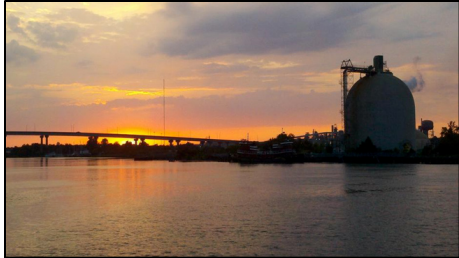


The Bay: Toronto Review

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The Bottom Line

Barry Levinson gives folks another reason to stay out of the water in this queasy biological catastrophe thriller.

Venue

Toronto Film Festival (Midnight Madness; Lionsgate/Roadside Attractions; opens Nov. 2)

Cast

Will Rogers, Kristen Connelly, Kether Donohue, Frank Deal, Stephen Kunken, Christopher Denham, Nansi Aluka

Director

Barry Levinson

Screenwriter

Michael Wallach

Director Barry Levinson teams with the producers of "Paranormal Activity" and "Insidious" on a horror movie that marks a refreshing entry in the found-footage trend.

TORONTO – An unexpected detour for director **Barry Levinson** into mock-doc horror, *The Bay* is an unnerving eco-disaster thriller that refreshes the found-footage trend with surprising effectiveness. Playing by classic B-Movie genre rules but with a mostly convincing veneer of reportorial realism, this lean, micro-budget entry sustains tension while delivering squirms, even if it drops the ball in the wrap-up.

At this point in the game, the bastard children of *The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield* and *Paranormal Activity* have sorely tested the limits of films in which a single camera is somehow never switched off or put down for long. Such lapses in credibility are not totally absent here.

But Levinson and screenwriter **Michael Wallach** mostly manage to circumvent the problem by gathering multiple media sources. These include news cameras, police vehicle cams, surveillance video, smart phones, Androids, Skype and underwater goggle cameras. On top of

that are sound sources such as recorded phone conversations, 911 calls, scientific and medical logs and Coast Guard transmissions.

Editor **Aaron Yanes** makes nimble use of the disparate visual and audio textures to thread together an urgently paced recap of Independence Day 2009 in the seaside town of Claridge, Maryland, on Chesapeake Bay. (The actual shooting location was Georgetown, South Carolina.) Over the course of 24 hours, events spiral into a full-blown catastrophe that claims hundreds of lives.

The extent of the calamity is conveyed up-front, as Donna Thompson (**Kether Donohue**) addresses the camera with grave seriousness to blow the lid off secrets carefully concealed from the media. The conceit is that a wealth of digital evidence was confiscated in the wake of the mass tragedy and has been accessed three years later via a Govleaks website.

An inexperienced student reporter interning at the time for a local news channel, Donna was assigned to do fluff coverage of the Fourth of July festivities. Levinson and Wallach nod wryly to every watery terror movie since *Jaws* and the original *Piranha* in this setup, as Donna takes in the crab-eating contest and interviews the beauty queen, who gushes, "I think it's every girl's dream to be Miss Crustacean!"

Cutting back and forth between her awkward TV coverage and shaken present-day interview, Donna chats on-camera with the Mayor (**Frank Deal**), oblivious to his culpability in ignoring danger signs and to the fact that he would be dead several hours later.

We quickly learn that the bodies of two divers were fished out of the bay and while their deaths were blamed on rogue bull sharks, the bites didn't fit that profile. There's also the matter of 45 million pounds of chicken excrement being dumped in the water each year from the massive local poultry industry, all of it loaded with chemical steroids. Then there was that nuclear reactor leak in 2002 that caused gradual ground seepage.

When people start turning up with bleeding rashes, boils, bubbling lesions and parts of their tongues missing, *The Bay* takes shape like a viral epidemic thriller in the vein of *Contagion*. Working ER at the hospital, Dr. Abrams (**Stephen Kunken**) is mobbed by patients presenting bizarre symptoms resistant to treatment. His examinations point to twin parasites eating their bodies externally and internally. (Watch the trailer below.)

Basing their story on the toxic pollutants and flesh-eating bacteria increasingly prevalent in the Chesapeake Bay, Levinson and Wallach cook up a mutant breed of the isopod that enters a fish through its gills and devours its tongue, replacing that organ with its own body. Of course it's not long before humans are playing host.

There are holes, such as failing to provide an adequate explanation as to why the parasites all get crazy hungry on the same day. But that's also part of the fun of a movie that mixes an earnest faux-documentary cautionary tale with horror and gore conventions.

Character development is less a priority than the escalating sense of alarm, and the sinister evidence that authorities outside Claridge are working on containment, not solution.

In addition to Donna, who continues documenting events with her cameraman even after the station shuts down her broadcasts on FBI orders, there are a handful of key conduits to the story. Dr. Abrams conducts a long Skype exchange with the Center for Disease Control, refusing to abandon the hospital even after his staff has fled. Prior to the July 4 events, oceanographers Sam (**Christopher Denham**) and Jaqueline (**Nansi Aluka**) record their studies of infected fish, discovering that much of the bay is a marine dead zone. And a young married couple, Alex (**Will Rogers**) and Stephanie (**Kristen Connolly**), shoot vacation video as they sail in from another town, bringing their baby to visit his grandparents.

While Connolly was one of the leads in *The Cabin in the Woods*, the actors mainly hail from the supporting-player end of the film spectrum, or from the New York stage. Using unfamiliar faces here was a good choice in upping the sense of ordinary people in an it-could-happen predicament, though Donohue is a little flat as the central witness. Denham (a lead in the indie drama *Sound of My Voice*, also seen at the Toronto festival in **Ben Affleck's** *Argo*) is an appealing, wiry presence; he has a nice running joke concerning Sam's difficulty understanding his colleague's French accent.

Once they have laid waste to the entire town, littering Main Street with half-chewed corpses, the filmmakers are less resourceful in finding a way to wrap things up. The ending is rather abrupt, and sticklers for rulebook horror plotting might gripe that we don't get to see someone save the day. But the evidence of a government cover-up to avoid widespread disruption of summer tourism and trade along the Eastern seaboard gives a chilling note to the conclusion. While the visceral scares are a distant second to the tense atmosphere, Levinson maintains suspense, aided by **Marcelo Zarvos'** ominous score.

Stepping outside his standard range and angling for a different demographic, the director has found a novel way to expand his collection of Baltimore movies.

Venue: Toronto Film Festival (Midnight Madness; Lionsgate/Roadside Attractions; opens Nov. 2)

Production companies: Baltimore Pictures, Haunted Movie

Cast: Will Rogers, Kristen Connolly, Kether Donohue, Frank Deal, Stephen Kunken, Christopher Denham, Nansi Aluka

Director: Barry Levinson

Screenwriter: Michael Wallach; story: Levinson, Wallach

Producers: Barry Levinson, Jason Blum, Steven Schneider, Oren Peli

Executive producers: Brian Kavanaugh-Jones, Jason Sosnoff, Colin Strause Greg Strause

Director of photography: Josh Nussbaum

Production designer: Lee Bonner

Music: Marcelo Zarvos

Costume designer: Emmie Holmes

Editor: Aaron Yanes

Visual effects: Hydraulx

Sales: IM Global

R rating, 84 minutes