



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# To Sleep with Anger

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

Charles Burnett's intriguing mix of melodrama and allegorical fable has a seemingly happy middle-class African-American family living in Los Angeles visited by an old friend (Glover) from the South – a somewhat mysterious charmer whose presence proves disruptive for his hosts. Exploring the discrepancies of past and present, Christianity and mysticism, tradition and modernity, the film is at once enigmatic, thought-provoking and witty.

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In Charles Burnett's films, you always have to keep an eye on the kids, who are rarely main characters but play pivotal roles nonetheless. Consider his brilliant debut *Killer of Sheep* (1977), a neorealism-inspired drama of everyday life in LA's predominantly African-American Watts district. Its unforgettable first scene depicts a small, cowed-looking boy being lectured by a stern off-screen father-figure on the importance of fighting back against bullies in order to be a real man. After this bracing opening, we don't see this moon-eyed lad again – we never even find out who he is – but the point is sharp enough: innocence rarely lasts long for black children in this impoverished suburb, scarred by residential segregation, racist police brutality and the violent uprisings of 1965. In the rest of *Killer of Sheep*, children – playful sprites full of hope and humour – pepper the landscape. They are poignant counterpoints to the drudgery-stricken adults; funhouse mirrors of their own sad futures.

In Burnett's third feature, the majestic and enigmatic *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), children are again crucial in a film ostensibly about adult relationships. The main narrative centres on Harry Mention (Danny Glover), a charismatic visitor from the Deep South who arrives one day on the doorstep of a middle-class churchgoing family in South Central Los Angeles. Mother Suzie (Mary Alice) and father Gideon (Paul Butler) welcome their old friend in, but it's not long before his uncanny presence, steeped in the folkloric southern traditions Suzie and Gideon have for the most part left behind, begins to cause severe ructions in the family fabric.

Gideon falls gravely ill, while Harry's insinuatingly macho behaviour has a particularly influential effect on Suzie and Gideon's grown-up youngest son, the petulant twentysomething Babe Brother (Richard Brooks), accentuating the animus between him and his older brother Junior (Carl Lumbly), and turning Babe Brother against his wife Linda (Sheryl Lee Ralph). Babe Brother and Linda's young son Sunny (DeVaughn Walter Nixon) doesn't say much, but he's quietly present in many scenes of tension and menace. He's also the only character able to dent Harry's swaggering confidence, when he accidentally brushes Harry's foot with a broom, a superstitious no-no that sends the visitor into paroxysms of uncharacteristic panic.

It's fitting, then, that Sunny is the architect of Harry's downfall. Early in the film, Sunny carelessly spills his marbles: no harm done. Later on, though, shortly after a huge confrontation between Babe Brother and Junior has ultimately brought the family closer than ever before, Sunny does it again. Harry trips over the marbles, falls to the floor, and suffers a fatal cardiac arrest. In a quietly ghoulish, politically charged postscript, Harry's dead body is left in the kitchen, covered only by a sheet. The medics won't take him away, and the coroner is nowhere to be found. 'If he was white, they'd have had him on his feet and out of here' comments one family friend.

But there's another child in *To Sleep with Anger*: an unnamed boy (played by Burnett's son) who blasts incessantly and tunelessly on his trumpet. His unappealing peals ring across the neighbourhood, at one point causing Suzie to drop an egg on the floor, at another distracting Harry as he's about to bring down an axe on the neck of a chicken. Midway through the film, Suzie, concerned about Harry's sinister behaviour, questions him about the quality of his friendship. Harry retorts with a riddle: 'Like that boy next door playing his horn. If he was a friend, he would stop irritating people. But if he stops practising, he wouldn't be perfect at what he does someday.'

In an interview in July 2016, I asked Burnett about the boy trumpeter, and he replied: 'I used to play the trumpet when I was a kid, and I used to just drive the neighbours crazy. So that's where that came from. I used to intentionally leave the window open and just blow as loud as I could out of my room.' There's something autobiographical, then, about the film's spine-tingling coda. Following a shot of Harry's body still festering in the homestead, Burnett cuts to a shot of the boy honking away tunelessly. After a few bars, however, his awful playing magically, seamlessly becomes perfect – a soulful lament which provides the melody line of the song that scores the end credits. It's the sound of a modest yet brilliant filmmaker slyly announcing the perfection of his own craft.

**Ashley Clark, *Sight & Sound*, July 2002**

Charles Burnett's first mainstream feature shows what a little well-spent money will do towards counteracting the nagging sense of miserabilism that weighed against the otherwise admirable qualities of his earlier independent features, *Killer of Sheep* (especially) and *My Brother's Wedding*. The opening scene is a case in point: a wonderfully spare yet elegantly detailed still life (not a little reminiscent of Errol Morris at his best) in which the portly Gideon, as formally posed and attired as a Victorian patriarch, sits staring expressionlessly to camera in a white room, behind him a portrait of a woman hanging above a buffet on which mysteriously igniting in a bowl of fruit that might have inspired a Cezanne canvas flames slowly spread to engulf him from head to toe.

Accompanied by the achingly sweet and yearning gospel notes of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's version of 'Precious Memories', the nightmare – for so it proves to be when Gideon wakes from dozing in the sun in his back garden – nevertheless leaves behind it a haunting after-taste of loss. The point, perhaps not too readily evident for a non-American white audience, seems to be that the Deep South remains a touchstone for 'home' in the collective memory, much more immediate and accessible than the hypothetical Africa of Black Power. For all its ineradicable associations with slavery, lynching and the burning crosses of the Klan, it was a place of roots, of togetherness. 'Then you knew your neighbour', Burnett has commented in an interview. 'Until the civil rights movement, and the riots, this community held steady. Isn't that strange, that after civil rights it fell apart?' In a sense, *To Sleep with Anger*, with the title suggesting some hopefully productive amalgam between activism and acceptance, threads a neutral but inquisitive way through the ramifications of this paradox.

With a whole string of superb performances, dialogue that manages the difficult trick of hitting notes both lyrical and earthy, and a magical gospel and blues score, *To Sleep with Anger* demonstrates Burnett's instinct for cinema every inch of the way.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1991**

TO SLEEP WITH ANGER

Director: Charles Burnett  
©/Production Company: SVS, Inc.  
Executive Producers: Edward R. Pressman, Danny Glover, Harris E. Tulchin  
Producers: Caldecot Chubb, Thomas S. Byrnes, Darin Scott  
Associate Producers: Michael Flynn, Linda Koullisis  
Production Executives (SVS): Michael Holzman, Jeffrey Ringler  
Production Auditor: Todd Grove  
Post-production Auditor: Lisa Mashburn  
Supervising Production Co-ordinator: Alan Gershenfeld  
Production Co-ordinator: James Beaton III  
Production Manager: Susan Strempel  
Location Manager: Earl West  
Location Consultant: Kasey Jones  
Post-production Supervisor: Carol Munday Lawrence  
1st Assistant Director: Jonathan Meisler  
2nd Assistant Directors: Kris Krengel, Sati Jamal  
2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Stacey Matthew  
Script Supervisor: Catherine Jelski  
Casting Directors: Gail Levin, Lauren Lloyd  
Extras Casting: Superior Casting  
Casting Assistant: Kimberly Hardin  
Screenplay: Charles Burnett  
Director of Photography: Walt Lloyd  
Additional Photography: John Simmons  
1st Assistant Camera: Tom Yatsko  
2nd Assistant Camera: Gregory Daniels  
Key Grip: Tom Harjo  
Dolly Grip: T.C. Eachus  
Best Boy Grip: Joseph Thompson  
Gaffer: Dino Parks  
Best Boy: Barbara Kallir  
Electrician: Willie E. Dawkins  
Stills Photography: Glenn S. Capers  
Editor: Nancy Richardson  
Assistant Editors: Christi Moore, Plummy Tucker, Larry Moten  
Production Designer: Penny Barrett  
Art Director: Troy Myers  
Set Dressers: Mia Ambrester, Rita Moshier  
Prop Master: Joel Leroy Carter  
Costume Designer: Gaye Shannon-Burnett  
Wardrobe Supervisor: Joy Shannon  
Wardrobe Assistants: Christina Harley, Diane Girsakis, Donna Forbes, Bobbi Almoite  
Key Make-up Artist: Diane Hammond  
Make-up Assistant: Alvechia Ewing  
Extras Make-up Assistant: Debbie Zoler  
Hair Stylist: Ken Walker  
Hair Stylist Assistant: Danny Irby  
Titles/Opticals: Cinema Research Corporation  
Music: Stephen James Taylor  
Trumpet: Ramon Flores  
Drums: Willie Ornelas  
Bass: Jim Lacefield

Keyboards: Dave Loeb  
Guitar/Harmonica: Stephen James Taylor  
Violins: Sid Page, Charles Veal, Pat Johnson, Jennifer Johnson  
Violas: Carol Castillo, Hershel Wise  
Cellos: Larry Corbett, Dane Little  
Music Supervisor: Budd Carr  
Music Editor: Jeff Charbonneau  
Choreography: Gaye Shannon-Burnett  
Sound Mixer: Veda Campbell  
Supervising Engineer: Gerry Lentz  
Post Sound Supervisors: Patrick M. Griffith, Ellen Heuer  
Re-recording Mixers: Ken Polk, Ken Teaney  
Dialogue Editors: Joe Mayer, Terri Fiyalko  
Sound Effects Dialogue: Lew Goldstein  
ADR Recordist: Rob Luna  
Foley Artists: Joan Rowe, Catherine Rowe  
Foley Recordist: Rody Hassano  
Unit Publicist: Skye Dent

Cast

Danny Glover (*Harry Mention*)  
Paul Butler (*Gideon*)  
Mary Alice (*Suzie*)  
Carl Lumbly (*Junior*)  
Vonetta McGee (*Pat*)  
Richard Brooks (*Babe Brother*)  
Sheryl Lee Ralph (*Linda*)  
Ethel Ayler (*Hattie*)  
Julius Harris (*Herman*)  
Sy Richardson (*Marsh*)  
Davis Roberts (*Okra Tate*)  
DeVaughn Walter Nixon (*Sunny*)  
Reina King (*Rhonda*)  
Cory Curtis (*Skip*)  
Paula Bellamy (*Mrs Baker*)  
Wonderful Smith (*preacher*)  
DeForest Coven (*Fred Jenkins*)  
John Hawker (*MC*)  
Irvin Jr. Mosley (*William Norwood*)  
Marguerite Ray (*Loviray Norwood*)  
Rai Tasco (*Phil*)  
Lorrie Marlow (*Cherry Bell*)  
Jimmy Witherspoon (*Percy*)  
Carnetta Jones (*woman in labour*)  
Christina Harley (*nurse*)  
James Grayer (*man at hospital*)  
Robin Scholer (*ER nurse*)  
Mark Phelan, Robert Terry Lee (*paramedics*)  
Greta Brown (*Virginia*)  
Sip Culler (*neighbour*)

USA 1990©  
102 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Day of Wrath (Vredens Dag)** Thu 7 Jul 18:15; Mon 11 Jul 20:30  
**Blue Velvet** Thu 7 Jul 20:40; Sun 17 Jul 18:30; Fri 29 Jul 20:40  
**To Sleep with Anger** Fri 8 Jul 18:10  
**Matewan** Fri 8 Jul 20:25; Tue 19 Jul 18:00  
**Manhunter** Fri 8 Jul 20:40; Thu 21 Jul 18:20; Sat 23 Jul 20:40  
**All the President’s Men** Sat 9 Jul 17:45  
**His Girl Friday** Sun 10 Jul 16:50; Wed 20 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 28 Jul 20:45  
**The Scarlet Empress** Wed 13 Jul18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 24 Jul 13:20  
**The Piano** Thu 14 Jul 14:20; Sat 23 Jul 17:50; Sat 30 Jul 11:45  
**Mandabi (The Money Order)** Fri 15 Jul 20:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:10  
**Pandora’s Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)** Sat 16 Jul 12:20 (with Peer Raben score); Sun 31 Jul 15:20 (with live piano accompaniment)  
**Rome Open City (Roma città aperta)** Mon 18 Jul 18:20; Wed 27 Jul 20:40  
**Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)** Fri 22 Jul 18:30; Mon 25 Jul 20:50 (with Edmund Meisel score)  
**Theorem (Teorema)** Tue 26 Jul 18:00

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