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Independent Lens

◀◀◀ CHARLES BURNETT

CHARLES BURNETT'S FIRST FEATURE FILM, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), remains to this day a near-mythic object, one of the first 50 films inducted into the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, yet rarely screened and never issued on video owing to unresolved copyright issues. Meanwhile, Burnett's second feature, *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), has suffered such a clandestine existence as to make *Killer of Sheep* seem like *Titanic* by comparison — when I spoke with Burnett during the course of writing this story, he told me that even he doesn't have a copy of it. And Burnett's work of the subsequent two decades has proved scarcely more available. Simply put, there may be no better contemporary American filmmaker whose films are more difficult to come by — or who has more richly evoked the infinite varieties and textures of life, black or otherwise, in our city.

He wasn't born here — who was? — but Burnett moved to Los Angeles from his native Mississippi as a child and took an engineering degree from LACC before, in the early 1970s, making his way to the film program at UCLA. There, in the company of classmates Billy Woodberry (*Bless Their Little Hearts*) and Haile Gerima (*Bush Mama*), he emerged as one of the leading lights in a movement of young African-American filmmakers keen to show their people, and the city they inhabited, in ways rarely glimpsed in mainstream movies. Reflecting on their work in his 2003 essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, Thom Andersen singled out Burnett as the herald of a "Los Angeles neo-realism" that ran in blinding contrast to cinematic depictions of L.A. as an oasis of beachside cottages, hilltop palaces and the upwardly mobile upper middle class — a city that ceased to exist south of the 10 freeway or east of the 110.

So the geography mapped by *Killer of Sheep* wasn't merely physical, but sociological — a South-Central inhabited not just by pimps, hookers and OGs, but by poverty-line families eking out meager existences while hoping against hope for change to come. Told as a series of episodes from the life of a Watts slaughterhouse worker struggling to hold his family together, even as his identification with the beasts he slays begins to weigh heavy on him, the film juxtaposes impressionistic fragments from the lives of the working poor against Paul Robeson singing "What Is America to Me?" And yet, what makes *Killer of Sheep* so unforgettable, so Renoir-like in its humanism, are the scatterings of joy Burnett finds amid the gray gloom: fleeting moments — a junk-strewn lot transformed into a playground by the power of a child's imagination, a husband and wife

WHO WE ARE

PHOTO BY KEVIN SCANLON

holding each other in a long-forgotten embrace — that are like mirages in a desert.

To see that film again today — on those rare occasions when one can see it — is to be reminded of just how much American movies in general, and African-American movies in particular, have suffered for not having Burnett as a regular voice at the table. (Instead, we get well-heeled minstrel shows like *Crash* and *Hustle & Flow*.) Indeed, in the years following *Killer*, Burnett's own life ran nearly as lean as those of the characters he depicted. *My Brother's Wedding*, which told of a Watts dry cleaner marooned somewhere between the professional aspirations of his family and the thug lives of his friends, was plagued by production problems (including the quitting of the lead actor — twice) and never properly released. And by the time of a 1997 *New York Times* profile tellingly headlined "A Director Who Collects Honors, Not Millions," Burnett was candid about the fact that were it not for the MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" he received in 1988, he might have had to abandon his filmmaking career altogether.

Luckily he didn't, and the result was *To Sleep With Anger* (1990), one of the great movies of the '90s and a magnificent dark comedy about how the arrival of a meddlesome stranger (brilliantly played by Danny Glover) sparks a collision of tradition and modernity, religion and superstition, for an extended middle-class family. Another story of Watts, it is a soulful evocation of a place spilling over with black history and folklore, where backyards teem with hen houses and chicken coops, where God works in mysterious ways and where Old Scratch himself may show up on your doorstep with a couple of tattered suitcases and his hat in his hand. It was also the first of Burnett's films to achieve something close to wide distribution, and he followed it in 1994 with an honest-to-goodness Miramax movie, *The Glass Shield*, a bristling fact-based story of racism and other wrongdoing in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office.

Burnett's characters are forever wrestling with demons — literally in the case of the eponymous protagonist of the underrated farce *The Annihilation of Fish* (1999); figuratively for *The Glass Shield*'s idealistic black deputy navigating his way through an all-white precinct, or for the rebel slave Nat Turner, the subject of an excellent 2003 Burnett documentary. Burnett himself is no stranger to demon wrestling. For all his triumphs, he has too rarely been able to make films on his own terms, and so he has turned increasingly to television, where the material hasn't always been deserving of his gifts (an exception being the lyrical and touching Disney Channel feature *Nightjohn*, about a freed slave who returns to plantation life in order to teach other slaves how to read). There are hopeful signs: As this article goes to press, Burnett is in the final editing stages on what may be his most ambitious project to date — a biopic of Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia — and the folks at the invaluable Milestone Film & Video confirm that their long-standing project to issue both *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding* on DVD should reach fruition by year's end. Not that Burnett seems likely to ever rest on his laurels. Such, to borrow the title of his recent film on the history of blues music, would be to risk warming by the devil's fire.

—Scott Foundas