



Unnatural Disaster

Ass-covering and denial in New Orleans

THE BIG UNEASY: Written and directed by Harry Shearer. Cinematography, Arlene Nelson. Editor, Tom Roche. With Robert Bea, Ivor van Heerden and Maria Garzino. 2010. 98 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Harry Shearer's *The Big Uneasy* is not, the filmmaker would like you to know, "a 'Katrina documentary.'" Hard words to avoid when you're discussing what happened in New Orleans in August of 2005, but Shearer has a point: *The Big Uneasy* isn't about the people, or the fleeing, or the FEMA trailers, or the rebuilding. Instead, it takes on the Army Corps of Engineers, making the case that much of the Katrina-related devastation could have been avoided were the city not at the mercy of a deeply flawed, insufficient protection system.

Shearer's film takes some time to find its feet, weaving first through a dizzying series of Mardi Gras images and skipping through a handful of talking heads before settling on three central figures: UC Berkeley professor Robert Bea, a former employee of the Corps, who co-led an investigation of the levee failures; former Louisiana State University Hurricane Center deputy director Ivor van Heerden; and Maria Garzino, a Corps engineer who investigated the water pump system put in place after Katrina and found it defective.

The Big Uneasy contains a wealth of information pulled from news broadcasts, newspaper articles and the report Bea and his colleague Raymond Seed wrote after their investigation, as well as talking-head testimony from Corps employees, journalists and others. From time to time, Shearer veers off into "Ask a New Orleanian" segments introduced by a slightly crazed John Goodman. The bitterness and frustration hiding under the polite, technically focused surface of the film seeps through in Goodman's tone and

in the tight, practiced answers given by the residents Shearer assembles to take on typical questions: Why does the city stay there? Aren't people just sitting around waiting for handouts?

Using the experience of Bea, van Heerden and Garzino, Shearer builds a quietly damning case against the Corps, uncovering a culture of ass-covering and equivocation that puts too much value on easy solutions, even when such solutions are nothing but a Band-Aid over a gushing wound. In a disturbing segment, Shearer reveals that a contractor took the Corps to court over flawed plans — but lost, and was required to build the way the Corps directed.

Bea and van Heerden's findings detail weaknesses in the systems that existed before Katrina; Garzino's unheeded warnings about the water pump system put in place after the hurricane suggest that there's still little interest in getting it right. From time to time, a voice sympathetic to the Corps appears — one man says there are too few actual engineers in the Army Corps of Engineers these days — but whenever the Corps has a chance to speak for itself, it's in a stubborn, bureaucratic tone that says nothing is wrong. It was just too strong, that hurricane.

In his filmmaker's statement, Shearer writes, "Media coverage of tragedies can become so pervasive that we no longer remember the tragedy anymore, we only remember the coverage." *The Big Uneasy* attempts, with moderate success, to return to the tragedy, and to shift the accepted narrative about what really happened in New Orleans. Certain directorial choices weaken Shearer's message: the decision to use section headings is more confusing than clarifying, and editing blunts some of Garzino's most pointed commentary. But if the filmmaking often feels unpolished, the story, as Shearer has pieced it together, has undeniable weight. EW

	THU Aug 25	FRI Aug 26	SAT Aug 27	SUN Aug 28	MON Aug 29	TUES Aug 30	WED Aug 31	THU Sept 1
THE BIG UNEASY	7:15	6:45	6:45	2:00 6:45	6:45	6:45	6:45	6:45
MIDNIGHT IN PARIS	5:45	4:30	4:30	4:30	4:30	4:30	4:30	4:30
BEGINNERS ENDS TONIGHT!	9:00	2:15 9:00	2:15 9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00
THE GUARD								
IN A BETTER WORLD ENDS TONIGHT!	5:10 7:20 9:30	2:45 5:10 7:20 9:30	2:45 5:10 7:20 9:30	5:10 7:20 9:30	5:10 7:20 9:30	5:10 7:20 9:30	5:10 7:20 9:30	5:10 7:20 9:30
SOON:	THE TRIP TABLOID PAGE ONE: INSIDE THE NEW YORK TIMES INCENDIES PROJECT NIM SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN MIRANDA JULY'S THE FUTURE							

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BRIDESMAIDS R 12:30, 3:45, 7:30, 10:15 GREEN LANTERN PG-13 12:25, 3:05, 5:45, 8:30 GREEN LANTERN (3D) PG-13 SPECIAL EVENT PRICING: \$2.00 UPCHARGE ALL TICKETS 11:05, 1:45, 4:25, 7:05, 9:45 THE HANGOVER 2 R 11:20, 1:55, 4:30, 7:40, 10:20 KUNG FU PANDA 2 PG 12:20, 2:40, 5:10, 7:20, 9:30 KUNG FU PANDA 2 (3D) PG SPECIAL EVENT PRICING: \$2.00 UPCHARGE ALL TICKETS 11:15, 1:50, 4:10 MR. POPPER'S PENGUINS PG 11:30, 2:05, 4:35, 7:35, 9:55 PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON STRANGER TIDES PG-13 11:00, 2:00, 5:00, 8:00	PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON STRANGER TIDES (3D) PG-13 SPECIAL EVENT PRICING: \$2.00 UPCHARGE ALL TICKETS 7:00, 10:00 SUPER 8 PG-13 11:35, 2:10, 4:45, 7:45, 10:25 WINNIE THE POOH G 11:10, 1:00, 2:50, 4:40, 7:10, 9:20 X-MEN: FIRST CLASS PG-13 12:10, 3:50, 7:15, 10:10PM
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Cinéarts
A BETTER LIFE PG-13
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Fri. - Sun. (12:10 2:35) 5:00 7:45 10:15
OUR IDIOT BROTHER (R) - ID REQ'D
Fri. - Sun. (12:05 2:20) 4:40 7:00 9:15
COLOMBIANA (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (11:35 2:00) 4:25 7:15 9:45
FRIGHT NIGHT (R) - ID REQ'D Fri. - Sun. (11:55 AM) 5:05 PM
SPY KIDS 4 IN REALD 3D - EVENT PRICING (PG) ★
Fri. - Sun. (2:05 PM) 6:45 PM 9:20 PM
SPY KIDS 4: ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD (PG)
Fri. - Sun. (11:50 AM) 4:30 PM
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ONE DAY (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (12:35) 4:05 6:40 9:25
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Sun. (2:45 PM) 5:10 PM 7:50 PM

THE HELP (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (11:50 AM) 4:20 7:05 10:05
RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (PG-13)
Fri. - Sun. (11:45 2:15) 4:50 7:25 10:20
CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (12:40) 4:00 6:50 9:35
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CAPTAIN AMERICA (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (12:15 PM) 7:05 PM
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IMAX: HARRY POTTER 7 PART 2 3D (PG-13)
Fri. - Sun. 12:00 PM 2:55 PM

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COWBOYS AND ALIENS (PG-13) Fri. - Sun. (1:30) 4:20 7:00 9:30

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