

[illegible]

A FILM BY
CHARLES BURNETT

Berlinale
76. Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Berlinale Forum

Credits



76. Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin Berlinale Forum

***My Brother's Wedding.** 1983 & 2007. USA. 1:33:1. Color. 110 (1983 release) and 81 minutes (2007 Director's Cut/final version and 2025 restoration) ©1983 & 2007 Charles Burnett Productions. Produced by Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF). 2007 Editor: Ed Gonzalez.*

Directed by..... Charles Burnett
Written by..... Charles Burnett
Produced by..... Charles Burnett, Gaye Shannon-Burnett
Co-Producer..... Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen
Executive Producer..... Gaye Shannon-Burnett
Associate Producer..... Brigitte Kramer
Supervising Producer..... Earl C. William Sr.
Production Manager..... Thomas M. Penick
Assistant Production Manager..... Lance C. Davidson
Production Coordinator..... Ruth E. Cassius
Line Producer/Stunt/Casting Supervisor..... Garnett Hargrave
1st Assistant Directors..... Julie Dash, Ronald Hairston
2nd Assistant Director..... Camelia Frieberg
1st Assistant Camera..... Omar El Aide, Arthur Jafa
2nd Assistant Camera..... Lynn Smith
Sound Mixers..... Veda Campbell, Arthur J. Lopez
Editor..... Thomas M. Penick
Executive Editor..... Charles Burnett
Associate Editor..... Christine Renee Penick
1st Assistant Editor..... Adrienne Williams
2nd Assistant Editor..... Steven Wright, Rex Stuart, Christopher J. Penick, Wanda West, Julie
Feiner, Douglas H. Penick, John Ellis, Bryan Bellamy, Cheryl
Thompson, Angela Nellyon Sims
Gaffer..... Amy C. Halpern
Best Boy..... Tony A. Brown
Prop Master / Set Decorator..... Penny Barrett
Make-Up Artist..... Clifton Johnson
Assistant Make-Up..... Stacey Evans
Sound Effects Supervisor..... Edward M. Osborne
Electricians..... Tom Smith, Jeanine Moret
Script Supervisor..... Maryse Leon
Wardrobe Supervisor..... Gaye Shannon-Burnett

Stills.....	Victor Hargrave, James Wyatt, Tony Glenesk
Special Thanks to.....	Abdul Hafiz, Billy Woodberry, Sharon Larkin, Time Hinkle, Bela R. Dillworth, Sherikiana Gerima
Negative Cutter.....	Joy Rencher, Beth Conwell
Mixers.....	Hiroaki Zom Yamamoto, Mark Rozett
Sound Transfer.....	Lewis Countee, Stanley Carr
Music Transfer.....	Paul Quan

Cast:

Everette Silas.....	Pierce Mundy
Jessie Holmes.....	Mrs. Mundy
Gaye Shannon-Burnett.....	Sonia Debois
Ronald E. Bell.....	Soldier
Dennis Kemper.....	Mr. Mundy
Sally Easter.....	Mrs. Richards
Hobert Durham Jr.....	Mr. Richards
Angela Burnett.....	Angela
Tim Wright.....	Big Daddy
Cora Lee Day.....	Big Mama
Monte Easter.....	Wendell
Frances E. Nealy.....	Mrs. Debois
Sy Richardson.....	Mr. Debois
Garnett Hargrave.....	Walter
Margarita Hargrave.....	Maria
Jackie Hargrave.....	Hattie
Lynda Gypcy Lewis.....	Judith (Pregnant Lady #3)
Denise Elliot.....	Cheryl (Lady in Accident)
Ross Harris.....	Mr. Bitterfield
Julie Bolton.....	Rape Victim
Charles Bracy.....	Walker
Stacey Evans.....	Jean
Nate Hardman.....	Babe Brother
Debbie Williams.....	Babe Brother Wife
Henry G. Sanders.....	Beat-Up Man
Helena Springs.....	Angry Woman in Car
Lucious Walker.....	Jack Ace
Taglito Atpay.....	Mr. Cook
Ed Prevost.....	Mr. Shaw
S'John C.L. Blackwell.....	Sleeping Boy
Javier.....	Robber #1
Larry White.....	Robber #2
Kal Isaacs.....	Robber #3
Kalita Bradley.....	Woman Robber
Herman Graham Jr.....	Funeral Director
Demean Hall.....	Sister
Mickie Washington.....	Sister's Daughter

Gene Cherry.....	Gene
Dian Cherry.....	Diane
Charles Anderson.....	James
Jerry White.....	Millie
Tamiko Hairston.....	Shirley
Boston Farley, Jr.....	Bob
John R. Lampkin.....	Liquor Clerk
James Washington Jett.....	Mr. Jett
Robert T. Wester Jr.....	Elmo
Tashia Cherry.....	Angela's Friend
Allahn Diva Wright.....	1st Baby
Rashawn Robinson.....	Baby in Car
Tina Jolly.....	Church Woman
Thomas M. Penick.....	Dead Body
Rosalind Burroughs Cluster.....	Sheila
Clifton Johnson.....	Police #1
Victor Hargrave.....	Police #2
Rita Williams Bell.....	Injured Mother
Terrence Allen.....	Terrence
Tony Brown.....	Walter's Friend
Brilla Cherry.....	Angela's Friend #2
Suzette Ry.....	Barbara
Lionell Hardy.....	Drunk
Ronald Hairston.....	Man On Bus
Brenda McGrew.....	Baptized Girl
John McGrew.....	Pastor's Aid
Glen Standifer.....	Pastor #1
Charles Drake.....	Pastor #2
Marvin Elkins.....	Viewer #1
Archie Hamilton.....	Viewer #2
Frederick W. Penick.....	Viewer #3
Marian A. Penick.....	Viewer #4
Dian Yvonne Laster.....	Viewer #5
Idrece Elliot.....	Sister's Baby
Douglas H. Penick.....	Pallbearer
Inez Drake.....	Lady In Church
Roman Bate.....	Man On Floor
Adrienne Williams.....	Woman In Church
Thedesa Christopher.....	Woman In Church
Kimberley Lowe.....	Pregnant Woman #1
Regina Hamilton.....	Pregnant Woman #2
Myrtle S. Penick.....	Wedding Member
John Ellis.....	Pallbearer
Marjorie Carpenter.....	Wedding Member
Tracy Carpenter.....	Wedding Member
Cozette Perrin.....	Wedding Member
Ki'Yo Carter.....	Wedding Member
April Caldwell.....	Wedding Member
Tiffany Pinder.....	Bridesmaid

Maria Crawford.....	Wedding Member
Shaune Arnold.....	Bride's Stand-In
Ruth E. Cassius.....	Wedding Member
Yzella Cassius.....	Wedding Member
Edward Warmasley.....	Wedding Member
Byron Warmasley.....	Wedding Member
Valon Lyles.....	Wedding Member
Fred Kaiser.....	Caretaker
Grover Johnson.....	Chauffeur
Thomas F. Stone.....	Pallbearer
Benjamin Williams.....	Pallbearer
Dione Bacon.....	Boy #1
James Bacon.....	Boy #2
Lawrence Jackson.....	Ambulance Driver #1
Tom Pruitt.....	Ambulance Driver #2
Stephanie Elliot.....	Ambulance Attendant
Michael Roby.....	Ambulance Attendant
Lewis Brown.....	Man With Gun
Dr. Henry Gordon.....	Singer and Harmonica
Mark Smith	Singer Funeral Song

Music:

“Old Rugged Cross” Sung by Dr. Henry Gordon (Harmonica) Mary — Piano

“Take Me to the Water” Sung by Rev. L.C. Carter and the Church Members of Antioch Baptist Church

Funeral Song Sung by Mark Smith

Hymns Sung by Sandra Y. Stoke, Kimberly E. Lawrence, Danielle E. Edwards, Jaquetta M. Vaughn, Evamarie Presley, Barbara A. Hale, Lisa M. Garrett, Barry Cooper, Larry Cooper, Sean R. Jackson, Clarence Armstrong and Dorothy Armstrong

“Never Let Me Go” and “Anymore” As performed by Johnny Ace, Courtesy of MCA Records, Inc.

“Tuareg Medicinal Chant” and “Hausa Street Music” Recorded in Africa by Stephen Jay, Courtesy of Nonesuch Records by arrangement with Warner Special Products

“Bear Dance” Performed by the John Briggs Consort, Courtesy of the University of California Extension Media Center

M.G.M. Laboratories, M.G.M. Title, M.G.M. Optical, Cine Sound

Special thanks to: Mr. Roger L. Mayer; Mr. Gary Bell; Mr. Fred Nolting; Mr. Bob Farmer, Mr. Scott Perry; Mr. Norm Carpenter; Mr. Kevin Barret; Mr. Michael Kahn; Mr. Bruce Green; and Lynda Foster, Lorimar

And a special thanks to: Mr. James Watson; Mr. Stan Harris; Rev. L.C. Carter; Rev. Lewis P. Bohler, Rector Church of the Advent Episcopal; Mr. & Mrs. H.L. Carter; Sandra Thorborn; Winston Mortuary; Earl Columbia Liquor Store; Allen Ambulance Service

Special Thanks to: The National Endowment for the Arts, The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

My Brother's Wedding (1983) has been digitally restored and remastered by Milestone Films in collaboration with UCLA Film & Television Archive and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

Funding provided by: Milestone Films, Kino Lorber, UCLA Film & Television Archive, and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

Laboratory services: Prasad Corp North America, Deluxe Audio

My Brother's Wedding restoration was supervised by Charles Burnett in consultation with Jillian Borders and Maya S. Cade

Thank you to Dennis Doros, David Block, May Hong HaDuong, Amy Heller, Zna Houston, Brian Jensen, Tomeka McLee, Susan Oxtoby, Jon Shibata, Jonathan Burnett, Mark Smirnoff, Colleen Simpson, and Todd Wiener.



Synopsis

In this tragicomic work of realism, Pierce Mundy (Everett Silas) is employed at his parents' South Central dry cleaners with no prospects for the future — his childhood buddies are all in prison or dead. Pierce's best friend Soldier (Ronnie Bell) is just getting out of jail. Pierce's brother Wendell (Monte Easter), an up-and-coming lawyer, is busy planning a wedding to a snooty upper-middle-class black woman named Sonia (Burnett's wife, Gaye Shannon-Burnett, who co-produced the film). Pierce's pious, Bible-touting mother (Jessie Holmes) provides occasional comic relief but also a heartfelt moral backbone to the film, as she urges Pierce to accept his responsibility to his family.

When Soldier is killed in a car accident, Pierce's conflicting obligations to family and friends becomes manifested in the choice between his brother's wedding and his best friend's funeral—both falling on the same day. The film's climax has Pierce desperately trying to be two places at once and ending up nowhere.

“The story focuses on a young man who hasn't made much of his life as of yet, and at a crucial point in his life, he is unable to make the proper decision, a sober decision, a moral decision. This is a consequence of his not having developed beyond the embryonic stage, socially. He has a distinct romantic notion about life in the ghetto and yet, in spite of his naive sensitivity, he is given the task of being his brother's keeper; he feels rather than sees, and as a consequence his capacity for judging things off in the distance is limited. This brings about circumstances that weave themselves into a set of complexities which Pierce desperately tries to avoid.” — Charles Burnett



Background

My Brother's Wedding began production in 1983. Burnett wrote, directed and produced this low budget independent film on location in the area of South Central Los Angeles where he grew up. As is the case in much of his early work, Burnett cast mostly non-professional actors from the area — partially as a means of, as he puts it, “demystifying the filmmaking process”—including a sophomore role for his niece, Angela Burnett, who stole the screen as Stan’s daughter Angela in *Killer of Sheep*.

There were excessive delays in the shooting schedule due to lead actor Everette Silas’ strike for higher pay — during which he in fact left California to become a preacher in the South. “He was a little much,” says Burnett, “When we picked him up at the airport he was wearing a cape.” During post production, the German producers, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen became impatient and asked that Burnett finish a cut of the film. Burnett rushed through a rough cut and submitted it to Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, who, against Burnett’s wishes, accepted it as the final cut.

The unfinished film was shown at the New Directors/New Films festival in New York to mixed reviews, discouraging distributors and tragically relegating the film to relative obscurity. Film critic Armond White called this “a catastrophic blow to the development of American popular culture.” Revisited decades later, following restoration by the Pacific Film Archive and a complete re-edit by Burnett (from 110 minutes to a trim 81), *My Brother's Wedding* proves to be funny, heartbreaking, and timeless.



Appreciations

“Has cinema ever translated jazz improvisation to the screen? Every time I view a Charles Burnett film, I am certain the answer is yes. With *My Brother's Wedding* in particular, jazz-inflicted improvisation comes into its own as trial by circumstance transforms the expected filmic beats and takes us somewhere... new. The rhythm of *My Brother's Wedding* mirrors the rhythm of Black life: a kaleidoscopic array of life's tensions and forceful equilibrium that show the depth of our soul. At the center of that rhythm, Pierce Mundy (brilliantly played by Everette Silas), a thirty-something man whose life exists in the ghosts of the Watts riots, burgeoning crack-era, and the communal caretaking that commands a life. As his well-to-do brother (Monte Easter) looks down on his Watts-centered life while preparing for his social-climbing wedding to Sonia (Gaye Shannon-Burnett); Pierce keeps his rhythm in maintaining his lifelong bonds with his best friend Soldier (Ronald E. Bell).

Like many great films, *My Brother's Wedding* is a proof of force. If *Killer of Sheep* (1978) was a student applying what he learned to create a master thesis, *My Brother's Wedding* is a teacher creating a guide for others to learn from. That fact mirrors the film's creation. Burnett, freshly off winning the Critics Prize at Berlinale for *Killer of Sheep*, was able to acquire funding from German broadcast network (ZDF, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) to show the depth of his world-acclaimed artistry. Noted filmmakers have their early breaks through the film's development. Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*) serves as first assistant director; Arthur Jafa (*Love is the Message... The Message is Death*) serves as first assistant camera on his first ever film set.

Burnett is our cinematic bluesman, using all the tools in his arsenal to make our lives and the act of creation plan to all who will listen.”

— Maya S. Cade, incoming president of Milestone Films, January 2026

“Although [it] generates a strong narrative momentum not found in *Killer of Sheep*, *My Brother’s Wedding* resembles its predecessor in the way it forsakes hyped-up scene-making for the quiet observation of quotidian reality. Burnett lets the narrative stray from its central storyline to show us life in its undramatic moments, when most of life is lived. We see Pierce bathing his ailing grandfather, listen to the flirtatious banter of a lovesick teenage girl, watch in amazement as a junkie planning a robbery is scared off by the sight of an old woman lost in prayer. These scenes remind us how eagerly the vast majority of movies—genre films, of one type or another—seek escape in melodrama and spectacle. Against this, Burnett would show us how to escape from mere escapism. . *My Brother’s Wedding* fits no genre. The film asks viewers to find its rhythm and move to it. What the Italian neorealists accomplished in the years after World War Two, and what a handful of daring Iranian directors have done more recently, Burnett—a one-man African-American New Wave—achieved with his first two features: he gave a culture, a people, a nation new images of themselves.”

— Nelson Kim, *Senses of Cinema*



L.A. Rebellion

Creating a New Black Cinema

From the L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories: Charles Burnett

Interview completed on: June 7, 2010; June 15, 2010. Interviewee: Charles Burnett (CB). Interviewer: Jacqueline Stewart (JS). Attendees: Allyson Field (AF). Cinematographer: Robyn Charles (RC). Transcribers: Kelly M. Lake, Michael Kmet. Courtesy of UCLA Film & Television Archive.

JS: So, after you do these shorts, then you move to a feature.

CB: Yeah I sort of was trying to do—well, it wasn't like I moved to them, it's as opposed to just trying to do anything next. And it was a longer form. The story that I wanted to do next was a longer version, I mean a longer story... *My Brother's Wedding* was longer.

JS: Mmm-hmm.

CB: And I had, how I came about to doin' that film was...it's not autobiographical...only in one aspect is that I got caught in a situation where I had to attend a funeral and a wedding. And so that's where the idea came from in a way. And there was this young lady who worked in our office, and she was getting married and she didn't have much of a family here, so she just invited everyone in the office and stuff like that. And this was planned a long time in advance, of course, and so I said, "Yeah, I'll be there," and she was very happy about that. And, and then...within days of the wedding or so, weeks or so a friend of mine was killed. We were neighbors as a kid, growing up and so I thought, that it would be more appropriate to go to the funeral than the wedding. I just felt more compelled to do—it seemed to be the more urgent, immediate thing to do. And so, I went to tell the young lady that I can't make it and as I was walking toward her, she says to me, "You're not going to tell me you can't make it" (laughs). And she had this sad look on her face, 'cause she didn't know anything about this funeral or anything, and so I'm like, "No,

I was going to say that.” And so, it just happen to had been the same day, maybe the same time. That’s been my life’s story, all these conflicts time wise.

CB: And so I was trying to figure out how to make it, and I just felt I could make it if the wedding goes off on time, they say their I-dos, happy man and wife, boom! I’m outta there. And so I go to her house. It’s the wedding day and everything, and the—we get there to learn that her uncle...was coming in the airport and hadn’t arrived yet. And I mean, my heart just starts sinking, waitin’ around and waitin’ around and then the funeral was about to go and it was goin’ and I was just stuck between two places. And I’d have made it if I had known—I may have gone to the funeral earlier, if I’d known ... the wedding was going to be late. So, there I was, like just not happy about either one, either way, and so, ...if you just learn to say no (chuckle). Just say no, yeah I used to have a lot of trouble. And so that was one of the...ideas behind it.

The other one was a lot of the kids I knew were trapped in this sort of situation — I wanted to do this story about this guy who had good intentions. And he was gonna be an aide to this friend of his who, gets out of jail, and be like a brother’s keeper. Well, that takes responsibility. A lot of the kids I knew didn’t ...mature as they should have, let me put it that way or took any responsibility. And so, I wanted to do about how could you be an aide to someone, a responsible person, and you yourself is not capable of dealing with these issues. It just makes a bad situation worse sometimes. It’s not...just being good at heart and good natured isn’t enough. You have to have a vision and a sense of things. And so, I wanted to sort of combine all these sorta things together, tell a story about Pierce, who is sane because of his parents and they’re...concerned about him and demanding he do certain things, traditional things. And at the same time, he’s this kid who, who has, like many of us who came up during that period, had this negative idea about the middle class. You don’t want to be bourgeois, whatever it is, middle-class and all this kind of stuff. And it was this really perverted notion of being working-class and staying working class and stuff like that is the salt of the earth. And so that’s the real person. Those are the up people. And all this wanting to be bigger than you and rich—or middle-class, whatever it is, money and education. It was looked down upon if you were, wanted to be, smart and educated and always trying to be more than he is. With all of our values — perverted values — and so, a lot of us grew up with that. And I had mentioned earlier, well, like having money, like my parents were very much like that all the way, you don’t want to be rich, people with money have problems.

CB: And so, we grew up with that. I say now, “Well I want those problems” (laughs). I can deal with them, if they can, I can. But I’d stunt my growth and, I remember going to college, I remember that this guy who... had said he was going to be a millionaire at a certain age. He plotted it out. I thought that was ridiculous, I did not have that dream. He’s probably that and more over now. And here I am thinking, ah, money. And I look at that now; I look at these bills I have to pay. I should have been —someone should have been tappin’ me on my shoulder, pulling

my coattails, as they say in those days. So, I wanted to do a film about that, about these distorted values and views.

JS: It's pretty interesting to me because he [Pierce] has to do so much running around, running, running, running, but getting nowhere.

CB: Yeah.

JS: You got this telephoto lens and he's running out of — in between, caught between things all the time, he can't really progress. And I was hoping you could talk a little bit about what it's like to shoot in the neighborhoods where you shot — how much you were thinking about representing the neighborhood visually, because that's an important dimension of the work that you were doing?

CB: Yeah, well you're always aware of it. And the images, and you look for good locations that become characters in a sense in the film itself...And it adds to a lot of value to it visually. We were very conscious of that always, things like that. But yeah, the running thing was another feature where, he was always running to get somewhere, but always late, getting maybe at the very moment. And so, there was a theme of him, of his life, just getting there and I mean, I have this problem now, just, can't leave early enough, whatever it is, and missing out on something. And it seems that once you create a habit of that, it's hard to break. I mean it's not that it's a habit so much as a part of fate (laughs) in a sense. You're given a moment to try to do something and then something else happens, something else happens and all these conflicts and things. I think with us, it's like we try to do too many things at the same time, I admire that other folks just concentrate on one thing and do this. They don't have family members comin' in—we had the, “Well I have to go here.” “No, you have to do, I have to go to the store and do this, go to the store and do this kinda stuff.”

(Laughter)

CB: “...But only in certain countries, they just say that when you get married, the cousins, everyone, they gonna come, stay at your house up. And so, it's that kind of nature. I remember Ousmane Sembène said, about we were in discussion about his responsibility in the community, there's certain traditions he had to follow. Even though they encumber, they take your time. It's things that he has to do. ...And I noticed, I was saying the other day, the working class and poor is burdensome, they have all these things that keeps holding them down. And Pierce, what Pierce's problem was, he romanticized that part of it. These are the people—these are the real people. His brother had sense enough to say to him, we can look at the positive and do, we get ahead, you help someone, you knew this. Pierce could help anyone, you need to have ability to do that, and it takes education, it takes money, it takes that kind of stuff. But he had, like many of

us grew up and a lot of it was—came about with this, with this separation in the community, where people with something always had this attitude. And so, there was a legitimate reason for, sort of like had this conflict and the Jack and Jill Club... All these what do you call it, clubs or gangs ...helped generate this sort of social gap, and this notion that you don't wanna be with those folks, they have like these attitudes. Out in Atlanta I think it still exist a lot. I don't use an Atlanta — (higher voice) "Whatchu know about us? We don't act like that anymore." So that what the film was about commenting on a lot of the social issues that were going on at the time.

CB: I wanted to do it in a sort of, a comic way, because when I did *Killer of Sheep*, people thought it was too dry. And they said, "Where's the humor? Where is this that and the other?" I said, "Well this is humorous to me," There's all these things in it. And so, I wanted this to be a little bit more embracing to those people.

CB: But it was a film that I never felt really good about it because it really wasn't completed, in a sense, because we had a nightmare shoot. Not the actors or anything, just the production on it, just shooting it.

JS: How so?

CB: Just if a thing could go wrong, it went wrong. We had some problems with some of the actors that were just incredible. My main actor wanted more money, and he sort of held out ... he disappeared and I had to find him, and he was somewhere in the south and we had to pay for him to come back. He said ...he got ordained as a preacher, and so he stepped off the airplane with this cape and a Bible in his hand. Literally. I mean you couldn't have went to Central Casting or Western Costume Supply and get all this stuff. And the props — literally stepped off the airplane with his cape all like Dracula, and the Bible. This is when at that time you could go back to the gate and meet them coming off the airplane. And it's like, I don't believe this character. It was one thing after another, after another at our shoot, and so it was just rushed to get it done...

[Small disturbance leading to a delay in the interview...]

JS: You're pickin' up Pierce from the airport and he's embarrassing you.

CB: Oh yeah, in his, oh I shouldn't say this—oh anyway he knows. He probably won't see this.

JS: (Laughs) He won't.

CB: Yeah, he won't see this, and so yeah he was a character. And it caused me some other problems I had and so I had to get the film to ZDF, because ZDF was the co-producer on it.

JS: German television.

CB: A lady by the name of Brigitte Kramer who worked there at the time in development saw *Killer of Sheep* at the Berlin Film Festival. And then she approached me to ask what did I have next on the fire? And I said, “well hundreds of stories.” And she said, “Why don’t you come to us and see if we can find the funding for you.” And so, I did and that’s where the finance came from to make the film. So, I owed them the film at a certain period. So, I had to rush to get it done. I probably could have gotten an extension, which I should have done, but I was like panicked and didn’t think and so, it was never a completed film. I just rushed and did a first cut and handed it them. And I had to mix it and everything like that, and so it was, to go back would have been so costly. And so, I didn’t do that. So...

JS: But recently you were able to go back and –

CB: And in a certain way what happened was the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley and Edith Kramer.

JS: She was there for many years.

CB: Yeah, and she was really helpful in black independent film and other films as well. She and another — you mentioned the other day people like and Carlton Moss, but you gotta—you gotta bring them in there. And Albert Johnson.

CB: There are certain people that you really have to consider, mention, that were really responsible for aiding black independent films, and we mentioned Mayme Clayton — because of all the people, I think she’s one of the early ones who wanted to archive our work. And she was surprising. And Albert Johnson was another one who was really responsible. And of course, Edith Kramer, we were talking about as well who programmed our film and also helped get a copy of *My Brother’s Wedding* archived at Berkley. Invited us up at other times, paid us money to help us along the way and things like that.

JS: What did Carlton Moss, what kind of support did he provide?

CB: Carlton Moss was, historically, a very important person who was a part of the WPA in the thirties, the Harlem Renaissance. And he wrote [unintelligible] and he helped John Houseman and Orson Welles put on several plays in New York. He had a lot of inclination, about district films and stuff like that...I think he taught at Fisk, as well.

JS: What was ZDF’s deal in terms of *My Brother’s Wedding*? That it would show on German television first and then...?

CB: Just German TV and maybe Switzerland, or something like that. But they were really great and they were — ZDF — and ADR [Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland], were really helpful in the feeling of independent films throughout. Unlike Hollywood they were really interested in independent films, and sponsoring — unlike PBS and all these other things like that — they were really good in financing everybody. If you have talent, they saw it...if they saw your film and liked you, whatever it is, you got money for the next. You didn't have to go through hoops. Now it's a little bit more difficult because of the money situation. But then, they really helped.

JS: I was wondering if you were thinking any differently about your audience for that one, than you did for *Killer of Sheep*?

CB: No. No, I looked at a wider audience for the black community in particular. Because, I wanted [it], for people who were not so much into the documentary style or realism but something that had an entertainment part of it. And so that's where the whole style came from for *My Brother's Wedding*.

JS: And distribution beyond ZDF, what happened there? Were you able to get a distributor in the US?

CB: I didn't really try, no, I didn't really try at any point. I was so — I always wanted to go back and recut it. The further you got away from it the more difficult it became. That was the case.

JS: And people you went to school with also worked on that one?

CB: Some of them, yeah.

JS: Do you remember any of those folks?

CB: Yeah, Julie Dash and Sharon Larkin started working on it. We had...who else? Tom Penick worked on it. That's about it.

JS: And was this the first film you shoot in 35?

CB: Um-hmm.

JS: Did that make any difference for you in terms of...

CB: Well, I had, it's a funny story. What happened was there was some sort of kind of recession going on. The rental houses weren't doing very well — I mean there was some sort of strike, or something happened that they weren't doing business. So, I was able to get a good deal for a 35-millimeter camera. There was a lady that Tom Penick knew at MGM that worked there who introduced me to some people who worked in the lab, and also some other department over there who had all these short ends from ER and something else they were doing. Not ER...

JS: The hospital show?

CB: No, not the hospital show. It was that western thing that...JR, JR?

JS: Oh, yes, *Dallas*.

CB: *Dallas*, yeah, JR. And something else, so we had all these short ends, they were using Fuji Film. Short ends could be at the end of the day — they'd break the film and put it in the can and that's a short end. So, I can get, like, anywhere from two hundred feet of film, 35mm, to almost a full load of film. They would sell it to me at an unbelievable rate and same way at MGM labs. I'd meet some people over at the labs and, I must say about MGM, they were very helpful. Anyways — I got, also, this equipment from them. It was just a wonderful deal. I want to thank Tom Penick, who was working there as assistant editor, and so it's through him I got a lot of film. I can't remember the guy who was in finance over there. I wish I could remember his name. He would, just say, "Would anyone just let me know and we'll help you out."

JS: What you're saying about expense not being such a big issue is very interesting, because of course that gap between 16 and 35 is huge.

CB: Yeah, but it was cheaper to shoot it in 35 in this sense

JS: Did the difference make any difference to you in terms of the look that you were going for?

CB: I did something old school at the time. I was interested in the full frame aperture at the time, as opposed to the letterbox, 1:85, whatever. Because I liked that composition, the old style of 35 composition; full frame. And...which was just going out at the time, and people were into the sort of long, letterbox thing. And there was a conscious decision going for that frame, that composition.

JS: Did anybody comment on that at the time?

CB: Well at that time it wasn't a big issue because then you're still doing films that were in these different formats.

AF: But that made more sense for TV, didn't it?

CB: It did, but I didn't think I was going to get into TV here, but for ZDF they will accept it the letterbox. Yeah. You're not thinking about those things — you just are going to do what you want to do.

JS: But that was a much shorter shoot than *Killer of Sheep*, or no?

CB: Yeah, it was a much shorter shoot, because I shot every day, basically. It was an extended period; it was longer than it should have been. Because later on the delays and stuff like that, and actors, and things. It was a madhouse.

JS: What was it like shooting *Killer of Sheep*? Did you have similar —

CB: No, it was fun. I mean, you had actors who didn't understand the process of filmmaking. They would show up at one or two, but I was prepared for that. It was all fun and things like that. Because I know I was imposing on them. So, it was okay.



IndieWire

***My Brother's Wedding* Filmmaker Charles Burnett Reflects on the Painful, Protracted Journey of His Nearly-Lost Masterpiece**

August 17, 2023

By Robert Daniels

'80s Week: "I thought that if it was cut right, then we could've had a story that really spoke to what was going on in the community," the filmmaker told IndieWire of his second feature.

Charles Burnett is best known for his landmark portraits of Black American life, from the aching neorealism of *Killer of Sheep* to the mordant mysticism of *To Sleep with Anger*, his films aim to depict the broken contract the country made with its African American citizens in the aftermath of World War II.

His lesser-known masterpiece *My Brother's Wedding*, however, is emblematic of a different continuum running through Burnett's films: the theme of becoming.

An intimate window into early '80s Los Angeles, where confluences of Black Southern roots were still trying to flower in a hostile urban environment — *My Brother's Wedding* is a heated tale about the perils of upward mobility, the rising drug epidemic, and the tight alliance shared by two Black men, Pierce (Everett Silas) and Soldier (Ronnie Bell), the latter of whom has just been released from prison as the film begins.

Young and proudly working-class, Pierce is agitated by the romantic union that will elevate his brother Wendell (Monte Easter) to the upper social status of Wendell's affluent fiancée, Sonia (Gaye Shannon-Burnett). Pierce treats Sonia with disdain, even as he protects the troubled Soldier, an imbalance that's put to the test when he's forced to choose between appearing at Wendell's wedding or attending a funeral of a friend. It's a choice that ignites an internal tug-of-war within him.

My Brother's Wedding found abbreviated life when it premiered at New York City's New Directors/New Films festival in 1983, but that version of the film that first screened was tainted after producers snatched the edit away from Burnett to disastrous results. The rough-cut wasn't well received by festival audiences (and infamously earned a harsh review from the *New York Times*), causing those same producers to then shelve the picture until Milestone Films co-founders Dennis Doros and Amy Heller bought the rights several decades later, allowing Burnett to finally finish editing in 2007.

While the 2007 version is much closer to Burnett's original intent, it's difficult for the filmmaker to forget what could have been. "I thought that if it was cut right, then we could've had a story that really spoke to what was going on in the community," he told IndieWire in a recent interview.

Raised in Los Angeles, Burnett emerged from a modest working-class background to attend UCLA film school, where he met Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Billy Woodberry, and formed what would become known as the LA Rebellion: a group of Black creatives dedicated to humanizing the lives of Black people on screen.

Burnett's master's thesis, *Killer of Sheep*, took that charge to heart. A groundbreaking black-and-white scorching film in the aftermath of the Watts Uprising; the film told the story of a Black family living on the economic margins to the point of emotional rot (Kaycee Moore's performance as the yearning mother remains a particularly towering acting achievement). Due to music rights issues stemming from the film's soulful soundtrack, however, *Killer of Sheep* also wouldn't be released wide until 2007 (another save by Milestone Films).

My Brother's Wedding, therefore, had offered Burnett an exceedingly rare chance for a Black filmmaker: a second feature. As in *Killer of Sheep* before it, Burnett cast first-time actors — fixtures in the South Central neighborhood he called home — and relied on the bluesy, soul songs of Johnny Ace to add further sonic textures. Rather than shooting in black and white again, however, he opted for color. He also wanted a comedic element he felt was lacking in his previous film.

"*Killer of Sheep* got some good reviews, but people looked at it and said it was too dry, and so forth," Burnett said. "*My Brother's Wedding* was a number of things: It was an attempt to sort of correct the lack of humor, but, you know, make it more satirical yet serious by making fun of some of the things from when we were kids growing up, along with middle class conflicts and things like that."

That desire to reach for a spirited, kinetic tone also shifted *My Brother's Wedding* away from capturing the strain of a striving Black mother and father (*Killer of Sheep*) to a younger

generation, closer to Burnett's own, who found themselves disillusioned in a different way by economic lack.

In fact, the script took inspiration from a real-life event where Burnett promised one friend he'd attend her wedding, only to discover that it fell on the same day as another buddy's funeral. "I was gonna tell her I can't go [to the wedding]. I was walking up to her to tell her, but I was too chicken to say I can't go. So, I tried to do both," he said. "I went to the wedding, and it took forever to start. There were all these announcements, an uncle, a cousin, whatever, their plane was late. So finally, the wedding took place and I tried to get to the funeral and by the time I got there, it was all over."

Burnett molded his painful experience to explicate the let downs and hardships encountered by the Black folks who migrated from the South to South Central, Los Angeles. Originally born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Burnett recalled how African Americans found racism on the West Coast as prodigious as the kind they left behind: Neighborhoods like Inglewood, West Los Angeles, Pasadena, Glendale, and Beverly Hills mirrored the rhythms of sundown towns, where Black folks could go to work during the day but had to leave before nightfall. And yet, the weight of prejudice didn't force Black people back below the Mason-Dixon line.



"I grew up in an oral traditional kind of situation where a lot of Southerners were here, and they would talk about the South and what they experienced. Lyrically and metaphorically, there was

always the South as this sort of mythical place that exists where they all had these awful experiences of racism and fear, and they didn't wanna go back," Burnett said. "My mother said she'd never go back there. That was her freedom."

That freedom in *My Brother's Wedding*, however, isn't felt by Pierce: While he doesn't want to transition into a wealthier pretentious class, he feels trapped in the menial job he performs clerking his parents' ramshackle dry cleaners. Burnett uses the dry cleaners as a meeting place between age groups: There's the tween Black girl infatuated by Pierce (he ignores her romantic pining), an elderly man arriving to have his trousers repaired, and the young adults grabbing their chic outfits. The routine leaves Pierce trapped in an endless malaise that's only interrupted by Soldier's release from jail. Pierce promises Soldier's mother that he'll keep her son out of trouble, but with few job opportunities for Soldier, no educational prospects, and a mess of emotional issues, Pierce's word means little. Soldier falls back into bad habits, and even worse behavior.



Though Pierce's disdain for Wendell and Sonia defines the complex film's drama, looking back on the script, Burnett wishes he had opted for an even-handed approach. He recalls how he yearned for the ability to make long-term plans the same way children of wealthier Blacks did.

"Because their parents were doctors, lawyers, and professional people, they instilled that in their sons and daughters," he said. "When we were growing up here, kids from Mississippi, South Arkansas, whatever, we didn't want the same jobs as their parents. We didn't want to do housework or carpentry. We didn't have to go to school for that. We did home training." In that

regard, it's telling how Pierce rejects the pleas from his parents to settle down and instead carouses with Soldier amid South Central's bustling nightlife.

Tenuous scenes of tradition and angst power the textured mosaic adorning *My Brother's Wedding*. Burnett captures how the Black Southern church-going transplanted to the West Coast — Pierce's mother attends sermons and Pierce reads Bible verses to the neighborhood's elders, Big Momma and Big Daddy — and the vibrant Southern-inspired bars and clubs that popped up too. The younger and older characters might butt heads, but there's also a deep ancestral love. Tender wrestling scenes between Pierce and his dad, and the tight hug Soldier receives from his own father, pay tribute to the sage people Burnett grew up with.

That's because *My Brother's Wedding* offers a depiction of Black life that isn't limited to the tragic. Instead, it's a fully realized picture of Black people's three-dimensional reality propelled by an empathetic lens and adept performances, Ronnie Bell's turn as Soldier chief among them.

In Burnett's eyes, Bell is reflective of the lost potentiality of Black talent. It's a plight not only seen in a character like Soldier, but also present in the actor's unrealized career. Hailing from Sacramento, Bell is the son of Aaron Mitchell, the lone person executed in California under Ronald Reagan's governorship. Bell portrayed his own father in a production put on by the Inglewood Theater; Burnett attended the performance and cast Bell soon thereafter.

Bell's moving, empathetic turn as the rugged Soldier should have netted the talented actor further roles. Like many other skilled Black actors, Bell ultimately quit the profession when his career stalled out (later in life Bell advocated for abolishing the death penalty).

"He was like Kaycee Moore," the director said. "They had that energy. I swear to God, they should have collected those people and made 'em stars and made 'em movies because they had more energy and more presence than most actors. It was like having Louis Armstrong and not giving him a trumpet."

By the time Burnett arrived at *To Sleep with Anger*, he was startled at how often the older Black actors who read for parts were brilliant talents who had yet to have gotten their breaks. "You always come back saying 'how come I didn't see you in more of this or that and this?' You ask the question, but you know the answer to your own question. That's what racism will do," he said.

Killer of Sheep languishing in legal limbo for over three decades didn't help, nor did *My Brother's Wedding* being shelved for nearly twenty-five years. Similar to many Black actors, the Black directors of the '80s and '90s also witnessed the erasure and eventual rediscovery of their best work.

Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground*, Ayoka Chenzira's *Alma's Rainbow*, Cauleen Smith's *Drylongso*, and Wendell B. Harris Jr.'s *Chameleon Street*, are just some of the Black films that have been "rediscovered" in the last decade. How much richer could Black cinema be if earlier success by talented filmmakers had been followed by firm encouragement?

All of Burnett's films bristle with that sense of becoming, even as dashed guarantees stifled worthy Black creatives to the margins. It's cruelly ironic, then, that *My Brother's Wedding* became emblematic of a persistent "what if" when producers took away the filmmaker's final cut. Even when Milestone Films granted Burnett a second chance to finish editing, the ghosts of the previous butchery forced the director's original vision just out of reach.

"Because when you edit a film, you have all of the materials that you shot, including the outtakes. The outtakes for 'My Brother's Wedding' had disappeared," Burnett explained. "So, it wasn't so much an edit as it was a trim." While grateful to Milestone Films, Burnett still thinks about the film's unexplored ideas that will remain forever unrealized. "I never looked at the film after that as an accomplishment," he added. "I think the story, to me, is a good story, but it wasn't executed well because of the problems with the edit and all of the errors that happened while trying to get it completed."

Since its release in 2007, the film has been lauded by many. The critic Richard Brody wrote that "Burnett fills the film with voices and memories, humor and rage; his vision of neighborhood life has an ample, passionate generosity." Reached for comment for this article, Black Film Archive founder Maya Cade said "*My Brother's Wedding* exhibits wisdom, poise, and poetry of Black life that feels almost like a dream. Burnett's gift of craft displayed here became the beacon that awakened a new generation of Black filmgoers and filmmakers."

In a twist of fate, the same anger *My Brother's Wedding* was meant to voice — the feeling of being pushed around, the erasure of an entire generation's hopes — is literally tied to the making of the film. It now stands as not just a specific recollection of '80s Los Angeles, but as a compassionate, humanist opposition to the limiting hood films that would follow in the rest of the decade.

It also provides a touchstone to the themes of Black southern heritage and the tension of younger generations colliding with the traditions of their mothers and fathers that would inspire *To Sleep with Anger*. *My Brother's Wedding* is the imperative thread providing the through-line to the director's career, and a resonant metaphor for the Black experience in post-war America.

It is one of Burnett's masterpieces, not only because of its compromised nature, but also because of it.

The New York Times

CRITIC'S CHOICE: *My Brother's Wedding* The Rough Poetry of Real Independence

September 14, 2007

By A. O. Scott

One of the most heartening recent developments in the world of American film has been the revival of interest in the work of Charles Burnett. At a moment when the term independent film is taken to refer either to midbudget studio projects anchored by Oscar-soliciting performances or to the aimless navel-gazing of under-stimulated hipsters (Speak up! Stop mumbling!), Mr. Burnett's work is an indelible reminder of what real independence looks like.

His early films in particular also testify to the vitality of a neorealist impulse that has never quite taken root in American cinema. *Killer of Sheep* (1977), which was revived last year, and *My Brother's Wedding*, which begins a weeklong run at the IFC Center today, have a sense of place and personality that is marvelous and rare. Shot in South Central Los Angeles, they are full of the rough poetry of everyday experience, and their depictions of African American working-class life are humorous, loving and honest, devoid of either condescension or political posturing.

A longer, unfinished version of *My Brother's Wedding* was shown at the New Directors/New Films festival in 1983, after which the film faded into obscurity. Mr. Burnett has re-edited it in the meantime and has produced an 81-minute feature of astonishing richness and density. The central character is Pierce Mundy (Everette Silas), a not-quite-young man who works in his parents' dry-cleaning business. Pierce seems stuck on the way to full-fledged adulthood and also caught between his duties to his brother, who is about to marry a doctor's snooty daughter, and his loyalty to his best friend, Soldier, who can't stay out of trouble or jail.

Somehow, Mr. Burnett, using nonprofessional actors, tells Pierce's story in a way that balances melodrama with calm observation. Quite a lot happens in *My Brother's Wedding*, but the story may be less important than the faces and voices of the actors and the subtlety of their interactions. They are involved, with Mr. Burnett and his crew, in a project of making art out of materials and inspirations that lie close to hand. And the result is a film that is so firmly and organically rooted in a specific time and place that it seems to contain worlds.

SLANT

Joy and pain: Charles Burnett's

My Brother's Wedding

September 14, 2007

By Andrew Chan

Who would deny that the revival of Charles Burnett's career has been the major film event of the year? Though his 1977 debut feature, *Killer of Sheep*, had already managed to enter the canon without ever having enjoyed a theatrical release, Milestone Films' pristine 35mm print still came as a revelation when it arrived this past spring. It wasn't just that the film proved to be every bit the equal of the Italian neorealist classics to which it has often been compared, but that it also served as a potential wake-up call to its audience, even the most conscientious of whom may have forgotten how scarce depictions of the urban black community still are in American film. As a film student at UCLA in the '70s, Burnett began addressing the social need of his time by responding to blaxploitation's fashionable views of criminality, seeking to provide a balance in American cinema's images of the ghetto. That *Killer of Sheep* remains essential for the void it fills makes it no less of an artistic triumph. Foregoing the emotional extremes of most politically motivated cinema, Burnett built his first masterpiece out of slices of life in which joy and pain are indistinguishable. With its lyricism and tonal restraint, it remains one of the starkest visions of American society and its deferral of dreams. But what makes it indispensable is its avoidance of the shallow pity that so often sentimentalizes social realism.

The release of Burnett's 1983 follow-up, *My Brother's Wedding*, in a new director's cut made possible by his increasingly public prestige, shows us how deep his humanist perspective goes, yielding more evidence of the subtlety and patience with which this filmmaker explores one of the great subjects of his career: the problem of dignity among a demoralized underclass. Set in South Central Los Angeles, the film chronicles the growing pains of Pierce (Everett Silas), a young man trying to reconcile his responsibility to his family with his sense of duty to a friend who has just been released from prison. Working in his family's dry-cleaning service, he feels trapped by his lack of direction and options, even as he resents his brother for being an upwardly mobile lawyer with an upper-middle-class fiancée. The film climaxes when Pierce is forced to make a choice that will test his loyalty to both parties. But while the plot ultimately comes to

revolve around Pierce and his decision-making, this ambiguous protagonist spends much of his time in the movie floating around as more of a lost soul than a real man.



As in *Killer of Sheep*, the mess of life leaks in from the margins of the story, overwhelming individual characterizations. Burnett gives precedence to vignettes over the manipulations of plot, lingering on comic details such as a boy making fart noises out of boredom, or a girl who repeatedly asks Pierce to take her to the prom. *My Brother's Wedding* serves as a powerful companion to its predecessor, as it evokes the comfortable familiarity its characters feel toward their milieu, as well as the sense of aimlessness that threatens to trap them there forever. Extending the effects of his use of nonprofessional actors and improvisation, Burnett adds a thick layer of artifice to the poetic naturalism found in *Killer of Sheep* by keeping the acting amateurish. Much less reliant on music as a counterpoint to action, this film sometimes has the eerie mood of a vacuum; whereas the characters in *Killer of Sheep* were accompanied in their desperation by the yearning voices of Paul Robeson and Dinah Washington, the world depicted in *My Brother's Wedding* seems completely devoid of the urgency to strive. Unlike *Sheep's* emotionally mysterious hero, Stan, Pierce lacks a strong charisma or the will to adopt a consistent set of principles. But in case audiences emerged from the earlier film convinced that the trials of ghetto life were what endowed Stan with his backbone, Burnett replies by identifying Pierce's tragic flaw as a "romanticized view of the have-nots." Poverty, the film explains, makes no one any wiser or nobler. Burnett gets tough on his hero toward the end of the film because he realizes, as many artists never do, that the sanctification of suffering is among the worst sins a social realist can commit.

For its critique of the notion that criminality equals cultural authenticity, and its engagement with the anxiety that upward mobility dilutes culture, *My Brother's Wedding* is as relevant today as *Killer of Sheep*. Just as the youngest son in Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* is torn between a life of sin and a life of responsibility, and just as the slaves in *Nightjohn* are forced to decide between

the chains of illiteracy and the freedom of knowledge, so Pierce is stalled from any growth or progress by his limited sense of what does and does not constitute blackness, and even his basic goodness won't save him from being left as the one solitary figure at the end. As he stumbles through the film without an identity or ambition, the haunting opening lines of *Killer of Sheep* echo back to us: "You're not a child anymore. You'll soon be a goddamn man. Start learning what life is about now."

The new wave of exposure Burnett is enjoying won't make his oeuvre very much easier to package. The best of his wide-ranging résumé includes his daringly poetic first films, the novelistic *To Sleep with Anger*, a jazz-themed short film made for French television, and a juvenile-lit adaptation for the Disney Channel. Though his key works can be viewed as variations on a cluster of thematic concerns, the diversity of their sources and styles makes it less easy to identify the auteurist thread that ties them all together, especially since they do not flaunt the kind of definable persona or visual stamp that always threatens to turn major talents like Spike Lee into caricatures. Marketing Burnett as a darling of the art-film world, some have taken to calling him a black Jean Renoir or Satyajit Ray, but analogies to these humanist touchstones are helpful only up to a point, since they fail to account for Burnett's disarming use of humor, his instinctive sense of music's relationship to image, and the influences of black art and culture on his formal sensibilities. The films invite comparison to the most high-art of foreign auteurs partly because they do not fit comfortably in the domain of the American independent, certainly not when placed alongside the undisciplined aesthetics and self-satisfied quirkiness of the scene's younger generation. Burnett's movies are, however, reminiscent of a time that began at least a decade before *Killer of Sheep* was made, when the spirit of independent film found its embodiment in the wandering, improvisatory style of John Cassavetes. While *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding* possess a temperament that suggests the exact opposite of the high-pitched hysteria in *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence*, Burnett's films represent similar challenges for the audience in the amount and type of attention they require; the unpredictability of their jagged rhythms; and the complexity and amorphousness of their emotions.

In the attempt to sell Burnett as a figure of both aesthetic and cultural importance, the most interesting result might be the way much of the critical press has agreed upon a single convenient soundbyte, habitually referring to him as America's "most gifted black director." Such quotable acclaim suppresses the questions we must ask about why African American voices continue to be so underrepresented and misrepresented in our movies. So far, partly due to a lack of access to his films, the most vocal part of Burnett's fanbase consists of white cinephiles, which may be why a considerable amount of criticism has emphasized his affinities to European filmmaking instead of his debt to black culture. But the impulse to understand Burnett within the framework of African American art is a necessary one, particularly as it shifts the focus away from his obvious but ultimately limited connection to the neorealists.

To appreciate Burnett from a racial and cultural angle is to at some point position him in dialectical opposition to the younger Spike Lee, who holds claim to the title of “most gifted black director” among the mainstream audience. Such a contrast can be both horribly reductive and surprisingly illuminating: when considered in dialogue with Lee’s films, Burnett’s work calls to mind the longstanding ideological debates that once placed the late-’30s duel between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright at the center of black aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Both Burnett and Lee are committed to very personal ideas about what constitutes a realistic, authentic portrayal of black life. But, like Wright, Lee’s highly topical films take on the form of sharp social critique and protest that includes and implicates the white audience; his style takes the philosophy underlying Wright’s political novels and expands it to embrace the values of the Black Arts movement and the passion of socially conscious black pop. On the other hand, Burnett, like Hurston, often lays his ethnographic eye on the daily routines and relationships within insular black communities, leaving the sources of oppression unnamed and invisible. His visual palette is beautiful but subdued, evoking the rootsy sparseness of a blues record. But although Burnett and Lee can be interpreted as manifestations of two different ideas about what a black artist should be, one of the many dangers of this binary lies in the temptation to ignore Burnett’s political aims simply because he courts less controversy, and because his films are likely to invoke more of our sadness than our outrage.

None of Burnett’s greatest films consider very deeply the moral responsibilities or accountability of their white characters. There is a refreshing cultural privacy he establishes in films such as *Nightjohn* (with its scenes of a slave community after-hours) and *When It Rains* (in which jazz becomes a form of currency by which a black woman is saved from eviction) that allows him to pose the same questions again and again: What do dignity and morality mean for a black person in an unjust society? How much of the pain of oppression becomes the joy of overcoming? How much control does a black person have over his or her own life, his or her own moral choices? Burnett presents these questions in ways we have never heard them asked before—in the poet’s voice of sorrow and confusion rather than the preacher’s holler of righteous conviction. With the theatrical release of *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother’s Wedding* this year, he has changed the face not just of cinema but of identity.

Charles Burnett's 1981 Treatment:

My Brother's Wedding

*[Editor: When Charles Burnett won the Critics' (FIPRESCI Prize) at the 1981 Berlin International Film Festival for his debut feature, Killer of Sheep, he received an offer to finance his next film from the adventurous German television network Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF). This is the filmmaker's very quickly written treatment for ZDF detailing his plans for **My Brother's Wedding**. The grammatical errors and spelling inconsistencies are retained for historical accuracy.]*

The story is not ethnographical or anthropological but a conscious attempt at art, an art that expresses ideas.

"My Brother's Wedding" is a story very large in scope that subtly brings together a number of themes that work together in such a fashion as to produce the effect of life unfolding, revealing in relief its organic structure to give the impression of life in its multi leveled form. The ideas that are discussed in the film, are dramatized by characters, real people attempting to give definition to their lives. The film's approach is to work with a mind to keep every element at its purest level, to keep the plot moving towards its resolution and by doing so, revealing insight in the human predicament in which poses question of humanity; what will loom forth, is one of the underlining themes, the sense of human weakness: human frailty.

Though the characters are mostly black and the location is the black community, the story communicates to all persons. The universal nature of the story is that it presents the characters as human beings, struggling with blood and tears, with compassion and an understanding of others suffering and locked in a moral dilemma. All of which are feelings shared in some degree by everyone. The story's uniqueness comes from a particular group of people's point of view which has been somewhat overlooked, a point of view which consists of wanting to be understood and wanting to play a part in the community of man.

The story is not ethnographical or anthropological but a conscious attempt at art, an art that expresses ideas.

Story Line

"My Brother's Wedding" is a tragic comedy that takes place in South Central Los Angeles. The story focuses on a young man who hasn't made much of his life as of yet and at a crucial point in his life, he is unable to make the proper decision, a moral. He has a distinct romantic notion about life in the ghetto and yet, in spite of his naive sensitivity, he is given the task of acting the part of his brother's keeper.

A friend of Pierce, nicknamed Soldier, is about to be released from jail after serving a three-year sentence for violating parole and leaving the state to avoid prosecution. Pierce's brother Wendel

is about to get married to a middle-class girl who is also a lawyer like Wendel. In planning for his wedding, Wendel neglects to invite his old neighborhood chums on the excuse that he doesn't want any of his old friends there to spoil his image. Pierce's mother runs a little dry-cleaning business in which Pierce works part-time. He always comes late and his mother who goes to church every night, waits for him, all dressed up and anxious to leave. Soldier is released from jail and wants to get back into the swing of things; Soldier's mother hopes that Pierce will be a positive influence on her son. Pierce and Soldier, because they share the same past and most of their friends are dead, feel very close; it is the fact that they can recall the past, relive it, recalling the good times, that gives the present moment any kind of meaning. They feel that they don't fit in today. Pierce does not get on well with Sonia, Wendel's soon-to-be wife. Pierce thinks that Wendel should have married someone from the neighborhood and he care less about being the best man at the wedding; it is his mother's wish that he is. If he could, he would avoid his brother, but his mother wants him to do this, being best man, as a favor to her, Pierce's father can understand him but keeps his feeling to himself. Soldier, since his release from jail begins to get in trouble again. He has beaten up several people each of whom has come to Pierce to complain. Pierce has to lie to Soldier's mother, giving her the impression that Soldier is doing good. One afternoon after Pierce's mother leaves him to look after the dry-cleaning store, Soldier brings a girl by and asks could he use the back room to make love with his girlfriend; Pierce sees no harm in it. While Pierce is up front daydreaming, his mother who has forgotten her hymn book comes in the back door without Pierce knowing it; however, when Pierce does become aware of her, it is too late and she walks upon Soldier and his girlfriend making love. No sin could be greater.

Sonia wants to invite Wendel's family to her family's house for dinner. Pierce finds himself out of place among the rich silverware and the discussion of who are the new black painters and what the republican party can do for the negroes.

Soldier speeds into a telephone pole, killing himself and seriously injuring a female passenger. People say that lucky Pierce wasn't with him, since they stick together like glue. Pierce promises Soldier's mother that he will be a pallbearer at the funeral. It is not until he has time to think that he realizes that the wedding and the funeral are on the same day and at the same time almost. He tries to get his brother to change the day or the time of the wedding; he will do it if Sonia goes along with it. She doesn't and Pierce's mother supports her. Soldier was no earthly good and she cannot see why such a person even when dead can upset good decent people.

Sonia comes up with the idea that perhaps they can change the time of the funeral. Pierce tries to ask Soldier's mother to change the time of the funeral but realizes that he must be crazy asking for her to do such a thing. He doesn't want to be best man but that brings his mother down on him for not wanting to do the only thing that she ever wanted him to do. The day of the wedding and the funeral, Soldier's friends are trying to put together a suit, by borrowing a different item of clothes to piece together what might look like a suit; on the other hand, Pierce is in his tuxedo and tells his friends that he will be there no matter what.

On getting to the church where the wedding is about to take place, it seems to Peirce that people are moving in slow motion and enjoying themselves for no reason. Sonia is being attended to by a group of women. Wendel gives Pierce the wedding ring and how he wants him to hand it to him since he never came to rehearsals. The preacher tries to talk with Pierce, but Pierce is too concerned about the time. It is being announced that the wedding will delay a bit because Sonia's favorite uncle will be arriving late because of his flight.

Pierce rushes to find his mother but he can't get in to where she is. Soldier's poorly dressed friends pour in to the chapel. He tries to tell his father why he doesn't think that he can wait any longer. His father tells him that he should have decided long ago and stuck by it. The funeral has already started and those at the funeral are looking around to see if Pierce has come yet. People are having a good time at the wedding which still has not gotten started. Pierce in an emotional state, listens to the ticking of everyone's watch, it sounds like crickets at night in the woods. Pierce seems to be swimming through the crowd to the door, opening the door, the air hits him like a gale. He runs out to the parking lot and takes his brother's car and races through the streets. The favorite uncle arrives to everyone's cheer.

The funeral is getting started. Pierce is waiting on a traffic light. It seems like everything is getting in his way. He gets to the funeral chapel; nobody seems to be there. A chauffeur is wiping a car and gestures that the funeral has been over for some time and the people have gone. Pierce is morally crushed. He finds that he has his brother's wedding ring. He turns the ring around between his fingers.

Character Analysis

Pierce Mundy, 32 years of age, black, wants to do the right thing but the results of his action indicate that he is incapable of doing so because of his romanticizing of his social environment which has produced a sort of stagnation in his development. He wants to be religious but mistrusts those who preach. He is opposed to those who think solely of advancing materialistically. He idealizes the poor which helps no one. When given the chance to help someone, he fails. He tries to assume his friend's guilt. He does not look to the future; his life is centered in the past. Because most of his childhood friends are all gone and he feels himself misunderstood by a younger generation who are totally insensitive and violent and caught between his mother's deeply religious values, Pierce, the main character, sees himself and his friend Soldier as a dying breed, a generation squeezed between two hostile opposites. Peirce believes in following his heart and being a participant in the struggles of those who suffer and experiencing whatever the working class has to endure.

Soldier 32, black, spent 3 years in prison, is in and out of trouble; however, he is not really a bad person. He simply rejects his social environment but does not know how to respond to it in a creative way. His acts are irrational and does violence; it is only after that he has released his

violence when he can feel sympathy for his victim. On one level, the whole conflict of the story is tied up with Soldier's character and how he effects people.

Pierce's Mother is a woman that has worked hard all her life, married to the same man for over 36 years and goes to church every chance that she gets, deeply religious and very much concerned about her two boys. Wendel is her favorite son, but Pierce is the one that she is mostly worried about because of his not knowing what he wants to be in the world. Pierce is the only thing that keeps her from fulfilling the lord's task which is raising her two sons and giving the rest of her life to her god; she could die in peace if Pierce could only start being responsible. She adores Sonia. She wanted a girl but only got boys. It makes her day when Wendel and Sonia come over. Sonia got an education and making something of herself as she wanted to do but couldn't; she looks at Sonia as being somebody she would have been given the chance. She has worked hard to own her dry-cleaning store and in doing so, she has an attitude that everything will work if you try hard enough and believe in the Lord. It is her who makes Pierce accept the role of being his brother's best man at his wedding. Because she thinks that Soldier violated her home, she refuses to change the date of the wedding and thereby setting the course of Pierce's downfall.

Wendel 36, black, very quiet, wants to forget his roots, that part of him that was nourished by growing up in the ghetto and being what he thinks as being poor. He got out body and soul and rejects anyone and anything that has to do with his past. Wendel feels himself moving up in society and is about to get married to a well-established middle-class girl. He is very careful in his manner, speech and dress; there is nothing that might suggest black dialect.

Sonia, in her middle twenties, well educated, not afraid to argue with anybody; she sort of has her ideas about the world that comes from an understanding of Marx and a kind of having seen that no new political system really works for the poor. She is misunderstood because of her background, and she can care less about what people think of her. She likes Wendel's mother very much because without having advantages, Wendel's mother did a great deal with what she had. One of the things that she dislikes, in people and especially Soldier is that he takes life for granted. She is the kind of person that has read the book; *The God That Failed* and *Darkness at Noon*. One does not know if she is looking for a strong person or someone that she can dominate; she has the qualities of both. She is very rational, even to planning kids. She refuses to understand Pierce's reasons for being what he is.

Soldier's Mother, a woman who looks like she will carry her secrets to the grave. She does not complain about her hard life. Her only interest is seeing that her son manages to stay out of trouble. She used to do day work and then stay on the place when her kids got old enough to start taking care of themselves. She is very religious in her own way. She has a very understanding and patient quality about her.

Soldier's Sister, her husband is a truck driver, she has a son that she does not want to work until he gets to be a grown man. She sees her father and other men and don't want her boy to be like them; she wants to spoil him. She has got all the answers; she does not see why her mother should waste her life away worrying about her brother, Soldier. Not realizing that if she is not careful, she will be doing the same thing that her mother is doing. Her mother is soft, but she is hard. She is very streetwise. She only thinks of her family first.

Pierce's father is rather quiet and is quite understanding; who does not want to get involved in anybody's business but his own; he seems to be in a world of his world. He is not all that fond of going to church but does so to please his wife. Every chance that he gets, he and his friends go fishing. He does not think that there is anything wrong with Pierce. He favors Pierce's way of thinking because he too has a tendency to daydream as well.

Soldier's Father, at one time was a very strong man; he moves with deliberation. He comes home weighted down with cans that he has picked up out of the streets and trash cans. He seems to respond to things as a tree would. He is very solid.

The format of the film is 35mm; the reason for choosing 35mm is because of the size of the frame and its shape. It gives you the sense of lateral space and in the film, there is a lot of movement from one side of the frame to the other. I want to emphasize space as another element of tension; for example, there is a scene where a little girl is looking for Pierce to tell him that Soldier has just been killed in a car crash. Pierce is standing on the street corner talking to some friends, unaware that Soldier has died. From a slightly high angle, you see the little girl running towards him in the background; the camera is lowered a little and with the use of a long lens, the girl in background, running toward Pierce seems to take a much greater time getting to him because the lens makes her appear close when she is actually very far away from him. There is another scene where Pierce is in the front of his mother's cleaners and she is coming in the back door to discover Soldier making love in the back room, again the lateral space would be very effective in saying everything in one shot. There is another scene where Pierce is walking towards a house in which a yellow light is coming from the interior of the house. When he walks in, the whole kitchen is bathed in yellow light but in the background, in the bathroom, there is a mother giving her baby a bath in natural light, all in the same frame.

The film will be in color because Pierce the main character is affected by the appearance of things. Sometimes the color suggests things that are unnatural, for example, the scene in the funeral parlor where there is a touch of green on everything. In another scene, there is a very dark girl at a kitchen table eating a deep-colored orange carrot. In this particular film, color will add another dimension to the story.

Charles Burnett

(1944 –)



The work of Honorary Oscar® recipient and legendary filmmaker, Charles Burnett has consistently garnered critical acclaim. In fact, Burnett’s first film, *Killer of Sheep* was declared a “national treasure” by the United States Library of Congress; and it was among the first 50 films placed in the National Film Registry because of its significance as a ground-breaking film.

The Vicksburg, Mississippi native moved to Los Angeles at an early age. He went on to receive an MFA from UCLA’s School of Theater, Film & Television, where *Killer of Sheep* began as Burnett’s UCLA thesis feature film. The future DGA, WGA and Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences member was *Killer of Sheep*’s director, producer, writer, cinematographer, and editor. The film eventually won the Critics’ Prize at the Berlin Film Festival and the first-place honor at Sundance (then the U.S. Film Festival).

After winning a Guggenheim Fellowship, Burnett began work on his sophomore feature *My Brother’s Wedding*. He wrote, directed, and produced this independent film centering on the theme of envy and its power to warp families.

Not long after receiving the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Fellowship as well as, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, a Media Arts Fellowship, and a NEA grant, Burnett wrote and directed the drama, *To Sleep with Anger*. Danny Glover starred as the charming, Southern family friend, “Harry,” who insinuates himself on the troubled family, forcing their inner turmoil to the surface. The film won three Independent Spirit® Awards: Best Director and Best

Screenplay for Burnett, and Best Actor for Glover. *To Sleep with Anger* also became the second film of Burnett's named to the National Film Registry.

Additionally, the National Society of Film Critics presented Burnett their Best Screenplay Award for *To Sleep with Anger*. It also received a Special Jury Recognition Award at Sundance and a Special Award from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. Both Burnett and Glover were nominated for New York Film Critics Circle Awards. He also received the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award.

His next film, *The Glass Shield*, starring Michael Boatman, Lori Petty and then movie superstar-in-the-making, Ice Cube, was a police drama based on the true story of corruption and racism in law enforcement.

Burnett made his television directorial debut with his acclaimed Disney Channel film, *Nightjohn*, starring Carl Lumbly in the title role, as well as Beau Bridges, Lorraine Toussaint, and Bill Cobbs. Based on the young-adult novel by Newbery Honor Book author, Gary Paulsen, *Nightjohn* tells the story of a captured enslaved runaway empowering an orphaned enslaved girl (played by Allison Jones in the film), by secretly teaching her a life-altering skill that is punishable by death for the enslaved — to read and write. *The New Yorker's* film critic Terrence Rafferty called *Nightjohn* the “best American movie” of that year. Among its many accolades, *Nightjohn* received a Special Citation Award from the National Society of Film Critics, “. [F]or a film whose exceptional quality and origin challenge strictures of the movie marketplace.” Burnett was also honored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival with a retrospective of his work, entitled *Witnessing for Everyday Heroes*. The event also included his documentary, *America Becoming*.

Following that honor, Burnett continued to have projects that “witness for everyday heroes” including: *Finding Buck McHenry* (Showtime) starring late acting icon, Ossie Davis as a legendary Negro Baseball League player; a look at race relations during the 1950s in the ABC mini-series, *Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding* (ABC) starring Oscar® winner Halle Berry; interracial love found among the most unlikely of characters in indie film, *The Annihilation of Fish* with Oscar®- nominated actors, Lynn Redgrave and James Earl Jones; and capturing a seminal moment in the Civil Rights Movement in *Selma, Lord, Selma* (ABC) that featured Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s late daughter, Yolanda King.

In the new millennium, Burnett's projects continued to be high profile, such as Martin Scorsese's acclaimed PBS documentary series, *The Blues*. Personally invited by Scorsese, Burnett was the series' only African American director, among the seven filmmakers that included: Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, Wim Wenders, and Mike Figgis.

He also directed the Iraqi war storyline for the Emmy and Golden Globe-nominated PBS miniseries, *An American Family: Journey of Dreams*, created by his fellow UCLA Film School alumnus, Gregory Nava, and starring Emmy® winner and Oscar® nominee, Edward James Olmos.

More than 170 years after Nat Turner's death, Burnett presented an innovative take on Turner's life for the PBS Independent Lens project, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*. Among Burnett's unique creative choices was infusing the traditional documentary format with dramatizations of the various perspectives on Nat Turner and the slave revolt, by featuring a different actor — including Carl Lumbly — playing Turner in select segments.

Burnett reunited with Danny Glover and Carl Lumbly for the acclaimed *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation*, written and directed by Burnett about Namibia's fight for independence against South Africa. He followed that with his helming of *Relative Stranger* for the Hallmark Channel. It starred *ER*'s Eriq LaSalle and late acting legend, Cicely Tyson, who garnered an Emmy nomination for her performance.

As with his projects, Burnett's accolades haven't waned in the 21st Century. The late Nobel Prize laureate, Toni Morrison invited Burnett to Paris for a retrospective of his films at the world-renowned Louvre Museum via its cultural program, *The Foreigner's Home*. A joint venture with Morrison and the Louvre, the program addressed the manifestation of displacement, exile, and immigration in the creative arts.

He also received the prestigious Horton Foote Award for Screenwriting. Previous recipients include Academy Award winners for Best Screenplay, Billy Bob Thornton (*Slingblade*) and Callie Khouri (*Thelma & Louise*). Howard University honored Burnett with their national Paul Robeson Award. Past recipients include Gordon Parks, Spike Lee and Euzhan Palcy.

In addition to TCM airing a retrospective of his films in 2008, that year Burnett's classic film, *Killer of Sheep* was named one of the "25 Most Important Films on Race" by *Time Magazine*. The film also had a special national release to critical acclaim, including this from *Entertainment Weekly*: "What matters is that this rare gem is now being released, with the polish of devoted restoration from UCLA film preservationists. And the legend of the movie's importance has not been oversold."

Burnett was named a Fellow by the renowned United States Artists Fellowship, along with Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright and actress, Anna Deavere Smith and Sapphire, author of the book on which Oscar®-nominated film, *Precious* was based. Another accolade bestowed on Burnett was by *Paste Magazine*, naming him on their list of the 50 Best Living Directors, that

included Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg. Burnett was one of only 25 Americans named to the international list, and just one of two African Americans, along with Spike Lee.

Burnett was also lauded by New York's historic Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) with a twenty-film retrospective of his work for three weeks during April 2011 at MoMA. Retrospectives of his legendary work continue, including the one in his honor at the renowned 3 Continents Film Festival in France held in November 2019.

Over the years, he has also been sought as a judge for film festivals in the U.S. and internationally, such as being the jury president for the famed Mar del Plata Film Festival in Argentina (considered the oldest film festival in the Western Hemisphere), as well as serving on a jury for Italy's esteemed Venice Film Festival. At the Venice Film Festival, Burnett was also honored with a screening of a Sony-restored version of his classic film, *To Sleep with Anger*. He has also served as a judge for non-festival awards, such as the revered Humanitas Prize. In addition, Burnett continues to be invited around the nation and the world for lectures, screenings, and live Q&As. He has spoken at educational institutions such as Yale University and at The Kennedy Center, following a screening of *Selma, Lord, Selma* at their acclaimed theater, The Reach in September 2019. Beyond imparting his legendary film acumen at lectures and panels, Burnett has served as visiting faculty or an artist-in-residence for renowned colleges and universities, such as Cal Arts, Bard College and UC Berkeley.



Among the honors he has received during his career for his impressive body of work, the pinnacle was receiving an Honorary Academy Award® from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences in 2017. That November, acclaimed filmmaker Ava DuVernay presented Burnett with his Honorary Oscar®, preceded by remarks about Burnett from actors Tessa

Thompson and the late Chadwick Boseman. Burnett was also acknowledged as an Honorary Oscar® winner during the 2018 Academy Awards telecast.

It was very poignant for Burnett to receive his Honorary Oscar® from DuVernay, because in 2015 the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Burnett about his *Selma, Lord, Selma* which some critics were citing as the artistic predecessor of DuVernay's Oscar® Best Picture nominee, *Selma*. In that article, he praised DuVernay's work on *Selma*, expressing how proud he was of her and of the historic milestone she had achieved with the Oscar® nomination. For Burnett it was also poignant that the year marked the 50th Anniversary of both Selma's Bloody Sunday and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

In 2020, Burnett directed a documentary that aired on PBS, *Power to Heal: Medicare & The Civil Rights Revolution*. Narrated by Danny Glover, an alumnus of many Burnett projects, the film examines the segregation of hospitals in the South. Currently, Burnett has several projects in development, including the film adaptations of the books *Grieve for the Past* by acclaimed author, Stanton Forbes and *145th Street* by the award-winning writer, Walter Dean Myers, as well as the memoir *God, I Listened* by late renowned rags-to-riches African American philanthropist, Eula McClaney. Another project he's developing is about formerly enslaved and famed entrepreneur, Biddy Mason, in partnership with Rev. J. Edgar Boyd, the senior pastor of Los Angeles's acclaimed First AME Church, which Mason helped found in 1872 — the historic and anti-enslavement African Methodist Episcopal denomination's first church in the city. Burnett is also attached to direct the Amazon Studios film project on Civil War hero, U.S. Congressman and former slave, Robert Smalls.

Burnett is represented for his writing and directing by Paul Alan Smith of the Verve Agency and is managed by Zna Portlock Houston of Manifested Entertainment Management, with stalwart entertainment attorney, Nina L. Shaw overseeing his legal matters. Milestone Films distributes Burnett's iconic *Killer of Sheep*, *My Brother's Wedding*, *The Final Insult*, as well as a collection of his short films, along with Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* which Burnett scripted and shot.

Burnett is honored to be a member of the DGA, WGA and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences. In 2024, he was presented with the Pratt Institute Legends Award.



Milestone Films

Over 35 years in film distribution and restoration, Milestone has built a reputation for discovering movies outside the mainstream that have been lost to history — acquiring, restoring, and introducing such important films as Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* and *The Annihilation of Fish*, Kent Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*, Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Bridgett M. Davis’s *Naked Acts*, the Mariposa Film Group’s *Word is Out*, Ayoka Chenzira’s *Alma’s Rainbow*, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country’s most influential independent distributors. Important contemporary artists who have presented Milestone restorations include Julie Dash, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Barbara Kopple, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme, Dustin Hoffman, and Charles Burnett.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis at *LA Weekly* chose Milestone as the 1999 “Indie Distributor of the Year.” In 2004, the National Society of Film Critics awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award. That same year the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award and the New York Film Critics Circle voted the company a Special Award “in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films.” In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission’s first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. In January 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association chose to give its first Legacy of Cinema Award “to Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Film & Video for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation.” In March 2008, Anthology Film Archive honored Milestone for its work in preservation.

The company won Best Rediscovery in the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for its release of *Winter Soldier* in 2006 and again in 2010 for *The Exiles*. In 2015, Il Cinema Ritrovato honored Milestone for Best Blu-ray, for the *Project Shirley* series. In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of

Film Critics for the releases of *On the Bowery* and *Word is Out*. The American Library Association selected *Word is Out* for its Notable Videos for Adults, the first classic film ever so chosen.

In December 2012, Milestone became the first two-time winner of the prestigious New York Film Critics' Circle's "Special Award" and also received another National Society of Film Critics Film Heritage Award, this time for the company's work restoring, preserving and distributing the films of iconoclast director Shirley Clarke. In 2019, Doros and Heller were honored with the Art House Convergence's Spotlight Lifetime Achievement Award and the Denver Silent Film Festival's David Shepard Career Achievement Award. In 2023, Milestone received the Ambler Cinematic Arts Award.

In 2009, Dennis Doros was elected as one of the Directors of the Board of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and established the organization's press office in 2010. He served three terms on the board. In 2016, he was honored with AMIA's William O'Farrell Award in recognition for services to the field. From 2017–2021, Doros served as President of AMIA, and on the board of Co-ordinating Council of Audio-Visual Archives Associations. From 2018–2021, Doros was a member of the National Film Preservation Board, which helps select the Library of Congress's yearly additions to the National Film Registry.

Heller and Doros have lectured internationally on the importance of saving and screening films outside the mainstream. In recent years, Milestone premiered pristine restorations of Erich von Stroheim's *Queen Kelly*, Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing*, Nancy Savoca's *Household Saints*; David Schickele's *Bushman*; Lois Weber's *Shoes* and *The Dumb Girl of Portici*; Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground*; George T. Nierenberg's *Say Amen*, *Somebody* and *No Maps on My Taps*; the films of Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, including the Oscar®-winning *Common Threads*, and Eleanor Antin's *The Man without a World*. They produced Ross Lipman's acclaimed essay film *Notfilm* and Martina Savoca-Guay's making-of documentary *The Many Miracles of Household Saints*.

In 2021, Milestone entered into a distribution agreement with Kino Lorber, which has allowed co-founders Doros and Heller more time to focus on the rediscovery and restoration of films that will delight viewers and challenge the cinematic canon. The pair — along with filmmakers Nancy Savoca, Rich Guay, Ira Deutchman, Mary Harron, Geoffrey Fletcher, and attorney Susan Bodine — have also been actively involved in the founding of a new non-profit organization, Missing Movies, dedicated to addressing the current cinephile's dilemma — thousands of films that are no longer available to the public.

In May 2025, Heller and Doros, now in their late-60s, announced their intention to gift Milestone Films to Maya S. Cade, a brilliant independent scholar, writer, and film programmer who is the creator of the Blackfilmarchive.com. An article in the *New York Times* by Derrick Bryson Taylor described how they came to the decision: "One of the things we've come to realize is that we are

not immortal,’ Heller said. As the company’s sole workers, ‘we are it. It’s the two of us and we want it to continue.’”

Heller and Doros said that last summer they had discussed with Cade, who volunteered herself, the idea of simply handing over their company. ‘When we met Maya, we just thought, Oh, well, we found her,’ Heller said. ‘We found the person who we really love and trust and can enthusiastically make this move.’”

Cade will take full ownership and control of Milestone in 2026 after a transition period — in 35 years the company has amassed a lot of titles, records, files, relationships, and history to pass on.

“They care and they love movies.” — Martin Scorsese

“Among the distributors dedicated to the preservation and circulation of classic cinema, none deserves more commendation and affection than Milestone Film & Video, founded by Dennis Doros and Amy Heller in 1990.” — David Sterritt, Quarterly Review of Film and Video

2007 Press book by Victor Vazquez. Thanks to Charles Burnett. All images property of Milestone Film & Video.

©2026 Milestone Film & Video Contact: Dennis Doros dennis@milestonefilms.com