TRANSCRIPT

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 one of the best films of its era, 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 answered questions from the audience about *To Sleep with Anger*, his drama starring Danny Glover as a mysterious visitor from the South who stirs up a Los Angeles family.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Charles Burnett following a screening of *To Sleep with Anger* (January 8, 1995):

CHARLES BURNETT: Thank you for coming out. Maybe we can start with questions, it's easier for me that way. If there are any questions…? Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are those trick cards in *To Sleep with Anger* (1990)?

BURNETT: No, they're just regular cards. A stacked deck of cards.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How long did it take you to make this film?

BURNETT: It's very difficult to say. It's a long process, making a film. You write the screenplay, and then it depends on how fast you are, or how slow. Once that's done, it's a long period of trying to find the financing for it. That was the longest period; it took about two years to find the money for it. Then, once that was in place, there were six weeks of pre-production. Then it was about a twenty-eight-day shoot. Then we had two or three months to edit. So, actually when it's all done, in order to shoot and do everything, it took about a year, not counting the search for the financing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What was the budget for *To Sleep with Anger,* and where was it shot?

BURNETT: How much did we spend on it? It was $1.5 million. It was filmed in Los Angeles. Yes, usually studio films cost a great deal more. This film, if it were done with a studio, would have cost about $10 million, as opposed to $1.5 million. So there's a big difference. Now, the average studio film is around $15 to $20 million.

How do you get that kind of money? It's actually somewhat easy. Really, comparatively speaking; yes, it is. (Laughter) It's interesting because I was talking to some other young people about screenplays and how easy it is to make money in this business—and how they try to keep you from knowing about how simple it is, in a sense.

I was working with a guy who's making a fortune by re-writing screenplays for other people. The funny thing is, most people in this business don't know what they're doing, right? That's the honest-to-God truth. We really—not *we*, but *they* really don't know what they're doing. You sort of have this notion that you have to go to school; you have to get a degree in literature; and all these other things? No, no, no.

It's really a con game, you know? People don't know how to write stories in this business. You think they do. They spend all this money... but they don't. If you read the kind of material that they get, you'd say, "I could do that." Your baby brother could do it! It's that simple. There are stories from tomatoes eating people to sophisticated films, and the majority of the stuff that they do is really sophomoric. If you have any kind of storytelling ability, if you can rap, if you

can tell stories or jokes, you can do very well in this business. You can do very well.
Like I was saying, this guy was doing this; for $300,000 he was re-writing what someone else had done. The thing is, you see, they don't want you to really do anything inventive or creative. They just want you to take what they've done, juggle what's there, and give it back to them.

You can make a good living doing that; actually, by just signing your name to a contract and saying, "I'm going to do it." Then do the best you can, and give it back to them. That's generally what happens. Then they go on to get another writer, and that writer does the same thing. And he goes on to get another writer. So at the end of the day, you have something like five or six writers on one project, and so it's very easy, once you're in the loop, to make a great deal of money and a living doing it. $1.5 million is somewhat easy to get if you have an interesting story and you have a name.

What I did was go to film school, UCLA film school. I made a few independent films and they got around—and so you kind of get a little name here and there. Once that happens, then people with money say, "Well, yes; I know this person's work." If it's $1.5 million or something like that—if you can do it very cheaply—then they will finance the film. It's when you're trying to get the $20 million, that's when it gets hard. (Laughter) But it's possible. Spike [Lee] is very good at doing it.

For example, a friend of mine has this script on Tar Baby that he's been trying to get done for seven years. He's the director on it, but the script is not very good—it's poorly-written—but he doesn't want to change it. So he's got several writers to re-write it, but he always tells them, "I like what's in it; just give me something, give me something… but don't change it." That's a contradiction. It's almost impossible. You try, but someone handcuffs you when they say, "I want you to improve it." In order to improve it, you have to restructure it. You have to start from scratch and write almost a new screenplay, but if they have this fixation or this obsession with it, they don't want you to really change it. So it becomes, you know, making minor improvements, and it's never really done properly. They give it to someone else to try to come with a different perspective or slant, and again they say, "Well, we really like what's there, just try to make it… you know?"

For example, they asked me to do a film on the Panthers, and they sent me this script. I read it and it was awful, you know? They needed *everything*! You just couldn't do a story of the Panthers—a whole story of Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver and these people—in two hours. But they wanted it done, and they had the whole kitchen sink in there. So there's no character development and there's no interest in the story because there's no time to get involved with these characters. They gave me the script and said, "Just a little dialogue to touch it up." I said, "It's not the dialogue. You have to restructure the whole thing. You can't do this."

So they gave it to somebody else, and said the same thing. That person didn't have any scruples; he did the best he could and tried to re-write it. Then they say, "Well, it's still not what we want." So they give it to somebody else. It's a game, in a certain sense. The idea is to learn how to play it. But if you want to do something creative, if you consider yourself an artist, you find that very difficult, and you don't want to be involved in that sort of thing. You want to make the film that you want to make, which is another problem.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you cast your actors?

BURNETT: There's a casting director, and what that person does is he or she brings in all the actors that they figure are right for the part, you know? Or they may not be right for the part but they're just out there, because you never know. You may have an idea about the character, a physical type—and then someone comes in to read that you never thought of and this person really adds something to it, so you really have to be open to everybody who comes in to show you what they can do. [The casting director] brings everybody through and you make the selection.

In this particular film, we had to cast Danny Glover's part first because Danny's not an old person, but he had to have people who were his "contemporaries," who were supposed to have been old. So to make that real, we had to cast

him and then try to balance that age difference in using the right "real" old actors.

We had the script, but it wasn't really considered anything until Danny came aboard. When Danny became part of it, then everyone said, "Oh yes; we can probably finance the film." Before Danny, we got offers for less than $1.5 [million] to do the film, but once Danny came aboard, they said, "Okay." A lot of it has to do whether they think they can make the money back with the film.

This kind of film, because it's not an action-oriented film, there's not that interest to finance it. What they want to do is hit a home run: produce a film that's going to do very well at the box office and make three of four times what you made it for—or ten times, or like a *Jurassic Park*, $300 million or whatever it was. But this one will never make that, and it hasn't made its money back yet.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Why did you want to be a filmmaker?

BURNETT: At the time I was interested in film, it was the 1960s. It was a time when a lot of changes happening socially in the country—the civil rights movement and things like that—and art was used for social change. Everyone who was involved had something to say, and wanted to contribute. Film was very popular at the time, but the doors weren't open. There weren't independent films being shown. Then, you got into film because it was what you wanted to do. You weren't going to make a living by it. There was no way of making a film *and* distributing the film as such. But I did it as a hobby, I thought; I knew I was going to try to make films on the side while I had a nine-to-five [job].

But there was something I wanted to say in film. It was the form of expression, or medium of expression that I thought was for me. I had a visual sense, I thought, and I found it very attractive. But now everybody wants to get into film. It's very possible now, too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you speak about the film's setting and whether it is intended to be Watts, LA or in the South?

BURNETT: Well, if you lived in Los Angeles during that time, most people that came from the South lived in that community. In many ways it was Southern; even though, like you say, you weren't in the South, you still had that experience.
I think here I wanted to give you that: a sense of not knowing exactly. It may be in the South, because Harry at first is going back home. But it's all sort of mixed up and there's a bit of ambiguity because of that. I didn't want to really place it, but there are references. It makes you think about maybe it isn't, maybe it is, and that sort of thing. It's all sort of interior, you know? But it really doesn't matter as such. It can be in Chicago. It can be all these places where people have migrated.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you discuss the opening scene of *To Sleep with Anger*?

BURNETT: The opening scene is Gideon's dream of being in hell, his nightmare. He wakes up and he realizes that something ominous is going to happen. It's like a foreshadowing: things are going to happen to him. Then he realizes that he's lost his toby—a toby is a good luck charm—and so he's looking for that when Harry shows up.

The whole meaning of "To sleep with anger," you know, is don't go bed with all these frustrations and things, because it distorts you. It's an expression from the Bible.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you see Harry as the villain of the film?

BURNETT: Well, one of the reasons I made this story was to ask questions. Can you really judge people? If something happens, is it in direct connection to that person, or circumstantial, or what? I sort of left it to the audience to decide that for themselves. I mean, you never actually see Harry *do* anything. He's around when things happen; he's very honest about what he does. He's not very cryptic, he doesn't lie or anything. He tells you what he wants, and things happen. It's a cultural thing in the sense that if you grew up in this sort of environment, where people have these kinds of traditions.
When you're a kid and your grandmother or your parents say, "This person is evil, don't let this person into your house," you wonder, "Well, what

did they do?" You're at a different state than they are, and so you never really accept the old customs and ways. At the time, it's problematic; but later on, when you get older, you reflect on that and wonder whether there *was* some sort of validity to those suspicions. You start experiencing the world, and you find there *are* people who have evil intentions or agendas that you sort of wonder about.

I'm not trying to say that Harry is an evil person. The character is based on a folklore character called, "Hairy Man." That character is a trickster. He's supposed to steal your soul, and in order to get your soul back, you have to outwit the trickster. That's the whole premise of the story, basically. I wanted to bring up these issues about this culture that is disappearing, and the folkways and folklore.

It doesn't exist as much now as it did then. A lot of this stuff is either new to young people or they hear about it indirectly. For example, I don't know if you know anything about the purpose of the broom? Some are still sort of mystified by it—what does it mean, you know? I notice today that young people ask, "Well, what does the symbolism of the film mean, particularly the broom?" When I was a kid, you couldn't sweep around adults with a broom because if you hit their foot with a broom, it meant they were going to go to jail; it was bad luck. Whether that was true or not remains to be seen, but a lot of people really believe in that, you know?

Today, you don't find things like that as often in family situations unless you've been in the South; in some parts it still exists. But a lot of this stuff is still somewhat new. The whole idea was to get back to that, to those folkways, and to see how valuable they are today. When you're in stress, you fall back on certain things—principles and ideas and spiritual things—and these things are very important to me. You can look back on them and they do explain the world, to a certain extent. Sayings and things—there's some truth in them. I guess that's why they came about, because they do reflect some part of reality. You find that today there's a vacuum there; it's sort of vacuous.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What did you want to accomplish with the film's ending?

BURNETT: Why did I choose that ending? It's kind of a false ending, in a sense. One assumes that Harry reached a climax, the crisis is over and so forth. In reality, there's this sort of ambiguity at the end. You could look at it and say, "Well, is Harry really dead?" His presence is still felt; they still had to get out of the house; and so forth. So that's the reason why the ending is the way it is. I didn't want it to be clear; even though in one way he's dead, in another way he isn't dead.

Again, his character is based on this folkloric character. I didn't want to say directly, "This is an evil person." I think it depends on the circumstance. Some people look at the movie and say that Harry is more of an angel than an evil spirit because he brings about this crisis in the family that ultimately resolves itself. You get a sense that they're a lot better off; he brought the family together. People can look at him as a positive sort of figure, in a way. Also in terms of African culture and images, you have this sort of dualism, where a figure or symbol can represent more than just one idea. Good and evil coexist, and that's a part of it as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How can I break into the film industry?

BURNETT: That's a good question. You don't necessarily have to go to a university to get into this business. You can see a film company that's working in your neighborhood and try to get attached to it. A lot of things you have to do for free. The trades list films that are going on. Just to get in, you can go and say, "I want to try out as a PA, a production assistant, or runner." Then you can work your way up to different things. What you want to do, once you get in, is to impress somebody, you know? Because that's what really counts, "This person is a really good worker." They may not pay you this time, but the next time you come out they will make sure that you work, because that's one thing they really want in this business: they want people they can depend on.

For example, fifteen minutes can mean thousands of dollars of waste. If you screw up—like you're working in costume and you forget the scarf, it's not there for that particular scene—they may have to shoot around it, or postpone that shot. Everything costs thousands of dollars, and if the

actor is only there for that day, they may have to go and shoot anyway. Later, they may not be able to cut because the person in one scene is wearing a scarf, and he turns around and the scarf isn't there. That sort of thing can cause continuity problems. So they want people who are going to do their job, and do it well. It's basically getting to know someone—getting in, or making a nuisance of yourself until you get in. That's one way… or going to film school. It's a lot easier to get into the business now than it used to be. Thank you for listening. (Applause)

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