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Nightjohn, Where Are You?

By Ali Rashid Abdullah

I got a call recently from a friend. "I heard Blockbuster has *Nightjohn*," she reported. She is a fellow teacher in the Oakland Public Schools, and, after viewing the film at last year's San Francisco Film Festival, I had told her to keep her eyes peeled for it. Well, I ran up my account with Pacific Bell calling Blockbuster video stores all over the Bay Area, all to no avail. *Nightjohn* had begun to seem to be more of a rumor than a reality.

Why the panic about this film? Let me begin at the beginning. I was drawn to this film because it was written and directed by Charles Burnett. You might be familiar with some of his previous work, such as *Killer of Sheep*, *To Sleep with Anger*, and *The Glass Shield*, films that established him as a serious talent. For anyone interested in high-quality films that present the American experience seen through an Afrocentric lens, Charles Burnett is a must.

Nightjohn proved to be well worth the trip to the film festival. The setting is a plantation in the deep South sometime prior to the Civil War. The action centers around the life of a young girl who is inspired to learn to read by a mysterious slave determined to teach her. If you are familiar with the biography of Frederick Douglass, for example, you know that as far as the slave-master was concerned, reading was a form of escape. And you also know what happened to captives who were caught attempting to escape. So we are talking about high drama here. And Burnett, masterful storyteller that he is, plays it for all it's worth from beginning to end.

After the film, as is customary in many festival screenings, the director was on hand to receive audience

feedback and respond to questions. Unfortunately, I had tickets for another film that was scheduled to start in ten minutes. But I stayed as long as I could, long enough to hear Burnett explain that *Nightjohn* was a Disney made-for-TV production aimed at family audiences.

Wait! Keep hope alive! It was baaad! It was the most realistic depiction of American chattel slavery I have seen on film, with one exception. That exception was an Italian film, *Farewell, Uncle Tom*, directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prospero of *Mondo Cane* and *Africa Addio* fame.

I'll bet you never heard of *Fare-*

ON FILM



By Kristen Loken

It's a film that graphically exposed me to the indomitable strength and spirit of my people. But I can't find it anywhere.

and other sordid perversions that plantation owners and other whites inflicted upon their helpless captives—the whole rotten mess from beginning to end. To my knowledge, this film is unavailable. I have tried every film archive I know in the United States and even written Jacopetti in Italy but received no response.

Now *Nightjohn* also seems to be receding into the realm of American denial and obscurity. I understand it was aired on the Disney channel where it was viewed by someone who recommended it be shown at the San Francisco Film Festival, after which it has disappeared from view.

What is especially disheartening about this deep-six scenario is the stench of conspiracy. I don't mean clandestine meetings in dark alleys or penthouse suites (although we know from history that no tactics should be ruled out). I'm talking about a much more widespread form of conspiracy, the kind that for many is reflexive, if not instinctual. There is one group of white folks, as they prefer to be called, who seem to spontaneously act to preserve the racist status quo by keeping certain ideas and infor-

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from going to see it. *New York Times* film critic A.H. Weiler gave it a lousy review that was buried deep in the paper.

The film graphically depicts every aspect of American chattel slavery beginning with the process of acquiring captives in Africa, marching them to the coast, warehousing them in dungeons there, the nightmarish ordeal of the Middle Passage on slave ships, warehousing them once again in port on the American coast, the degradation of the auction block, a mind-bending, will-breaking life of toil on the plantation, all culminating with a head-chopping, plantation-burning slave insurrection. Beatings, killings, rapes,

well, Uncle Tom, and that's my point. When films are made that do not project an image of African Americans as "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks," consider yourself lucky when you get to see them. Author Donald Bogle's excellent study of the same title chronicles this distortion on film, as does Marlon Riggs' *Color Adjustment*, the probing documentary of the same distortions served up on TV.

Farewell, Uncle Tom played in New York back in 1972 for about one week. It was rated X, perhaps due to occasional nudity—at least that would be the legal dodge to dissuade the public

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mation under wraps. And then there are their counterparts who seem to not want to know. Which means that, as we approach the 21st century, there are numerous white Americans in mass denial of their history. And they like it like that.

Just a few years ago, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, way in the back pages, how "Four signers of a Republican-inspired 'Contract with Antelope Valley Families' won positions on school boards in the booming suburbs of Los Angeles..." Key among the initiatives they pledged to achieve was to "prohibit 'revisionist' history teaching of the contributions of minorities in America." Like I said, they don't seem to want to know, and they don't seem to want their children to know.

Turns out my friend did get to see *Nightjohn*. Apparently another educator thought it had merit because my friend viewed it at a conference for English teachers this year at Asilomar State Park. As an educator myself, I believe the film has an important message for students. Wanting my students to see it, I called Disney immediately after the festival to inquire about projected airings. Nothing was scheduled, nor has the film

aired since. My next strategy was to purchase a copy of the video myself. The price was discouraging, but the telephone representative advised me to be patient; the price would most likely drop in a few months. It did. And it has stayed at \$96 for the last six months. Blockbuster quoted me the same price.

Now I can get *Booby Call*, *How to be a Player*, *The Nutty Professor*, *Nothing to Lose*, and *Original Gangstas* all together for \$96. And I can rent them at virtually every video shop in America. But I can't find *Nightjohn* nowhere, an 'I gotta spen' haf a paycheck to buy it. Wha's up widdat?

I guess some of you folks are saying, "We gave you *Amistad*. What do you people want now?" Hey! I'm grateful Steven Spielberg was inspired to make *Amistad*. He deserves to be commended. He presented the United States in one of its noble moments considering its infamous record as an unapologetic slavocracy. The inhumane, savage brutality of the Middle Passage, accurately depicted in *Amistad*, is an image that the world should never forget, alongside the images of concentration camps in Nazi Germany. *Farewell, Uncle Tom* attempted to implant other images that deserve equal exposure, but I'm grateful that Providence allowed Spielberg to accomplish what he did.

There has been some criticism in the African-American community that Spielberg did not deal with the sub-

ject from an Afrocentric perspective. Such a perspective might have focused in greater detail on the African experience as captives in Africa and Cuba. More time might have been allotted to the Africans' character development—their feelings, concerns, conflicts, and discussions—rather than merely settling for facial gestures and bodily postures of victimization. The reaction of free and enslaved African Americans to this incident is another arena that might have been more deeply explored. Perhaps, as continental Europeans, Messrs. Jacopetti and Prospero felt less constrained in their presentation of American history than do European Americans.

In any event, in the final analysis, the filmmaker must prioritize. Spielberg picked one incident from the many he might have chosen from America's history of slavery to make a feel-good film for white America. He played it safe. In the bargain, Africans and African Americans were not demeaned and the details were historically accurate, despite the relatively peripheral roles they were assigned. Considering the record, his effort was an accomplishment.

Speaking personally, I do not expect European Americans to deal with subject matter from an Afrocentric perspective. When I see African-American subject matter in the hands of European-American filmmakers, I anticipate a Eurocentric perspective. Unfortunately, as is too often the case in American society,

Eurocentric and racist have become synonymous terms. *Amistad* was an exception to that pattern: it managed to be Eurocentric but not racist.

On the other hand, *Nightjohn* is a film written and directed by an African American. It too has historical merit in terms of its accurate recreation of a period in American history. As such, it has relevance in the lives of white Americans and should be viewed by them. But Burnett's sensitivity to the psychological, cultural, historical, and emotional concerns of African Americans gives *Nightjohn* special significance for them. Slavery remains an undissolved gallstone in the social body of African Americans that requires the treatment of a highly skilled practitioner. Burnett has proven his expertise.

Nightjohn made an indelible impression on me as an African American. As a historical document, it graphically exposed me to the indomitable strength and spirit of my people when faced with a seemingly hopeless set of obstacles—slavery in the South and racist discrimination in the North. Burnett's empathetic writing and sensitive directing enabled me to identify with the personal experiences of the characters and thereby relive an experience that has given shape to African Americans' personality and character, both as individuals and as a group.

Every day I see African-American children struggling to learn to read, with some on the verge of giving up. *Nightjohn*, realistically rather than

trite, places one of their ancestors in a similar situation. In his discussion following the screening, Burnett revealed that the actor in this role was a child recruited from the Southern town where the film was made; she had never acted before. Her performance is a testament to his genius as a director.

Burnett, who seemed absolutely candid in his remarks, spoke about one scene which he compromised in consideration of the targeted "family audience." As I recall, Burnett said, "He probably would have killed her," as he spoke of a scene near the end involving the little girl. Otherwise, he pulled no punches.

So here on the brink of African-American History Month, we have two films dealing with the historical issue of American chattel slavery—one by an African-American filmmaker and one by a European-American filmmaker. Both turned out to be admirable accomplishments, but only one is accessible to the film-going public. The Afrocentric film was permitted only a fraction of the cost of the European, which had an astronomical budget. The Afrocentric film was unpromoted, minimally aired, and languishes in file X somewhere. The European film was given extensive promotion, widespread distribution, and will probably be nominated for an Academy Award. As the comedian Mel Brooks might explain, "So what's wrong with that? It's good to be the king."