convey the weariness of informed individuals whose conscience caused them to be deemed an enemy by their fellow colleagues. The film's other major character is Maria Garzino, an Army Corps contract specialist-turned-whistleblower assigned to install defective water pumps. Though her claims of the machinery's shortcomings were initially dismissed, she was eventually hailed as Public Servant of the Year. Her story is one of the few rays of hope in the midst of a story as dark and corrupted as an oil-drenched ocean.

One of the film's most enraging sections centers on the profoundly wrongheaded Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet constructed by the Army Corps that greatly assisted Katrina's floodwaters in engulfing eighty percent of New Orleans. US District Court Judge Stanwood Duvall is on hand to read his verdict in the MR-GO lawsuit, and his damning words against the Army Corps are somewhat reassuring. The film temporarily jolts to life during an all-too-brief excerpt of a heated courtroom scene in which Louisiana Senator David Vitter charges Army Corps Major General Michael Walsh with placing price tags over the cost of human life when selecting options for post-Katrina pump construction. It's sequences like this one that make the film well-worth a viewing, but too much of the screen time is taken up by quotes, graphs and other uncinematic images best left in a textbook.



The Big Uneasy premiered Aug. 16 on DVD and Video On Demand.

Photo credit: The Notions Dept.

Though stars such as Brad Pitt, Jennifer Coolidge and Wendell Pierce provide voice-overs for various sequences, they are required to do little more than recite words and statistics in the style of an educational film. The only star allowed to make an impression is John Goodman (star of HBO's New Orleans-based series "Treme"), who pops up periodically to pose intentionally condescending (or flat-out stupid) questions to New Orleanians that supposedly much of the American public has been asking. His scenes fall flat, but other moments provide genuine insight, such as architect David Waggoner's discussions with the Dutch on how to improve the city's safety. They advise the people of New Orleans to make water a natural part of their environment, keep their soil as moist as possible and teach every single child how to swim. Those skills will most certainly come in handy if the Army Corps' latest \$14 billion protection system is as inept as this film claims it to be. "The Big Uneasy" is not a masterwork on the order of Spike Lee's "When the Levees Broke" or Carl Deal and Tia Lessin's "Trouble the Water," but it is still essential viewing, flaws and all.

*'The Big Uneasy' features Robert Bea, Ivor Van Heerden, Maria Garzino, Michael Grunwald, John Goodman and Harry Shearer. It was written and directed by Harry Shearer. It premiered Aug. 16 on DVD and Video On Demand. It is not rated.*



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