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[Back to The Onion](#)

[Archives](#) | [features](#) | [cinema](#) | [music](#) | [video](#) | [words](#) | [fttf](#) | [justify](#) |

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[Columns](#)

[Justify Your Existence](#)

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### **Finding Buck McHenry** **(Showtime)**

Director Charles Burnett has never quite gotten a fair break. In 1977, he helped pioneer modern independent black cinema with *Killer Of Sheep*, a much-lauded but little-seen (thanks to a lack of video distribution) drama about working-class life. When Burnett finally received studio financing, he didn't fare much better: *To Sleep With Anger* barely played theaters, while the provocative if uneven police drama *The Glass Shield* was re-cut before its release. Burnett makes challenging, character-driven films about ideas and issues, specifically issues of race, making him far from the first choice of risk-averse studios. In the past few years, Burnett has moved into work for cable TV, a more hospitable venue for his style of film if in many ways a less satisfying one. Still, his cable tenure has allowed him to make the touching plantation drama *Nightjohn* and the notable but less ambitious *Finding Buck McHenry*. Callow youth Michael Schiffman stars as a baseball-card-obsessed little-leaguer who grows despondent when his own career behind the plate fails to measure up to his sports-card heroes. Cut from the team, he balks at joining an expansion team but begins to change his mind after receiving valuable tips from kindly school custodian Ossie Davis. Davis agrees to coach the new team, seeing an opportunity to help his antisocial, recently orphaned grandson. But he starts to have second thoughts when Schiffman notes the similarities between Davis and legendary Negro Leaguer Buck McHenry, a pitcher whose career (and apparently life) ended after a brush with the law. Based on a young-adult novel and aimed at children, *Finding Buck McHenry* will probably work best with young audiences. Burnett doesn't do much to get beyond the ready-for-cable style, but he does an admirable job focusing on the film's real issues. As it progresses, Schiffman's problems fade into the background, allowing Davis' haunted past to take center stage. Davis could probably provoke tears appearing in a cat-food commercial, and his restrained, understated style allows him to create a character believably pressed down enough by discrimination to fake his own death but resilient enough to go on. A solid, substantive children's film made even better by the talent in front of and behind the camera, with any luck *McHenry* will help Burnett find the audience that, through no fault of his own, has eluded him. —Keith Phipps

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