

**Final Report on The *Nightjohn* Project and The Visit to Indianapolis of Charles Burnett  
(Nov. 19-20).**

*Nightjohn.*

When I first heard the title in 1997 in a *Newsweek* article about the film *Amistad*, I never imagined that one day it would be a compound phrase in my vocabulary: The *Nightjohn* Project. This was a program that encompassed a visit to Indianapolis by a man many consider to be the finest African-American film director, a screening for some nine hundred seventh- and eighth-graders at the Madame Walker Theatre, and an innovative community outreach linking IUPUI faculty with several Indianapolis-area middle schools.

The centerpiece of Mr. Burnett's visit and the project for which the African and African-American Studies Committee received generous funding from the Central Indiana Community Foundation was the screening of *Nightjohn* and the outreach the following day. Over nine hundred children from nine middle schools attended. The participating schools were Crispus Attucks, Forest Manor, and Emma Donnan Middle Schools in IPS, Key Learning Community and the Center for Inquiry, also in IPS, Westlane Middle School in Washington Township, and the International School of Indiana. As Charles Burnett and I walked east on Indiana Avenue toward the Madame Walker Theatre Center on that beautiful Thursday morning in mid-November, we saw bus after school bus lined up to let children and their teachers into the theatre. Eventually, there were so many buses that Indianapolis police entered the theatre to complain that the buses were blocking the street.

Inside, the view from the stage was remarkable as our seven months of hard work and planning took the form of young students streaming into the aisles. A veritable platoon of security guards, many from IPS, was on hand. The organization—that of the Madame Walker staff and of the schools themselves—was disciplined and impressive. Among the announcements Didier and I made at the start of the program concerned the print of the film, which was generously lent to us by Disney, while the grant had to pay only for shipping, concerned the 35 millimeter print. The projectionist discovered that Disney had sent an “authentic print”; that is, the original, off of which video transfers for the TV showing and home video release were made. The staff told us to warn the throng that the film was brittle and could break. It didn't, but the warning was in keeping with our running method of preparing for every contingency. We were not prepared, however, for the children's response to the movie. Once the film got under way, these nine hundred kids became one rapt spectator, in concert with the story of Sarny, the ten-year-old slave at a small South Carolina plantation in 1831. At every turning point in the plot, the audience cheered and applauded. It was thrilling to hear such enthusiastic participation. The question-answer session with Charles Burnett also went well. Two children from each school lined up at aisle microphones and asked questions that had been prepared in advance by IUPUI faculty members as well as some that had been made up by the classes themselves. Mr. Burnett's answers were richly informative and gave the students an inside look at the decisions that professional filmmakers make.

On Friday, following Mr. Burnett's departure, ten IUPUI faculty members and students fanned out to five middle schools where they appeared as guest speakers in the classes that had attended the *Nightjohn* event. Although obviously the showing at the Madame Walker Theatre and Mr. Burnett's visit were the main events, the outreach to the schools was where we really closed the deal as far as completing the pedagogical and community service missions of the project. Here the volunteers found an appreciative and receptive audience. At one school, Westlane, the volunteers found that the English teachers had made up probing and provocative study questions

and writing prompts on the film and novel. At Forest Manor School, the students had each written a poem about *Nightjohn*, which they collected in a portfolio and presented to the volunteers. In addition, several volunteers testified to the effect that the day had upon them. Kate Duffy, a Lecturer in the English Department, wrote to her colleagues in the faculty listserv that "I had the delightful experience of spending the day at Westlane Middle School with 8th grade English students talking about issues of race, culture, history, and literacy . . . This project certainly reinforced my understanding of the need to concentrate on our recruitment and retention efforts." Another volunteer, Troy Myers, an outstanding student in the Film Studies program, wrote, "I just wanted to thank you so much for allowing me to participate in the discussion at Forest Manor this morning. Working with Professors Schick and especially Professor Mobido was very educational. Also, I had an immense amount of fun working with the students."

In addition to the incredible experience for the IPS students and their teachers, CICF's generosity allowed us to do the following with Mr. Burnett while he was in town. There was a showing at the Indianapolis Museum of Art by Charles Burnett of his new 2003 film on Nat Turner followed by a dinner for invited guests and a luncheon for people in the university and local film communities.

By any measure this innovative program was a striking success. We owe a debt to the Central Indiana Community Foundation for its generosity, to Charles Burnett for his willingness to come out and share his experience as a filmmaker and his presence as a role model with young people of Indianapolis, to Disney for allowing us to borrow the print of *Nightjohn* free of charge, and to IUPUI and the Indianapolis Museum of Art for supporting us in myriad ways. Given the impact the event had on the community and on those who participated, the African and African-American Studies Committee hopes to do something similar in the near future.

The expenditures were as called for in the grant. We spent \$2000 for Charles Burnett's honorarium, \$1175 for rental of the Madame Walker Theatre (including projectionist and sound technician), and \$505 for Mr. Burnett's airfare, his hotel accommodations at the University Place, and for FedEx shipping of the 35mm print to and from Burbank, California. With permission from the CICF, the balance of the grant funds was used to offset the costs of hosting Mr. Burnett at the dinner the night before the event. Expenses concerning security at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, most of the dinner for Mr. Burnett and guests Wednesday evening and the luncheon following the *Nightjohn* event were covered with funds from other sources, the IUPUI African-American and African Diaspora Program and the Office of the Dean of Faculties.

No technical assistance is required to maintain our organization. The IU Foundation Board assists university programs in securing funding as requested. At this juncture, we have not made such a request as we have been successful in providing quality programming at significantly low cost.

--Dennis Bingham, for the African and African-American Studies Committee.

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