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HOME THEATER

A SECOND LOOK

A classic gets a new release on life

Music licensing issues kept Charles Burnett's experimental 'Killer of Sheep' out of sight for years. Enter Milestone.

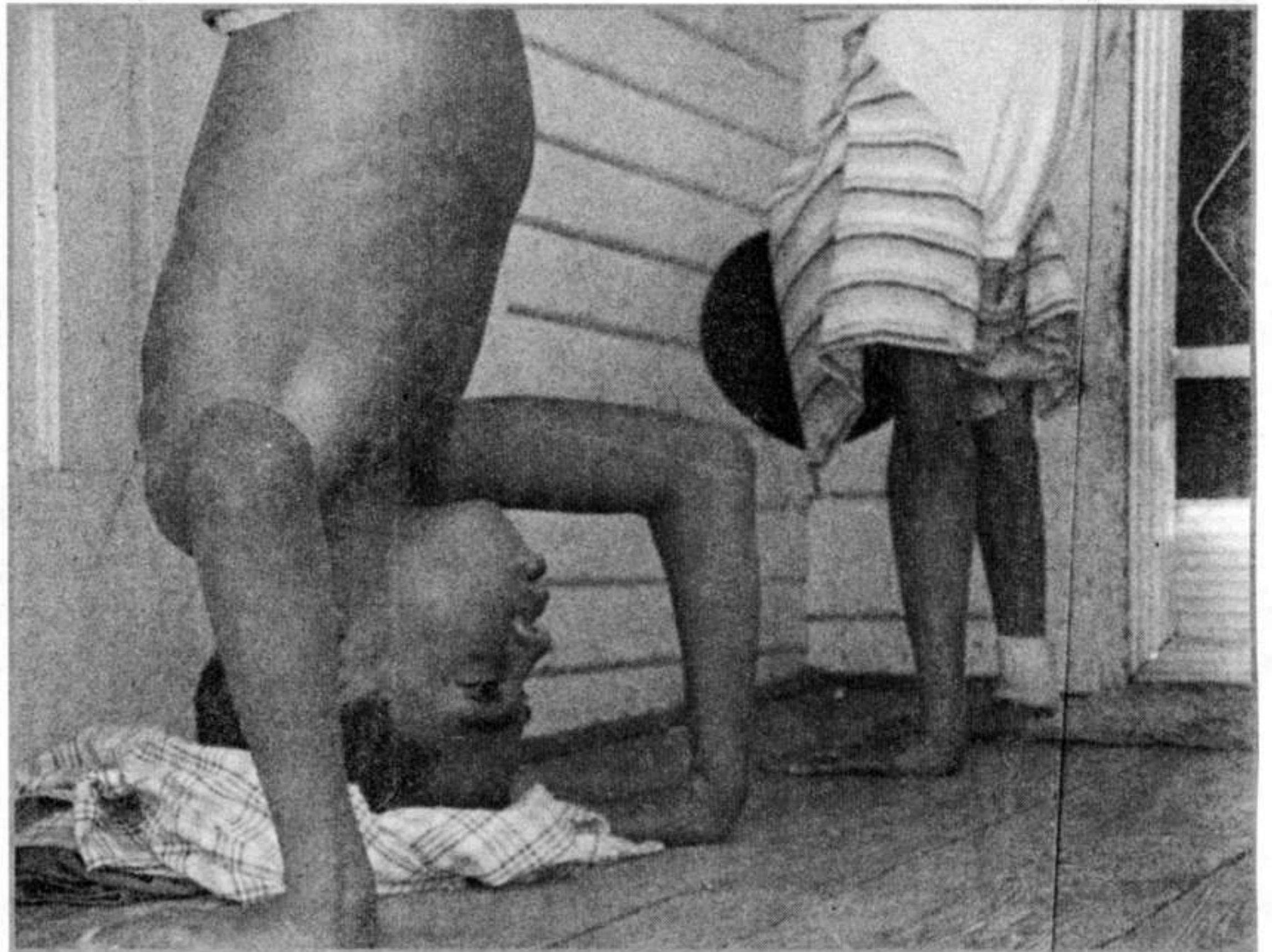
By DENNIS LIM
Special to The Times

FOR much of his three-decade career, Charles Burnett has been championed as an unheralded master by the relatively few who've seen his films. He works infrequently, and many of his movies have suffered some combination of producer interference and marketing negligence. Before the long-overdue release this year of his debut feature, "Killer of Sheep," this pioneer of socially and politically conscious African American cinema was best known for being somewhat unknown.

Completed in 1977, "Killer of Sheep" — which finally arrives on DVD this week — is a landmark of American independent film, remarkable not just for what it put on screen but also for the story of its making and its strange afterlife. The episodic, impressionistic portrait of a working-class neighborhood in Watts originated as Burnett's master's thesis film at UCLA. Working on weekends with a nonprofessional cast and crew, he shot the movie himself, with borrowed equipment, donated black-and-white 16-millimeter film stock and very little money (most of it his own).

Running a compact 87 minutes, "Killer of Sheep" drifts through the daily existence of a stoic slaughterhouse worker, Stan (Henry Gayle Sanders), who is being steadily numbed by his dreadful job. Scenes of Stan at work and of animals herded to their deaths alternate with scenes of the neighborhood kids at play. Instead of a traditional plot, what emerges is a sense of place, family and community.

There is a plaintive, dignified beauty to Burnett's grainy images, and the abundant blues



Milestone Film & Video

BACK IN THE DAY: "Killer of Sheep," Burnett's 1977 UCLA master's thesis, is an impressionistic depiction of life in Watts. It was cited as a "national treasure" by the Library of Congress in 1990.

and jazz ballads on the soundtrack are achingly lovely. But the movie doesn't sentimentalize the lives of its characters — moments of pure joy coexist with an undercurrent of despair and frustration. The result often suggests an experimental version of an Italian neo-realist classic or a curious hybrid of John Cassavetes' raw immediacy and Jean Renoir's noble tenderness.

Political realism

BURNETT, who was born in Vicksburg, Miss., came of age at the height of the civil rights movement. He and his UCLA contemporaries Billy Woodberry, Julie Dash and Haile Gerima did not make activist or militant films, but their early work was, in part, a reaction to what they considered the degradations of blaxploitation.

Their commitment to realism, to representing with accuracy and respect the recognizable, present-day lives of black people, was profoundly political.

Because "Killer of Sheep" was never meant to be shown commercially, Burnett never bothered to clear the music rights, which severely hampered efforts to release it in later years. In any case, the film was not proclaimed an instant masterpiece. In a 1978 review, a New York Times critic complained about "the director's arty detachment from his material," though the film was a hit with European critics and programmers. It won a prize at the Berlin International Film Festival, and Burnett received financing from German television for his second feature, "My Brother's Wedding" (1983).

Over time, "Killer of Sheep" became known as a lost gem. It

was cited as a "national treasure" by the Library of Congress and inducted into the National Film Registry in 1990. Its reemergence this year is thanks to Milestone Film & Video, which spent six years and \$150,000 securing the music. (Steven Soderbergh donated half that amount.) In the end, only one of Burnett's original music choices, Dinah Washington's rendition of "Unforgettable" over the closing credits, had to be replaced — the new version uses Washington's "This Bitter Earth" instead.

For the first time in years, this underappreciated director's profile is on the rise — a recut version of "My Brother's Wedding" recently appeared in theaters and is available on the two-disc "Sheep" DVD. With any luck, there will soon be new Charles Burnett films to discover, not just old ones to unearth.