

Trouble the Water

REVIEW BY ROB NELSON

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Directors: Tia Lessin & Carl Deal

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Where: New York and Los Angeles



Spike lee's when the levees broke will likely always be the Katrina documentary of record, its four hours serving as an immutable monument to what was once in Louisiana and what remains. But *Trouble the Water*, built around 15 minutes of eye-of-the-storm video shot by then 24-year-old Kimberly Rivers Roberts will stand as the definitive experiential chronicle of the catastrophe. Indeed, almost nothing recorded post-hurricane by pro videographers Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, with the exception of an already legendary musical scene by rapper Roberts herself, comes close to matching the brute force of that low-res Hi-8 footage. Which for Lessin and Deal—whose acute editing offers a de facto survey of doc subgenres from amateur autoethnography to network news, Bush-whacking spin, and tourist-commission propaganda, not to mention their own Sundance prize-winning ode to uplifting endurance against the odds—is very much the point.

No doubt Roberts's raw footage—beginning with the proverbial calm before the storm, soon broken by the rumble of National Guard trucks, the howls of sixth-sensing dogs, and the intensifying thump of wind battering the camcorder's condenser mic—has its own artistic integrity and historical value. (One hopes it will be presented intact as a DVD supplement.) New Yorkers Lessin and Deal—who arrived in New Orleans in search of a story and stumbled upon Roberts, her husband Scott, and her invaluable tape—circumvent the risk of being accused of exploitation by using the material not only for effective storytelling but also as an implicit critique of what most salaried TV journalists would call the all-important “perspective.” Thus *Trouble the Water* dares to break the spell of Roberts's ground-zero vérité with an elliptical cut to an anonymous newsgatherer's pricey helicopter shot: above it all in more ways than one, the aerial view at once shows everything—the city underwater—and nothing, at least as far as Roberts is concerned. In the context of Lessin and Deal's doc, it reveals the limits of what we saw from that privileged perch at home in front of the tube.

When we next see Roberts, it's through another lens—that of the two pros, who do well not to impose themselves unduly on the survivor's efforts with her husband, and other Ninth Ward refugees, to collect their infuriatingly elusive FEMA checks. Still, in some respect, the struggle that Deal and Lessin succeed in capturing is that of Roberts's attempt to regain the artistic control she had lost—either during the storm, when her camcorder's battery ran out, or later, when she handed her footage over to Lessin and Deal in the hope that it would be seen in some form. To identify with her temporarily compromised authorship is to feel goosebumps when she recovers a recording of her song “Amazing,” presumed lost in the flood, and proceeds to perform it for the camera.

What could anyone possibly hope to say of “Amazing” that isn't right there in Roberts's impassioned delivery of her own lyrics as she retakes center stage? “I don't need you to tell me that I'm amazing/C'mon and take a look and know that I'm amazing.” Coming near the end of *Trouble the Water*, the performance is an old-school showstopper; never mind that we're watching a barebones shot of a woman in a tiny bedroom rapping to a boombox—for a brief moment, socioeconomic adversity is transcended. Not that the artist needs me or any other movie critic to tell her that.