INDEPENDENT LENS’s “NAT TURNER: A TROUBLESOME PROPERTY”

—Multi-Layered Investigation into Elusive but Pivotal Historical Figure Reflects Unique Collaboration between Charles Burnett, Frank Christopher and Kenneth S. Greenberg—

Premieres Nationally on “Independent Lens,” ITVS’s Acclaimed Series on PBS February 10, 2004 at 10 P.M. (check local listings)

“This film about the historic figure Nat Turner is magnificent. It is required viewing by all who are deeply concerned about the nature of race relations in America.”

—CORNEL WEST, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

(San Francisco, CA) — Nat Turner’s slave rebellion of more than 170 years ago is a watershed event in America’s long and troubled history of slavery and racial conflict. A groundbreaking exploration of race, violence and social memory in American life, NAT TURNER: A Troublesome Property tells the story of that violent confrontation and the ways that story has been continuously re-told since 1831. It is a film about a critical moment in American history and of the multiple ways that moment has since been remembered. Nat Turner was a “troublesome property” for his master and he has remained a “troublesome property” for the historians, novelists, dramatists, artists and many others who have struggled to understand this enigmatic figure.
Such a complex film required a unique collaboration between MacArthur Genius Award feature director Charles Burnett, acclaimed historian of slavery Kenneth S. Greenberg and Academy Award®-nominated documentary producer Frank Christopher. **NAT TURNER: A Troublesome Property** airs nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Don Cheadle, on Tuesday, February 10th at 10 P.M. (check local listings) as part of Black History Month special programming.

To emphasize the fictive component of historical reconstruction, the film adopts an innovative structure by interspersing documentary footage and interviews with dramatizations of different versions of the story, using a new actor to represent Nat Turner in each version. As literary critic Henry Louis Gates explains in the film, “There is no Nat Turner to recover; you have to create the man and his voice.”

The filmmakers have interviewed a broad range of contemporary African American and white descendants, historians, writers and artists. The film weaves selections from these interviews into a rich narrative reflecting the multifaceted legacy of Nat Turner in America today. The film also presents Nat Turner as an important figure in American historical memory through selected dramatic recreations based on images and words found in folklore, original documents, novels and plays from 1831 to the present.

The earliest source of information about the man, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, was not written by Nat Turner at all, but was assembled out of a series of jail cell interviews by white Virginia lawyer Thomas R. Gray. The man portrayed in this first telling of the Nat Turner story clearly saw himself as a prophet, steeped in the traditions of apocalyptic Christianity. However, this “confession” of Nat Turner raised the question of whether the slave rebel was an inspired and brilliant religious leader in search of freedom for his people, or a deluded fanatic leading slaves to their doom. Viewers watch this same controversy play itself out over and over again throughout our nation’s history.

Historians Eugene Genovese and Herbert Aptheker discuss how the figure of Nat Turner was transformed as a metaphor whenever racial tensions flared. Religious scholar Vincent Harding and legal scholar Martha Minow reflect on our nation’s attitudes towards violence. Alvin Poussaint and Ossie Davis recall how Nat Turner became a hero in the black community. And when William Styron published his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967—and invented a sexually charged relationship between Turner and a white teenaged girl he later killed—it unleashed one of the most bitter intellectual race related battles of the 1960s. Today, Nat Turner’s slave rebellion continues to raise new questions about the nature of terrorism and other forms of violent resistance to oppression.
Additional information and/or downloadable photographs from **NAT TURNER: A TROUBLESOME PROPERTY** are available at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos.

The program’s interactive companion website at www.pbs.org/natturner features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmakers, cast and crew bios, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film’s subject matter. The site also features a “talkback” section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.

**NAT TURNER: A Troublesome Property** is a production of subpix L.L.C. in association with ITVS and KQED Public Television.

**FEATURED INTERVIEWS**

ERIC FONER, Historian  
MARY KEMP DAVIS, Professor of English Literature  
PETER WOOD, Historian  
EKEUWEME MICHAEL THELWELL, Professor of Afro-American Studies  
THOMAS PARRAMORE, Historian  
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., Director, W.E.B. DuBois Institute  
VINCENT HARDING, Professor of Religion and Social Transformation  
HERBERT APTEKER, Historian  
WILLIAM STYRON, Writer  
KITTY FUTRELL, Southampton Country Historical Society  
EUGENE GENOVESE, Historian  
MARTHA MINOW, Professor of Law  
RAY WINBUSH, Director, Race Relations Institute  
OSSIE DAVIS, Actor  
DR. ALVIN POUSSAINT, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry  
AYUKO BABU, Director, Pan-African Film Festival  
LOUISE MERIWETHER, Writer  
LOYLE HAIRSTON, Writer  
JAMES McGEE, Southampton County Resident  
CHARLES BURNETT, Director  
KENNETH S. GREENBERG, Historian and Producer
NAT TURNER: A TROUBLESOME PROPERTY Credits

Directed by
Charles Burnett

Produced by
Frank Christopher
Charles Burnett

Written by
Frank Christopher
Kenneth S. Greenberg

Co-Produced by
Kenneth S. Greenberg

Edited by
Michael Colin
Frank Christopher
Diedrich Bader
Terry Mulroy
Cynthia Griffin

Executive Producers
John Demps
Liba Daniels
Sharen Davis
Todd Capps
Stephen James Taylor
Liz Marks, C.S.A.
Alfre Woodard

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

COSTUME DESIGNER

MUSIC COMPOSER

ADDITIONAL MUSIC

CASTING

NARRATOR

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

CHARLES BURNETT (Director / Writer) Critics have called Burnett “the nation’s least-known great filmmaker and most gifted black director.” Burnett’s debut film, Killer of Sheep, on which he served as producer, director, writer, editor, cinematographer and actor, was selected by the Library of Congress to be among the first 50 films to be included in the National Film Registry.

In 1983, the Vicksburg, Mississippi native wrote, directed and produced his next feature, My Brother’s Wedding, centering on the theme of envy and its power to warp families. Burnett’s themes of family continued to influence his work. In 1990, he wrote and directed the drama To Sleep with Anger, which starred Danny Glover as the charming, Southern family friend who insinuates himself into a troubled family.

His next film, The Glass Shield, was a police drama based on a true story of corruption and racism within the Los Angeles police force. Burnett followed with his television debut via the acclaimed 1996 Disney Channel film, Nightjohn, starring Carl Lumbly, Lorraine Toussaint, Allison Jones and Bill Cobbs. Based on the young-adult novel by Gary Paulsen, Nightjohn is a period piece about a slave’s risky attempt to teach an orphan slave girl to read and write. The New Yorker’s film critic Terrence Rafferty called Nightjohn the “best American movie of 1996.”

Burnett’s other television work includes the 1997 ABC mini-series Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding, starring Halle Berry and Lynn Whitfield; the 1998 ABC telepic, Selma, Lord, Selma, starring Jurnee Smollett, Mackenzie Astin and Clifton Powell; America Becoming, a documentary about U.S. immigration; the 1998 Showtime film Long Distance; and the 2000 Showtime film Finding Buck McHenry, starring Ossie Davis.
In 1997, the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival honored Burnett with a retrospective of his work presented at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center. He is also the recipient of a 1988 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. A one-time trumpet player, Burnett vividly remembers making his way through the seminal blues tunes of W.C. Handy. His most recent film, *Warming By the Devil’s Fire*, was shown on PBS as part of the seven-part series *The Blues*, from executive producer Martin Scorsese.

FRANK CHRISTOPHER (Producer) is an award-winning producer, director, writer and editor who has been making documentaries since 1970. Included among the many awards garnered by Christopher’s films and television programs are: an Academy Award® Nomination for Best Feature Length Documentary, six Emmys, two CINE Golden Eagle Awards, the Blue Ribbon Award from the American Film Festival, the Gold and Silver Awards from the Houston International Festival, the Grand Coral First Prize from the New Latin American Cinema (Havana, Cuba), the Outstanding Documentary Award from the National Latino Film and Video Festival, and the Director’s Choice Award from the Thomas Edison - Black Maria Film and Video Festival.

In 1996, Mr. Christopher conceived of the idea for the documentary, *NAT TURNER: A TROUBLESOME PROPERTY* after reading William Styron’s novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. He subsequently assembled the creative team of feature filmmaker (Burnett), historian (Greenberg) and documentary filmmaker (Christopher) to tackle the complexity of presenting the multiple interpretations of the story of Nat Turner to a national television audience.

Currently, Mr. Christopher is the executive producer of *Remaking American Medicine*, a four-part series on the transformation of American health care to be broadcast on PBS in 2005.

KENNETH S. GREENBERG (Co-Producer/Co-Writer) is Distinguished Professor of History and Chair of the History Department at Suffolk University in Boston. He is one of the nation’s most well respected historians of slavery and the South. He holds degrees from Cornell University, Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin; has been the recipient of numerous grants, including two from the National Endowment for the Humanities; and has been a Fellow at Harvard University’s Charles Warren Center, and a Fellow in Law and History at Harvard Law School.


During the past few years, Kenneth S. Greenberg has become the preeminent historian of Nat Turner and the slave rebellion of 1831. He is the editor and has written the authoritative introduction to the original *Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996). Most recently he has written and published a collection of significant new historical essays on Nat Turner in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, released by Oxford University Press in 2003. This volume also includes
complete text versions of the filmed interviews of Dr. Alvin Poussaint and William Styron, short excerpts of which appear in the film.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. Independent Lens features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin in The New Yorker to write “Watching Independent Lens ... is like going into an independent bookstore—you don’t always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn’t even know you wanted.” Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independent lens. Independent Lens is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series Independent Lens on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

ABOUT PBS

PBS, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is a private, nonprofit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation’s 349 public television stations. Serving nearly 90 million people each week, PBS enriches the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services on noncommercial television, the Internet and other media. More information about PBS is available at www.pbs.org, the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet.