MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH **CHARLES BURNETT**

The pioneering African-American director Charles Burnett was a film student at UCLA when he made *Killer of Sheep* (1977), a powerful independent film that combines blues-inspired lyricism and neo-realism in its drama of an inner-city slaughterhouse worker and his family. *Killer of Sheep*, now regarded as a landmark in American independent cinema, was part of a small group of films that became known as "The L.A. Rebellion." During a retrospective of his films at the Museum of the Moving Image, he introduced a screening of *The Killer of Sheep* and then participated in a wide-ranging discussion moderated by culture critic Greg Tate.

Introduction to *Killer of Sheep* by Charles Burnett (January 7, 1995):

CHARLES BURNETT: Thanks for coming out. Perhaps you'd like to ask some questions—I feel more comfortable doing that rather than just speaking. (Laughs) Well then, let me start. You'll have to excuse me, I have this flu; it's not contagious. (Laughter)

I made this film [*Killer of Sheep*] years ago. It was 1973 or somewhere along in there. It wasn't for distribution or anything like that. When we were making films—Haile Gerima is in the back somewhere, as well—we were in film school, trying to make films that were going to do something positive. And this film was made in response to films that were made to show exploitation of the black community in workshops and things like that. It was a sort of social realism. They were sort of formula: you do A, B, C, and this other thing would happen.

I lived in this environment, and things weren't quite working out the way you hoped they would. The most one can do is just endure their circumstances, to a certain extent. Sure, you can go to school and get educated, but the people I grew up with, this was their lives. I wanted to do a film that would reflect what they were experiencing.

I was going to college at the time. You experience change in your life, and you realize that you—I'm jumping around, but there's this notion that if you are an artist you speak for the black community. You find out right away that you don't, sometimes in embarrassing ways. I was very much aware of it and so I didn't want to make a movie that was going to impose my values. I just wanted to make a movie that had all these incidents and somehow reflected a narrative, told a story, came back on itself and gave you a sense of these people's lives. That was the idea behind this film.

At the time it was made, it wasn't like Park City, where you can make a film and get a three-picture deal. We had jobs from nine to five. We made films because we thought, well, it was the thing to do. Hopefully someone would show them in churches or [to] small groups to affect social change.

Haile, he went to Howard [University] and they had a conference. [*Killer of Sheep*] was screened there, years later. It was left in a can. It picked up word of mouth from there, it sort of got around. People got interested and it's gotten where it is. Well, that's my spiel.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you talk about films and filmmakers that have inspired your work, or filmmakers that you admire?

BURNETT: Well actually, I admire just about every filmmaker who makes a movie. I say that seriously, because after you've made movies and feature films, it's a war, you know? You can really

appreciate just staying in the business and getting a film done. When I was making this film, I had all the control. It was done over the weekends; friends were acting in it and so forth. It wasn't this steamroller effect where every day there was so many shots or you *had* to do it. Now, almost ninety percent of what I have to do has nothing to do with the creative side of film. I have very little time to deal with actors, and very little time to deal with the concept of filmmaking. It's all about politics and about trying to outwit somebody else—a producer or someone like that.

I know there are a lot of filmmakers who get a lot of flack because this film fails or whatever is at the box office, but there are so many reasons why a film fails. As long as the films that they make are not pornographic, and perpetuate this myth about black people—I mean, if there's something decent about their film, and it still fails, I [still] really admire that person as a filmmaker. Ousmane Sembène, for example; and there's Haile; there's Julie Dash; and there are a number of filmmakers that I really admire. George Evans, a documentary filmmaker, is one I really, really like, as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The main actor, did he have a message?

BURNETT: Well, I thought about this character, because when I used to catch the bus to school, I ran into this kid—he was younger than I was at the time, he was a teenager—who worked in a slaughterhouse. I couldn't imagine a young man working in a slaughterhouse, killing animals, and the kind of toll it must take on him. I did the film in a slaughterhouse, and the next few years, I was a vegetarian. (Laughter) Now, I'm not. But, you know, I wish I were.

But it really affects you. You smell blood and it gets into your system. You become dysfunctional, I think. This is what happened to this guy—he was living a nightmare. He went to work and it was a nightmare. It affected his family and everything else. It was not only the slaughter house, but his environment as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The scenes with the children, did you give them some idea of what you wanted, or did you just turn the camera on?

BURNETT: No. The thing about independent film is that when it's done very cheaply, you have to script everything and storyboard it because you know the most expensive thing is the film itself. At UCLA, that was one of the conditions. You really had to know what you wanted to do.

It was all scripted. It's interesting, because I learned a lot working with the kids on this film. The little girl, for example. I remember one of the days early in the shooting of the kids, I was trying to tell her to go to the kitchen faucet and get some water. I was trying to get down to her level. I said, "I want you to go over and get the water, come back, and look at your father."

So we start the camera and she goes and gets the water. And so I said, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't do it like that. Go over like this and get the water and turn down." And she said, "Okay." So she goes over. I said, "No, no, no." I did it over and over again because we're in distress and all that sort of thing. I said, "No, no, no, do it like that…what's wrong?" And she said, "I did just like you said." So it dawned on me. I said, "Yes." She did exactly what I said. From that moment on, all you had to do was tell the idea, the concept. I said, "You know, you're angry with your father…" It was like that. Kids are very smart. Adults, I don't know. I had more trouble with adults.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That was one of the things that I was so impressed by—the way you work. But what I wanted to ask you about is the Harlem Renaissance. Could you speak specifically about that?

BURNETT: Usually when people quote something I said in the paper, I always deny it. I said, "I didn't say that," because I'm always misquoted. One of the problems about being in this business is that it's a rat race. It's very difficult to advance film to some extent, you know? It's a struggle with the people who own the means of production and distribution. They're not really interested in film as an art—it's a business. And I didn't realize—I mean, I should have realized that [my] training is film as an art.

There are things that people in the Harlem Renaissance were able to do in literature that—in essence they were trying to get away from this minstrel-type of situation that had imposed itself on black literature up until that time. It's not for a diverse audience; it's generally for a white audience. It's that concept that you're continuously struggling against. Those people were able to work out problems of character, trying to get away from that. We're always rooted in it.

The other thing is that I find that there's this tendency to try to divide ethnic filmmakers, people of color. The press might ask you, "Well, what do you think about Spike Lee? What do you think about so-and-so? What do you think about this?" They want you to say something negative, you know? That doesn't help us at all. We should, as a group, be talking about character development; about themes; how to bring in jazz, blues, all this sort of thing like that; how we reflect folklore; and get to another point in film, rather than the gangster, the pimp, and the urban violence.

You feel it very strongly when you're trying to pitch a story, and they come up with this idea. You say, "Well, you know, that's..." You feel a moral conflict.

You have to be determined. But I think the audience also really has to play a part in it. It has to be some sort of relationship with the audience, and the filmmaker has to get support, because as long as these films—these urban films—are very popular, they're going to continually make those films. For example, I did a film called, *To Sleep With Anger*. It was like pulling teeth to get that film made. First of all, there wasn't—I just recognized an excellent filmmaker right out in front, Michael Almereda—you're talking about a filmmaker, here's one here! What was I saying? (Laughs) Excuse me. A friend of mine is out there. Every time I get stuck, I also blame it on the jet lag..

This whole thing about family drama, if it isn't something typical or something they've seen before that shows the mother's a prostitute, the brother's in drugs, and this and that and so forth—the youngest, he gets help from somebody. If it's not that, it's very soft, you know? That's been my experience on this. You know, that's everyone's experience! If I wanted to make a movie, I can just repeat that formula and I'm sure I can get people interested.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Could you speak a bit about magical realism in relation to *To Sleep with Anger*?

BURNETT: Well, I don't think in terms of magical realism in this kind of thing. When I make movies, I'm just concerned about the story, you know? I was concerned about folklore and the absence of it in my community now. I wanted to make a film that raised questions about it. I thought of a story that had an ordinary conflict and imposed a folkloric element to it, a structure—this thing of the trickster and hairy man in this Georgian folk tale, the person who catches you out one night and steals your soul and you have to outwit him to get your soul back, you know? There's something magical about folklore.

That element was already there but the whole idea—does that exist? I mean, does a character like Harry exist in the world? Things like that I left up to the audience to decide. I was only thinking in terms of just a story of a man who comes to visit and disrupts the family. I actually looked at it in a very realistic way, I think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I grew up in Coney Island, and so much of what you showed in Los Angeles was what I experienced—being on the railroad tracks, and going out rolling in the dirt, and climbing on garages; it's the same. It's just amazing.

BURNETT: Well, I think one of the reasons for making films is the fact that you grow up on Hollywood films, and you see very little that reflects your experience, your reality. I wanted to make films that reflected the things I grew up with. I found that there was this universal quality, some [experiences] that we all share—the same games and things.

I think that brings us all together in a sense. When I saw Ozu's films, and Kurosawa's films—I had been raised on American propaganda films about the war and stuff like that, and then when I saw Ozu's films, I said, "God! Where have I been?"

Your world opens and then you realize that there's an injustice going on. I think most of us who started making films in the 1960s, that's why we got involved in film. Oh, I'm being hooked! May I answer this lady?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I felt that your soundtrack was as strong as the narration in the film. Is that something that you plan to pursue as part of your signature?

BURNETT: What happened was that my mother used to play all these records, right, over and over and over again. I didn't like them until later on, until all of a sudden I was walking down the street—well for example in *To Sleep With Anger*, the opening record was Sister Rosetta Thorpe and "Precious Memories". My mother used to play it over and over again, all these records. When I was older, I was walking down the street and there was this song going through my head and I said, "What did I hear? What is this?" I started to piece it together.

I had to go back and look at these old 78s; some of them were broken, it was really tragic. To find them is very difficult because you have to go the rare record stores and so forth. I realized then that I should try to preserve them, you know? I use film as a medium to do that as well. I'm going to put them someplace; basically that's it. Thank you. (Applause)

Pinewood Dialogue with Charles Burnett following the screening of *Killer of Sheep*, moderated by Greg Tate (January 7, 1995):

GREG TATE: Good afternoon. It's an honor to be offered an opportunity to speak with Charles. The last time we talked, I think it was 1985. I was out in LA visiting A.J. Fielding and Julie Dash, and we talked. I ran into a friend of mine this week who said, "I hear you're going to talk to Charles Burnett. Is he going to talk to you? He seems like a rather taciturn kind of follow, you know?" The times I'd heard Charles speak and spoken with him, I always felt him to be a modest and enigmatic kind of person. So in a way, this is an opportunity for me to demystify Charles Burnett for myself.

I'm not going to embarrass him by showering a lot of accolades on him, but he's definitely a real model for anyone who's engaged in a storytelling art—not just film, but literature as well. The script for *Killer of Sheep* holds up as literature, if you ever get a chance to read it. Reggie Hudlin said he considered *Killer of Sheep* to be black cinema's *Invisible Man* and I think that you can make a strong case for that.

Artists that I think of as models seem like they come in three categories. There's the category I guess I'd call like the "Divas," like Miles Davis or Billie Holiday or Jimi Hendrix. Everything that went on in every day of their lives seems to be documented somewhere.

Then there are people I consider the "Covert Divas," like Toni Morrison and Chaka Khan. They seem to be very extroverted public figures, but you really don't know anything at all about them.

And then there are people like Charles and Ralph Ellison, who I guess I consider like the "Anti-Divas." They're like ghosts, they just do their work and split, and the rest of us are like, "Oh, my God!" You know?

I guess the first thing I'd like to ask Charles about—it's really the kind of question my mother would ask, a Florida state question, "So, who are your people?" (Laughter) I'm interested in your family background and what your folks did and that kind of thing. How did they encourage you to get to this point.

CHARLES BURNETT: My folks are from Mississippi. During that period, the 1940s, they moved to Los Angeles along with everyone else from Mississippi, and settled in Los Angeles near Watts. My father was in the army. I went to school there, public school, of course. The school systems were very bad then. I remember being discouraged. They said, "You're never going to be anything," so I went along with that in mind. (Laughter) I was waiting to be drafted and a friend of mine was going to LACC. I went along with him.

I was waiting to be drafted, like I said, when I discovered this thing called student deferments, but you had to take a full load of courses. After

that I was taking nothing but courses, you know? (Laughter) That's when my education actually started. But I had been involved in music at one point. I used to play a trumpet and I thought I was going to be a musician. But that changed. My brother hocked my horn and that was the end of that. (Laughter)

Anyway, I was majoring in electronics and I thought I was going to be an engineer, but then these guys who were working at Autonetics and all these other places kept coming and taking refresher courses. It sort of disillusioned me in a way, because everyone was sort of waiting until they got to the point where they could retire, you know? Job insecurity was something that they always talked about. I couldn't live like that. (Laughter)

So I went to a job that was even more insecure: film. I thought of cameras, you know? The only places that had cinematography schools were UCLA and USC at the time, which were close. I went to USC and tried to get in. It was very expensive, so I went over to UCLA, which was extremely cheap. That's where it all started.

TATE: I'm wondering who in your background made you really privilege storytelling, folklore, and oral tradition?

BURNETT: People from Mississippi used to have this image that they're all liars, those who told stories, you know? That sort of thing has been following me. If you look at the record of people who are from Mississippi, there are a lot of talented people—surprisingly, considering all the stuff that's happening there.

It came out of a need to try to explain what was going on in my community. I always felt like an outsider because I had this sort of speech problem, right? I really couldn't get engaged in any sort of conversation. It comes on every now and then. I think it came from that deficiency in not being able to speak; so I started to take creative writing classes.

When you go to UCLA Film School, one of the good things about it is that they teach you to be a total filmmaker. It was unstructured. It was chaotic. You learned from students. They said, "Here's a camera. Here's equipment. Come back with a film. Come back with something we haven't seen before, otherwise you're going to be crucified." That was the order of the day.

At the end of the course screenings I used to say, "God, they were so vicious." Teachers would say, "That was a bunch of ..." but they wouldn't say crap, they would say—there are some young ladies and kids here, but they would say, "That's …!" You know? Right in front of you! I remember a guy I was with was really frightened that they were just going to just destroy me. You develop this hard shell attitude, you know? But the idea was that you had to come up with something new. UCLA at the time was sort of anti-Hollywood. Anything that was slick, well-lit and all that sort of thing—you were suspect. (Laughter)

The role that education does play [is that] one who's gone to a university has different alternatives. You have to realize that there is a sort of distance now between you and the community. It was like self-analysis to some extent; how I related and how I've changed. That's been a big difference.

TATE: If you can, walk us through the whole production process of *Killer of Sheep*. You have the script. How did you go about casting it and working with actors? You obviously worked with a lot of non-actors in the piece. Could you talk about your feelings about that in terms of accurate representation of a black community onscreen?

BURNETT: I wrote the screenplay, and I forget how many pages it was. But when I started making films, particularly at UCLA, I started using everybody—friends and things like that. You exploit people. (Laughs) You can't pay them anything, unfortunately, so I contributed to things like buying them drinks and that was the extent of their pay.

But I try to get people who fit the role. I find, because they're not actors, you really don't have to work with them to get them into character. They're already there, you know? It's a matter of getting them familiar with filmmaking, and not shy about doing what they're supposed to do. Most of it was selecting friends that I grew up with. We

worked mostly on the weekends over a long period of time.

We shot all over the community, and I must say this about the community at the time: it was helpful, partly because they were really unsophisticated in terms of filmmaking. Now, you go and everyone wanted a dollar or $100 or whatever it is, you know? (Laughter) They're very much aware. But then, they were always willing to help someone was trying to help themselves. I got a lot of help from people in the liquor stores and places like that in the community. They said, "That boy's going to make it!" (Laughter)

At the same time, it was sort of embarrassing because I was of two minds. One, I was involved in film. People also used to say you were a fool, because you're never going to make it. This was a white man's world, and no one had ever heard of anyone [else] being in film, you know? So I didn't really tell people I was involved in film until… I had to. (Laughter)

For my mother and everyone else, there was really a lot of mystification. It was another world. I didn't realize until I got into college that this thing existed. They would have understood if I say I was going to be a doctor or lawyer. Oh, yes, they'd understand that; but to be a *filmmaker*? I can still understand why, because if you have to wait twenty years to get a job, that's pretty maddening.

TATE: You were at UCLA at same time as Haile Gerima; Julie Dash, I think, came a little later; and Larry Clark, and Billy Woodberry, and so forth. What kind of discussions did you all have about what you thought your prospects were going to be as filmmakers in the world beyond college?

BURNETT: We didn't really discuss that. We mostly discussed the moment in filmmaking. We were all running around, hustling and trying to help one another. I don't think any of us really thought—at least I never thought, and most people never thought—we were going to make a living by doing it.

There was one person, I think, who was probably a bit [more] advanced in his thinking than we were. And that's a guy by the name of Jamaa Fanaka, who did a bunch of the *Penitentiary* series.

TATE: *Penitentiary I* through *Penitentiary III*! (Laughter)

BURNETT: He really knew how to milk a thing. (Laughter) When he first walked into the school, he knew that he wanted to make feature films. He wanted to make money, and he was very honest and straightforward about it. As a matter of fact, all of his films were feature films, I think—and very provocative, too. He's one of these people who doesn't get the credit he deserves.

He was out there long before a lot of people you recognize now. He was also involved during the black exploitation period. As he was going to school, he was making films about that, in that same realm; and he's been overlooked. But most of us were discussing—I don't know if it was theory, but it was something. (Laughs)

I think it was more practical matters. We were busy trying to form a cooperative or a group, a film group. We spent—self-criticism here—we spent days and months just trying to find a name. We'd get a name and someone at the last meeting would say, "No, no, no, I don't like that." So we had to go back again, you know? We were still trying to get a name when I left. (Laughter) But we had a lot of hope, a lot of hope.

TATE: How do you feel about the term that Clyde Taylor has applied—

BURNETT: He's back there, you know; watch out… (Laughter)

TATE: I know! We know each other; it's cool. But he refers to the work you guys generated in that period as "The L.A. Rebellion." Do you feel it was a successful rebellion?

BURNETT: Well, a few things. Clyde is a scholar; I'm not. He's done a lot of research on stuff like that; I don't look at films the same way. I think sometimes it takes a scholar to define what was going on. We just were there, making films. It wasn't to me—I wasn't conscious of being a part of a rebellion, of being a part of a protest. In a way, we were certainly responding to what was

going on in Hollywood, because we kept bringing up questions about these films and how they presented us and so forth. We were also involved in a struggle with the department because we were, in a sense, a minority. We were trying to get equipment and black teachers and classes and things like that.

But we were together at one point, and we helped each other. Like I said, we tried to form a group that we could never jump start—though we got close. Looking back, I think that's reserved for scholars to deal with.

TATE: So much of the way we're used to seeing black films promoted these days is through the filmmakers promoting themselves. That doesn't really seem to be your game plan. How do you feel about having to go out and be a huckster and hype a film?

BURNETT: Well, I think the problem is that when we started in film, it was an art form. We never really thought of it, as I said earlier, as a business. All our training was spent trying to learn filmmaking. I think some of us should have dealt with promoting film, because it *is* a business. In order to survive, you have to deal with that. People who have been very successful know how to play the game—like Spike has been very successful; Julie Dash has been very successful promoting *Daughters of the Dust*; and so forth.

In order to survive you have to be viable, and you just can't live off—most of these films I haven't made a penny off of, you know? Like *To Sleep with Anger*—few people have seen it. If I had been out beating the bushes and the drums and everything else, that might have helped a bit. I think you really have to look at people like Spike as models, in a certain sense. That's not my personality, so I have a problem of doing it, but I may have to change because I have to pay these bills. (Laughter) I may have to stand around and say, "See this movie here!"

One of the things you find with people who are very successful is that they go to the IFP [Independent Film Project]and things like that. Even though their film isn't made, they're there with all this material saying, "This is a film! Support this film!" And you say, "When is it...?" "It hasn't been shot yet." "Oh." (Laughter)

I get conned into saying, "Wait..." You see these airplanes flying over with ribbons for, you know, *Superman 4*. (Laughter) It's all about hype, you know? I think in order to survive, once the film is made you have to treat it as a business, or have an organization set up to do it for you if you can't.

TATE: Yes, that seems to be one of the major problems for black filmmakers who are doing it alternatively—a lot of times the people distributing the film don't seem to quite know what they're doing in terms of getting it to a core audience or a black audience. I'm wondering your new film, *The Glass Shield*. You have a number of very recognizable faces in it. Is there a strategy or battle plan for trying to use some of those folks to go out and promote the film?

BURNETT: That's the point about marketing and distribution. I think you have to get involved; you really have to be on top of people. When we did *To Sleep with Anger*, we tried to get involved with marketing and the company said, "We're the experts. You just made the movie—and that's good—but we know what we're doing." That was a mistake. I never want to that again. A lot of these companies don't interact or do business with black media and journals; they don't have ongoing relationships. So every time, it's like reinventing the wheel—"Who do we talk to?" Nobody knows, and nobody wants to know. Even when you suggest, "You can put $50 into a religious magazine, one of these church magazines, and you'll get thousands of people to look at it," they wouldn't do it. They get stuck in a rut. It's like, "I'm being paid to do this so you can't encroach upon what I do."

Now there are organizations definitely trying to get involved—like I keep saying, look at Julie Dash's film. It's a wonderful film. It doesn't have any recognizable stars—it has stars most people in the community know, though in general there isn't a Danny Glover or someone mainstream. But they just made *To Sleep with Anger* look like it was… they just outdistanced us in terms of gross. You point this out to these guys, "They had commitment and a passion to get this film out. What happened here? You had excellent reviews,

some of the best reviews that were put out that year. Stars, you know. What happened?” “I don’t know…” (Laughter)

Note: Due to technical problems, no audio recording is available for the remainder of the dialogue.

TATE: You said that you spend a lot more of your time now dealing with politics on the set than on the creative end. With *The Glass Shield*, what [happened] with that project in particular?

BURNETT: I think it starts out as this thing about getting jobs for people. You have friends and people that say, “Look, I want to work on your film.” It begins there in a lot of ways. You tell them to come down, and so you might have a production manager you’ve never met before—and he has his own agenda and people he has commitments to. Right away, there is a hidden agenda going on; he’s hiring people that he has obligations to. If friends come say, “Well, I wanted to apply for a job and nothing happened,” then you can do something. But if they don’t, then you can’t. That happens a lot, because people never come back. All of a sudden you’re in the middle of shooting, and you realize, “Wasn’t Joe supposed to be working here?” You know; something like that. So it’s just on the basis of trying to employ people.

Then what happens is that, particularly on low-budget films, there is this tendency to under-budget the film. Like *The Glass Shield*, we wanted $6 million or $8 million, because there’s a lot of action and stuff like that. I ran into someone at Cannes who said, “If you can do it for $2 million, you can do it.” The producer said, “Yes.” Just like that! Now I have to make a $6 million film for $2 million. The guy scratched, and we finally got it up another million, but even that [was too low], because we had all these things that we wanted to do! We had to work within that budget. That created a lot of tension because it’s very labor-intensive, this business; and everyone wants to get paid. You can’t exploit people *too* much, you know? (Laughter)

TATE: Just enough. (Laughter)

BURNETT: I mean we’re getting a lot of money here. A ditch-digger doesn’t make this much—but it doesn’t matter, you can’t use that with them; these guys are very tough. Anyway, it starts at that level, and it begins to build. Something which started off a good experience ends up being war. Producers want to—if you ever worked with these people as a team, [you know] they want to hire people that are going to be loyal to them—editors, cameramen, things like that. Because at the end of the day, when they don’t want to get a shot because they can save some money, they want to be able to say to cameraman, “Tell Charles, he can’t do this shot.” If the cameraman’s on their side, he’ll say, “Well, it’s going to be difficult…” but if the guy’s on your side, he’ll say, “Charles wants this shot.” The same goes for the editor. They’ll come in and say, “Can you cut this?” On and on... There are all these things that people are working on behind your back, more than they’re actually working *with* you to get the film done. The whole thing about producers is you have to come in on budget, and their concern is that it makes them look good if you come in on budget.

Most of the time you’re busy arguing. “Can I get this shot? Can I get the insurance to go and get this park scene?” “But do you need it?” “Yes, I need that park scene.” The actors are asking, “Are you going to work with us?” “Well, I’m busy trying to get this shot. I’ve got to have money to do this thing.”

And on and on and on. You become a mediator. You [aren’t] spending your time directing movies as [much as saying], “Don’t fight, we’re all on the same side; just cool off.”

But you can call a meeting with your actors. I can’t talk to them because if I talk to them I have to pay them. But you can have a meeting, and so we call these guys in. They really can’t rehearse because of the unions and things like that, so you try to work out the characters and everything right there. Hopefully some of them will want to work together with other actors. I’ve been lucky because I’ve had actors who were very interested in the material and wanted to make it better. So they would meet with other actors and in essence have a rehearsal—but it’s not like two or three weeks; it’s within a couple of hours. The only other time you have to deal with them is before you shoot, when everyone’s running around.

There are all these questions and no one wants to be responsible. They say, ""What chairs do you want? Do you what this chair or that chair?" And you say, "What's the difference?" "Well, this one has been used a little more." So you have to say, "Well, yes. That's fine." "What about the hair, is it long enough?" And you say, "Yes, that looks perfect." There are all these questions and at the end of the day it comes to *you*.

Before you shoot, your actors come in. They have to come out of make-up so you drag them out of there. (Laughter) "Can we run through this?" They'll do it; then you send them back and you block it for the cameraman—and we're ready to go! One of the things about having good actors is that you can communicate. You don't have to spend hours and days trying to get them into character. Lots of films are $7 million movies where they do a scene a day. It moves like an iceberg, you know? That's too slow… but I'd like to experience that one day. (Laughter)

TATE: I do have one dumb question: I was wondering if you could ever see making a film for $50 or $100 million justified in your own mind?

BURNETT: Yes—and I wish I was the producer on it too! (Laughter) Someone once said "Why do you do films for $2 million as opposed to $1 million? You can do the same..." He said, "But if I did one for one, I couldn't steal it!" It's designed that way. You've got $50 million, but it's never enough. It gets to be like that. I just want an adequate budget to get the shots that I want. For example, *The Glass Shield*, the film you saw: because of the fact that we did it for half as much, there were shots that for me were compromised, and it takes away the reality of it. A lot of people don't see it, but I do. It would have added more dimension to the film.

TATE: You've been making films for about 21 years.

BURNETT: I've been trying!

TATE: But in the time, you've made four features and had one produced—one of your scripts directed by another director, Billy Woodberry [*Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984)]. How many un-produced scripts do you have?

BURNETT: Not that many, actually. I have one that I'd really like to do—just one.

TATE: Are you interested in doing genre films; detective stories, science fiction, westerns, and so forth?

BURNETT: I don't look at them in terms of genre. I look at the story first and that's it. With *The Glass Shield*, someone asked me about the whole thing about genre and the cop film; all these rather scholarly questions. I'm not into that. It's a movie, you know? I start out just wanting to make a movie; it's a true story about a cop who experienced racism in his department, this incident, and he got kicked out. The idea I was interested in was how can a man lose sight of his identity? How can he believe he's doing the right thing and end up doing the wrong thing? How do you extricate yourself from that? How do you redeem yourself? That was the idea, not the fact that it was a cop story. The cop element, the police setting, made it easier for that to come out. People ask me, "Were you trying to redo this genre and extend it?" No. I'm just trying to make a story.

TATE: Well, I'd like to stop hogging the mic and turn it over to the audience for questions. (Pause) Not everybody all at once. (Laughter)

BURNETT: There's a gentleman back there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In *Killer of Sheep*, you were often able to have one shot that was kind of perfect give us all the understanding we needed in a scene; you just covered it in one shot or two that were really poetic. It sometimes seems that when budgets get higher or there are professional actors, there's more of a need to do close-ups on everybody where the shots don't tell the story as much as they are the conventions you need to have everyone well-lit and give them their screen time. Have you found yourself going into cutting scenes into many more shots?

BURNETT: I think you have to. When I did *Killer of Sheep*, I didn't have to answer to anyone. I didn't care about distribution or time; it could be four hours long—I didn't care. But with *To Sleep with Anger*, it was down to cutting seconds of frames and so forth like that. The distributor wants 90

minutes; that's the perfect time for him. Anything over that they start getting woozy.

You can lock yourself into a situation just by shooting a long shot without coverage. You may have to give up that whole scene if you don't go in for coverage—because you may have to get rid of ten minutes and in order to go into that scene and make it smooth, you may have use close-ups, reaction shots. It's important that you do it because at the end of the day it's all about trimming and trying to get it to move and to flow.

There's a difference between film people who go to watch films and audiences who go to watch films just to be entertained. There's a different rhythm that they get into. You can see it when you're in the kind of unsophisticated audience: if a shot is too long, whatever it is, you can see where they're taken out of the movie. Exhibitors are there watching these people's responses and the moment they—"Ah…" "Oh, we gotta cut that scene; we've got to trim it down, got to get it going." While a lot of film people will just look at it and say, "You know, I really like that shot." They don't care! (Laughter)

So it's this thing against the popular art medium—whether it's an art or a commercial thing. If it's your own money, you do the way you like, but if you're trying to get a job… I think it's a different approach for when you're doing your own films and for Hollywood.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: To increase production value or to make a movie on that scale, do you think all the headaches are worth it? Or, if they would sell, would you keep doing documentary-style, bare bones films like *Killer of Sheep*?

BURNETT: Oh, yes; there's no question about it. I mean I would run to that other end. I'm pretty old—but I got gray hair from doing *To Sleep with Anger*! Next day, "Charles!" "What do you mean? I woke up with—what?" (Laughter) I mean, it happens. It's a whole different experience, less stressful and so forth. But again, people appreciate those films but they don't support them. It's, "Oh yes, we'll come see that one..." but they're not paying. Films like this are very small, you know? It's a problem.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm curious: how much did it cost you to make, *Killer of Sheep*, and how did you finance it? Also, how long did it take you to make it?

BURNETT: Well, I don't remember; I know I did it on the weekends for a long period of time, and it was a very leisurely pace. It cost [only about as much as] the film stock and processing, and it was really cheap because of that. It was way under $10,000. The problem was I had to go to two different labs and that's where the cost went up, trying to get a release print from two different labs. But it was really inexpensive.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Greg introduced you as an anti-diva, and one of the things that I gained from your work was the generosity and integrity that you present in your art. I just wanted to thank you for this.

BURNETT: Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This film seemed to be really evocative of 1940s and 1950s cultural interest and class resonating through the movie. I didn't think so much of the 1970s, when it was made. I was wondering if the past was more influential on you at that time than the present? What kind of discourse did the film create? Did you feel this was in synch with the '70s, or did you really capture something else…?

BURNETT: I'm hoping that it was in sync with the 1970s or that period. I've always liked films of that period. Those black-and-white films, they were probably more relevant films; people had a social conscience then. In fact, you're absolutely right. I remember being impressed by a film that Clark Gable was in, of all things. It was an ensemble. I think maybe because the fact that the studios had a bank of actors at their disposal all the time, they had to keep them in movie after movie after movie. Unlike today, you didn't just get one or two people who are the principals and everyone else is just kind of there. I was always impressed by the ensemble experience that you got from those old films. They were also well-written; good parts for women and secondary characters and things like that. Doing *Killer of Sheep*, I was trying to respond to what was going on in the community at that moment—but a lot of those records were

from the 1940s and 1950s, stuff like that. There was that sort of mix.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are you currently teaching on staff anywhere?

BURNETT: She asked, “Am I teaching?” I know Chris Choy is here to lobby and promote NYU, and Haile’s been trying to get me over to Howard for a long time. Every now and then they ask me at UCLA. It’s this feast or famine kind of situation, so it’s very difficult to plot a time and say, “I can do it at this period.” You have a number of projects trying to go, they’re right at the gate, so it keeps you removed from moonlighting. Not that teaching is moonlighting! (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: *To Sleep With Anger* is, in my view—and I do review films and write about films—the most important film about black folk belief as it resonates and influences urban black culture. I think you have made such sensitive ground. I only regret that it didn’t make a lot of bucks for you at the box office. My question is about Jamaa “Blank”, who made the prison films—I’d like to know his name.

BURNETT: His name is Jamaa Fanaka. He was a UCLA student, and he just did a film called *Street Wars* (1992). He’s been making low budget films and he’s a very articulate person. Again, I think he’s misunderstood mainly because he has this interesting way of putting things. I think we were at this festival in—this is not me—but he said, “Making movies is like a woman in labor.” I was like, “Oh, God…” But you know, it’s like giving the birth and the pain, and stuff like that. It’s interesting.

TATE: When he was at UCLA did he make a film about a black radical with a 25-foot penis who killed people or something? (Laughter) Is that right?

BURNETT: Well, let me confess to something. (Laughter) There are a lot of us who worked on that film. You’re going to find out anyway…He didn’t tell us what the story was *about*. But yes, it was a very interesting story. (Laughter) It’s not my quite my taste but—I’ll tell you this interesting story. I’m not six foot five or anything but I work with him sometimes and help him out a bit. This one day I was on the dolly. I don’t know if you know anything about this area in San Pedro, Point Firmen? What happens is it goes down a bit toward the ocean; it’s on a hill. It’s comes down like this, and it zig-zags like this, and it zig-zags down, and things become steeper and steeper and steeper. We shot with a crew and we had a cameraman and everything, and they had me on the dolly. So I’m going down the hill, slowly, slowly. This thing must weigh about 500 pounds, plus the cameraman and the assistant cameraman. These are long tracking shots. As the thing start going down the weight of this thing is—and here I am like coming down like this literally holding up the thing—and the only thing I can think of is that if this guy doesn’t stop I’m going to get crushed!

I mean, if you’d seen the hill—you can’t appreciate it until you see the hill. This little guy about the size of an ant holding this dolly up... You worry about physical things, your body, when you’re straining; it was one of those kinds of things. You’re literally at almost a 45 degree angle!

TATE: When I saw *Killer of Sheep* the first time, about ‘77, ‘78, it was the first time I’d seen any representations of the landscape and the life of black folks in that part of California, Los Angeles.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Greg mentioned the specificity of your films coming from the South, and the L.A. context. I’m from Canada, so I want to ask about the global context. I know in Toronto your films are also very deeply respected, as they are in other parts of the world—in India and Europe and so forth—as being both American but also global in a way. I wonder where you see your films fitting within world cinema?

BURNETT: Again, there are certain things you concern yourself with. You really don’t have time to say, “This is where I want to be.” You just hope to do a film that you’re familiar with—the subject matter. That’s basically all I’ve been concerned about, besides hoping that there’s an audience out there. Sometimes you find it and sometimes you don’t. Sometimes in a screening, people say, “I don’t know what this is about,” and some you find it—it hits. Again, I leave that for other people to define.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you find audiences outside of the U.S. respond differently to your films?

BURNETT: Mm-hm. (Laughter) I also learn a lot from how they perceive films, and what they expect from films. In certain places, it's interesting how they want you to be in the vanguard somehow and or other, and just be on the edge all the time, the cutting edge. It's always compared to your last film.

When I was doing *To Sleep with Anger*, I was trying to get funding from ordinary sources and regular independent sources—the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and places like that. It's very difficult. Again, the whole thing about how people respond to your film: there's this idea that what PBS and CPB want, is to reflect Midwestern sensibilities. My films don't do that, so they're not interested in developing anything I had to do.

I had a guy who told me, he said, "Don't go there because you won't get funded. Try Hollywood." I looked at him and I said, "Are you crazy?" He said, "No; you'll probably find people there who are willing to take chances and to gamble, to be more open. They're looking for product, they're looking for ways to make money more than any place else." I found that to be true. It was very difficult trying to find money, and like I said, independent films take five or ten years—you can ask some of these filmmakers who give up so much to try to make a film, raising money and so forth. Then they can't get a distributor for it or the distributor rips them off or whatever it is.

I got funding from German television and also from Fugitive Cinema, which paid for a film I did, but it wasn't enough. You're going around trying to learn how to write grants and things like that—*that* becomes the job, as opposed to making film. For independents now, it's very difficult to find money. There's also a lack of growth. Everyone wanted me to make another *Killer of Sheep*—but the idea is to grow, to do other things. There are more stories out there than that.

When you try to cater to an audience and try to think in terms of your audience, you run into trouble doing that. I just hope people who go to see the films can share in the things I like; I can't ask for anything more. I know people are going to like it, and people are not going to like it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Greg asked you if there are any screenplays that you want to make, and you said there was one. I was wondering what it's about?

BURNETT: It's a script called *My Word of Honor*. It's based on an incident where these two guys killed their platoon leader in Vietnam for putting them out on the point all the time. There were these atrocities, and they felt that this guy was leading them to a point they could never return from psychologically. So the only way to escape was to get rid of this guy—and they did. When they get out—it's present day story, but this is a flashback—but he escapes, and ends up in San Francisco where he's in jail awaiting extradition. He learns that the guy that he was in Vietnam with is working for the government as sort of a political appointee, and he tries to reach him through his lawyer to get his extradition blocked. Then the lawyer wants to do this whole blackmail trip, take it further. It's about coming to terms and to grips with each other. Once things get started then how do you get out of it? It's that sort of thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: A few times tonight you referred to scholars, and film theory came up once. To what extent to you read or delve into other people's writings on film theory? Does it have any effect on your view, or your film language?

BURNETT: There's a friend of mine who's a scholar. He had his students write about film I did called *The Horse*. You hurry, you're shooting and there's this cross in the middle of a scene—it's not a cross, it's a clothesline, it's a dilapidated clothesline. Meanwhile this horse was hemorrhaging, so I had this blood; I was trying to put blood on this little boy's shirt and it wouldn't show up….

When his class saw the film they showed me this elaborate scheme of the film: the clothesline as a cross and what the meaning of it was; and the number of blood drops was the number of wise men… (Laughter) These students ran up to me and said, "Mr. Burnett, gee you're pretty heavy." I had to be honest. "You know, honestly, I didn't—

that's not in the film." (Laughter) I hadn't even thought about it. I went up to my friend and said, "Your students are asking me these questions and that's not what I intended—I didn't even—that's not even it." He said, "You just made the films; we have to interpret 'em." (Laughter) It's not yours anymore.

But it is valuable I think. After I discredited it, let me give it its due. I think it provokes and I think it may train audiences to see films a certain way, and help to create a film culture and a film language.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Working with Ice Cube— he's an aspiring director as well. Does he do any of the music for *The Glass Shield*?

BURNETT: No, he's not doing the music. At least at the moment he isn't. (Laughter) Ice Cube is an extraordinary person, he's very talented. He watches. He's really good to work with. I mean, you have this image of rap people, but he's very professional. He knows his lines better than anybody. He didn't blow his lines—maybe once, just once—but he was right on each time. On the set he was very available to anybody, the kids and everything like that, and he would ask, he'd say, "Well, why did you need to direct… why are you doing that?" I'd say, "Well, because, that's what's what I'm supposed to do." He'd say, "Oh, okay." He was very good to work with.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Because *Killer of Sheep* is your best-known film, most people think you are a realistic director. But I've noticed in a lot of your movies there's always a subtle shift in tone, so I'd like you to express your interest in realism. Maybe one way you can get at that is to talk about the beginnings of your films. The beginnings don't necessarily strike me as realistic but are always very emphatic. There's the scene in *Killer of Sheep* with the father and son, then you have this strange scene at the beginning of *My Brother's Wedding* where you see hands coming out of the shower and playing the piano. Then you have that really peculiar, magnificent opening of *To Sleep with Anger* where the guy is sitting at the table with his feet in the fire. Could you talk about those three openings and also could express your interest in realism or in visual abstraction?

BURNETT: I've always approached film from what I guess you could call a "realistic" point of view. I think realism encompasses a lot of things. It's never what you see, and it's never what it seems. There's that element about it that when you really analyze is kind of surreal, and there's irony. What I'm doing really is just breaking it up and putting it in those elements. To me it always looks as though it's not anything but a story, a convention to some extent.

To Sleep with Anger opens with this dream sequence, with this guy imagining what he feels that hell is like—which is rather nice, in a certain sense. It's not the hot boiler room. But it's a part of his dream and imagination, and that's the irony of it, or the paradox. That's what the beginnings are about. The only way you can really be independent is to put your own money into it and sell the house and all the kind of stuff like that.

I'm being hooked again; thanks very much.

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