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MALCOLM X:

The Movie. We saw it first,
now read the review

BHAJI ON THE BEACH

Strong articulate Asian
women on TV

JAMMIN' UNDER LONDON

Busking Afro-Caribbean style

Melvin Van Peebles: Talkin' Baaad





FESPACO: Ouagadougou Pan African Film Festival

Burkina Faso, 20-27 February 1993

"Africa must base its development of democratic society on the freedom of cinematographic expression in particular and culture in general." - Story by Makeda Coaston

Ouagadougou is a city made famous by film. As the host site for FESPACO, the largest biennial show-case of African cinema since 1969, the Ouagadougou Pan African Film and Television festival is a Mecca for African cinema reverence.

This year's festival theme 'Cinema and Liberties' draws attention to the economic, political and cultural dilemma facing Africa's filmmakers. This theme could have easily served as the title for the FESPACO discussion held at the London Film Festival on a rainy Saturday afternoon featuring Mr. Phillippe Sawadogo, festival director for the last ten years.

Not unlike the rest of the African Diaspora, the Motherland is in a struggle to gain control of its cultural frame of reference and to reap the benefits of its cultural products. African filmmakers manage against the odds to finance and produce quality films but then find it difficult to have them distributed.

Distribution is also a sore point for Black filmmakers in the West, but more distressingly, African filmmakers have to take on cinema owners and distributors who do not value African film aesthetics nor grasp the significance of Africans seeing imagery of themselves.

London-based South African filmmaker Lionel Ngakane who is an active member of FEPACI, the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers concurs, "We have our own films but they are not really seen in Africa. We haven't got the distribution, the theatres are not owned by people who are interested in the development of African cinema so we have a problem getting the cinema owners and distributors in Africa to show our films."

African filmmakers must also confront their own governments who have yet to recognise the cultural agenda as a priority concern of the nation-state.

Phillippe Sawadogo, of Burkina Faso, one of the poorest, yet one of the most cinematically progressive African countries comments, "In Africa the screen is still colonised because we are not able to show our own movies.

FESPACO was set up to push the continent's film industry, because cultural problems are not seen as a priority. We must fight for our cultural identity and also fight to make our industry well known, to be present universally. We are a big part of the world with 650 million inhabitants."

"In spite of an enforced diet of Hollywood blockbusters and 'B' movies, when African films are shown they pack the cinemas at Ouagadougou and throughout Africa."

Jean Pierre Bekolo shares a typical distribution nightmare. His film *Quartier Mozart*, shown at this year's London Film Festival, still has not been released in his home country Cameroon, where the cinema is dominated by Hollywood films sold cheaply to distributors as package deals which undercut African independent films.

In spite of an enforced diet of Hollywood blockbusters and 'B' movies, when African films are shown they pack the cinemas at Ouagadougou and throughout Africa. Ngakane observes the powerful impact African films have on the consciousness of the people, "There is absolutely no doubt that when

African people see their own image on the screen it is even more important than the image on screen for Europeans, because for Europeans it's cinema, for us it is our history, our culture and our social condition." Still, no amount of discourse and debate can defuse the spirit of celebration that predominates the festival. This year's festival features filmmakers from 45 African countries premiering feature films, documentaries and shorts. There will also be a market place for industry buyers and cinema competitions for African and African Diaspora filmmakers and for the first time the festival will host a television and video competition.

I don't know anyone who has been to the Ouagadougou Pan African Film Festival and not been uplifted, entertained, challenged and inspired. A video documenting the festival in action and featuring interviews with many of Africa's major filmmakers has been produced by Kwesi Owusu and Kwati Nee-Owuwo entitled *Ouaga - African Cinema Now* is available from the British Film Institute.

To obtain the festival video or to get more information about attending the Ouagadougou Pan African Film Festival or submitting your work contact June Giovanni, UK Festival Representative at the British Film Institute on 071-957 8943. ■

Talking Drum

A Column On African-American Culture & Aesthetics

By John Chenault

SPIKE LEE'S MALCOLM X HITS THE TARGET

Spike Lee's "Malcolm X", the most widely anticipated black film in history, premiered in New York City on Monday, November 16, the same day a New York State parole board announced its decision to deny parole to Thomas Hagen: the only one of three men convicted for the murder of Malcolm X still imprisoned. With this ironic beginning the film opened two days later in theatres all over America, exciting and enthralling the generation of young people who have transformed Malcolm X into a cultural icon, and

reminding the older generation that the black unity Malcolm X fought and died to achieve still remains a dream deferred.

From the films provocative opening credits - which feature footage of the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police intercut with an American flag that ignites and burns until it forms an "x" - it is evident that this epic portrayal of the life of Malcolm X is meant to serve as a metaphor for the Black experience in America in all its bitterness, volatility, ▶



► and transcendence. The controversial opening montage is underscored and punctuated by the voice of Denzel Washington quoting Malcolm X's evocative words: "We don't see the American dream; we've only experienced the American nightmare." This opening statement is an appropriate prologue for the story that follows. But the message of the film is not one of resignation or failure. The story of Malcolm X's brilliant life, as told cinematically and in his own words, reiterates the time-honoured lesson that black people should never be afraid to dream.

Spike Lee is definitely not afraid to dream. He fought and won a series of battles with Hollywood studio heads, and critics from the Black community, to secure the right to produce the film according to his unique cinematic vision. And what a vision it is. Aided by a \$35 million budget - the largest sum ever given to a black director - Spike designed and developed a film that has been compared to "Lawrence of Arabia" in its sweeping majesty and stunning beauty.

The film which lasts approximately three and a half hours, closely follows the narrative structure of Alex Huxley's best selling book: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The three acts of Malcolm's real life drama - his early years as a hustler, his transformation into a Muslim Minister and Apostle of the Nation of Islam, and his epiphany after his journey to Mecca - are treated with great authenticity, empathy and understanding. The film opens during the war years when Malcolm, then known as "Detroit Red", was pursuing the lifestyle

of the zoot-suited, fried-head, lindy-hopping hipster. This segment of Malcolm's life is blindingly colourful and vibrant. The dance sequences in the night-club scene and the street scenes of 1940's Boston are meticulously recreated.

"Malcolm's incarceration and conversion to the Nation of Islam also is depicted with great attention to detail."

As this first act unfolds Spike employs a series of flashback sequences to depict Malcolm's early years in Nebraska, the murder of his father at the hands of white racists and the mental breakdown of his mother and subsequent break-up of his family. These flashbacks are used effectively throughout the remainder of the film to highlight several parallels between Malcolm's childhood and adulthood.

Malcolm's incarceration and conversion to the Nation of Islam also is depicted with great attention to detail.

At this point the film changes mood and timbre, becoming more sombre and tempered in keeping with the austere nature of the subject. During this segment we see the emergence of the man who has come to capture the imagination of a new generation almost thirty years after his death. It is the Malcolm of this period, "Malcolm X," the firebrand, evocative speaker and apostle of black anger, that young people today find so appealing.

The final act - Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam, his journey to Egypt and Mecca, his return to America as "El Hajj Malik El Shabazz", and the inevitably fatal appearance at the Audubon Ballroom - proceeds with riveting intensity. It is a tribute to the filmmaker's prowess as a storyteller that the audience is kept rooted in its seats even though the tragic outcome is clearly known down to the last detail.

"Denzel Washington as Malcolm X is superb. He seems so imbued with the nuances and subtleties of Malcolm's posture and speech that he assumes, chameleon-like, a remarkable resemblance to the man despite their obvious physical differences."

The other members of the cast also turn in exceptional performances. Angela Bassett as Betty Shabazz has a regal almost ethereal quality that brings a compassionate dignity to the role. Spike Lee as Shorty, Malcolm's partner in crime, is comic relief at its best. And the performance of Al Freeman Jr. as the Honourable Elijah Mohammed, and Delroy Lindo as West Indian Archie, may wind up competing for the honour of best supporting actor. The other supporting cast members - including cameo appearances by Mary Alice, Christopher Plummer, Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, Peter Boyle, Al Sharpton, and Nelson Mandela - also make outstanding contributions to the rich tapestry of black, brown, beige, and white faces that blend and meld on the screen.

Millions of words have been written about this film project; and during the last few years it has helped to fuel an estimated \$100 million dollar industry in Malcolm X items (including T-shirts, hats, buttons, potato chips, and car fresheners). But the words that resonate long after the rest have faded from memory come from the heart and head of Malcolm X. If his life is not to be relegated to a cinematic event and his name rendered into another trademark for capitalism, the spirit of his struggle for freedom and unity must be kept alive: "By Any Means Necessary!"

*John Chenault is a freelance writer who divides his time between Cincinnati, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia. He has written numerous newspaper and magazine articles, and is the author of the recently published collection of poetry: *The Invisible Man Returns*. ■*