

Document Citation

Title	'Malcolm X': hero for troubled times
Author(s)	Kenneth Turan
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1992 Nov 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	F1, F4
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Malcolm X, Lee, Spike, 1992

L.A. Times
Calendar 11-18-92

'Malcolm X': Hero for Troubled Times



DAVID LEE

Denzel Washington portrays the title character in Spike Lee's powerful "Malcolm X." Above, he addresses a street rally in Harlem; the black leader's pilgrimage to Mecca led to the rethinking of his racial attitudes.



Spike Lee Mutes Polemics in Study of Slain Black Leader

By KENNETH TURAN
TIMES FILM CRITIC

Despite his blistering anger at America, his fury at the way black people were treated by what he saw as a smug and satanic white majority, there was something quintessentially American about the character and accomplishments of Malcolm X. In a country where self-transformation is practically a religion, he was a man who reinvented himself not once but several times, changing from cynical street hustler to an ascetic apostle of racial separation to a man whose concerns for social justice were growing wider and more multicultural when he was brutally murdered at the age of 39.

It is perhaps in recognition of this that Spike Lee's somber, powerful "Malcolm X" (citywide) opens with an enormous American flag filling the entire screen. Never mind that the flag burns down to a smoldering "X" and is intercut with the Rodney G. King beating footage as Malcolm's words charging "the white man with being the greatest murderer and kidnaper on Earth" are heard on the soundtrack. The thing to remember is that the last film that opened with an oversized flag was the George C. Scott-starring "Patton," a model of mainstream Hollywood biography.

For what is surprising about "Malcolm X" is not how very accomplished a piece of filmmaking it turns out to be, but exactly what Lee, who co-wrote the screenplay with Arnold Perl and an uncredited James Baldwin, wanted to accomplish. The unexpected aspect of this forceful, purposeful work by a director with a reputation for being an in-your-face polemicist and provocateur is just how careful and classical a film it finally is.

While length alone ("Malcolm" weighs in at three hours and 21 minutes) makes comparisons inevitable with last year's meditation on modern American history, Oliver Stone's "JFK," this film has a totally opposite objective. While "JFK" was a piece of muckraking revisionism, telling us that everything we believed was wrong, "Malcolm" is consciously aiming at the creation of both a hero and a mythology powerful enough to sustain those whose struggle with racism is still a reality.

With every carefully composed frame, "Malcolm X" tries with remarkable success to be a grand epic for people of color, an African-American counterpart to "Gandhi" that aims to move a controversial thinker and doer who has not been much revered outside of the black community into the heart of the American mainstream. And by turning traditional filmmaking inside out, by using familiar forms to make as incendiary a thinker as Malcolm palatable, Lee may in fact be more subversive than he ever has before.

Hewing fairly closely to "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," as told to Alex Haley, this film tells the story of a brilliant, ambitious and finally abandoned man whose hard-won ability to articulate the rage and despair of the black underclass has yet to be equaled. Part of its power is

Please see 'MALCOLM X,' F4

'MALCOLM X'

Continued from F1

that it understands that the tensions and prejudices Malcolm railed against are (witness the King footage) still with us, that his anger is still justified. And part of its fascination is that some of his solutions—his belief in family and education, even his emphasis on empowerment and pride in self—seem hardly radical at all.

Of course, the Malcolm who at one time preached strict racial separation because he believed all white men were devils, who famously declared the determination to gain human rights "by any means necessary," is still more than capable of arousing controversy. Yet by using Denzel Washington as Malcolm, Lee not only retained the services of a superb actor but also someone whose sympathetic persona tends to take some of the sting out of Malcolm's more biting words.

Washington's Malcolm is a heroic performance in several senses, calling for him to be on screen in almost every scene and to make all those transformations believable, and the actor does it all with a special grace. The rest of the cast, including Angela Bassett as Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz, Delroy Lindo as Harlem gangster West Indian Archie and Albert Hall as Baines, the key to Malcolm's conversion to Islam, are excellent across the board. Lee has also shown a puckish side in some cameo casting, using progressive attorney William Kunstler as a

racist judge and director John Sayles as an FBI agent.

The director himself has a role in the film's early going, playing Shorty, a zoot-suited hipster in a yellow plaid ensemble who is young Malcolm Little's guide to the hustling life in wartime Boston. It is Shorty who gives Little's red hair its initial process, taking out the kinks with a lye solution, leading to Malcolm's pleased comment, ironic given all that was to come: "Looks white, don't it?"

Malcolm, now known as Red, attracts the attention of an attractive blonde named Sophia (Kate Vernon) who believes passionately in love across the color line. Ever restless, haunted by a troubled boyhood we see in flashback, Malcolm moves on to New York, where he becomes the protégé of numbers boss West Indian Archie and gets made over into a more stylish kind of hustler.

All of this eventually lands Malcolm in prison, where Baines, a fellow inmate, teaches him to respect himself and believe in the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm has a vision, converts, changes his name to X and vows "to dedicate my life to telling the white devil the truth to his face."

The rest of Malcolm's life, from his national celebrity to his break with Elijah Muhammad and the pilgrimage to Mecca that led to a rethinking of his racial attitudes, was lived in the hot glare of publicity. Though parts of Malcolm's account have been contested by later biographers, Lee remains largely faithful to it, and,

except for a kind of black power montage featuring school kids, Nelson Mandela and both Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan that closes the film, does not stray from his even-handed narrative attitude.

Beautifully photographed (with lots of swooping camera movement) by Lee's longtime cameraman Ernest Dickerson, "Malcolm X" clearly enjoys such visual displays as the choreographed ecstasy of the jitterbug dancing of Malcolm's Boston days and a mass Harlem celebration of Joe Louis. Though the film supports its great length nicely, it is more necessary for psychological reasons than dramatic ones, assuring the film the imprimatur of a "JFK"-like cultural event the director is unswervingly after.

One of the most interesting aspects of "Malcolm X" (rated PG-13 for a scene of violence, for drugs and some language) is how adroitly Lee, mainly by staying straightforward and cliché-free, has avoided many of the pitfalls its story presented. Though he uses the composite character of Baines as a convenient repository for all that is eventually untrustworthy about the Nation of Islam, Lee in general does not tip his hand via casting, refusing to melodramatize either side. This tactic also ensures that no component of the broad audience Lee is after will be offended by what he has put on screen.

Even Elijah Muhammad (an eerie, restrained performance by Al Freeman Jr.) is portrayed non-judgmentally, as is the question of whether it was his followers or the

FBI or some combination that led to Malcolm's death. Finally what this fascinating film leaves us with is a feeling of sadness that a man who traveled so many roads through so much difficulty should come to die so young on the floor of a Harlem ballroom, a prophet whose honor Spike Lee has taken extraordinary steps to restore.

'Malcolm X'

Denzel Washington	Malcolm X
Angela Bassett	Betty Shabazz
Albert Hall	Baines
Al Freeman Jr.	Elijah Muhammad
Delroy Lindo	West Indian Archie
Spike Lee	Shorty

A 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks production, in association with Largo International, released by Warner Bros. Director Spike Lee. Producers Marvin Worth, Spike Lee. Screenplay Arnold Perl and Spike Lee, based on the book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" as told to Alex Haley. Cinematographer Ernest Dickerson. Editor Barry Alexander Brown. Costumes Ruth Carter. Music Terence Blanchard. Production design Wynn Thomas. Art director Tom Warren. Running time: 3 hours, 21 minutes.

MPAA-rated PG-13 (a scene of violence and for drugs and some language).