

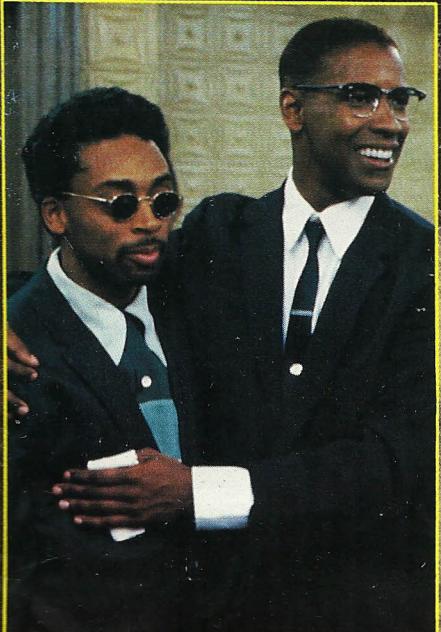
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THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE BLACK MAGAZINE

The life of
MALCOLM X:
THE MOVIE



SPIKE LEE &
DENZEL WASHINGTON



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THE LEGACY OF MALCOLM X



Denzel Washington as Malcolm X.

During his heyday in the early '60's, Malcolm X was consistently at the center of some social or political storm. The mainstream media had branded him "America's worst nightmare." And nearly 30 years after his assassination in February, 1965, this tireless campaigner for human rights is again the source of much controversy—and a welter of anticipation—with Spike Lee's movie of his life scheduled for a late November premiere.

Long before Lee took on the film

project, it was a bone of contention. After Marvin Worth purchased the film rights back in the early '70's, his efforts to find the right script and director met with snag after snag. When Lee was signed to direct, there was still a problem with the script, with several writers failing to satisfy Lee and the producers. The situation was finally settled after Lee decided to revamp a script written by the late James Baldwin and Arnold Perl. "Because Elijah Muhammad [the founder and leader of the Nation of Islam] was still alive," Lee told this reporter, "there were some things they

[Baldwin and Perl] could not deal with. I have added that portion of the history to the script."

When Lee campaigned to direct the film, he often said that only a black director could bring the proper resonance and comprehension to the project. Such an endeavor would require months of research and networking with the people who knew Malcolm X, Lee told journalist Ken Jones, and "no white director in the world would have access to those people." Lee said that many distrust a white director's motives in making a movie about Malcolm X and would



Angela Bassett (portraying Betty Shabazz) and Denzel Washington as Malcolm X.

Spike Lee.



refuse to cooperate with such a project.

Ironically, there is a contingent of Black activists who apparently don't trust Lee, either. This group, led by poet/playwright Amiri Baraka, has denounced Lee, contending that he is not qualified to interpret the life of such an important political figure as Malcolm X. "In none of his films," Baraka raged, "has he demonstrated that he can do the right thing with black militancy, or sustain the integrity of Malcolm's life."

Lee lashed back at his detractors. They had no right to tell him what to do, he said, "and I will not be intimidated by Baraka and others. What right have they to dictate to me?" For several weeks Lee and Baraka snapped at each other, providing the film with additional notoriety and controversy. Recently, however, the two set aside their differences. This past February, at an event in Harlem, they were invited to a commemoration of Malcolm's assassination, hosted by Dr. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow. "Baraka spoke for 90 minutes," Lee told Jones, "and he had ample time to blast

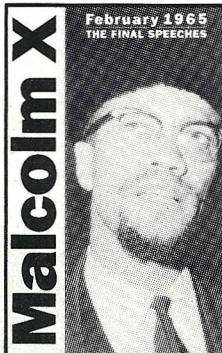
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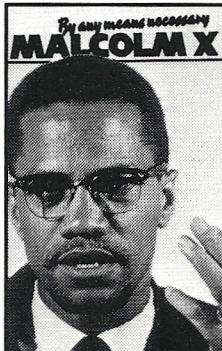
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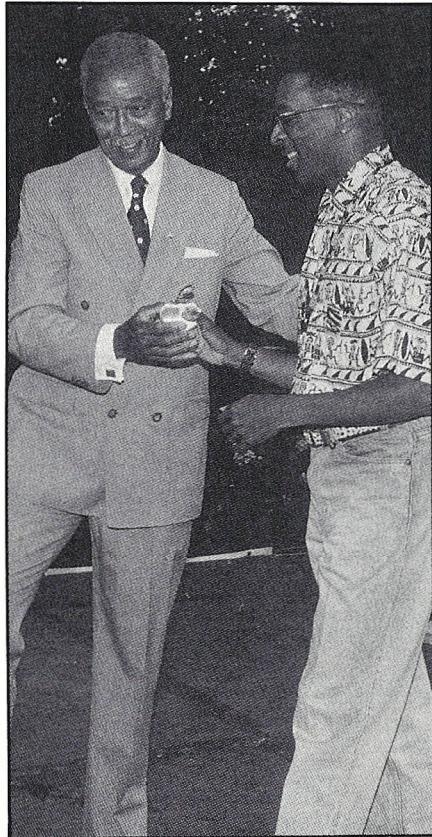
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Photo: Joan Vitale Strong



Spike Lee and N.Y City Mayor David Dinkins.

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Byron Lewis (L), chairman of Uniworld Advertising Group and Spike.

me, and he did not choose to do that. I respect him for that. Afterwards we shook hands, and he said, 'I'll just be quiet until I see the film.'"

Several of those who have already seen sizable chunks of the film are disturbed by Lee's emphasis on Malcolm's early years as a hustler. And there were rumors, which insisted that Lee and Denzel Washington, who plays Malcolm X, were at odds over certain scenes. "There is no truth at all to that," Lee says.

Washington, too, dismissed any notion of rancor between him and Lee. "We got along great," Washington told reporter Ron Brewington, preferring to discuss his preparation for playing Malcolm X. He said he spent about 12 years preparing for the role, "from the time I did the play (*When the Chickens Come Home To Roost*) until now, and I'm not finished," he added. "Anytime you invest body, soul mind, spirit in a role like Malcolm X, you walk away with a lot of it. Malcolm X was such a brilliant man, I hope some of it rubbed off."

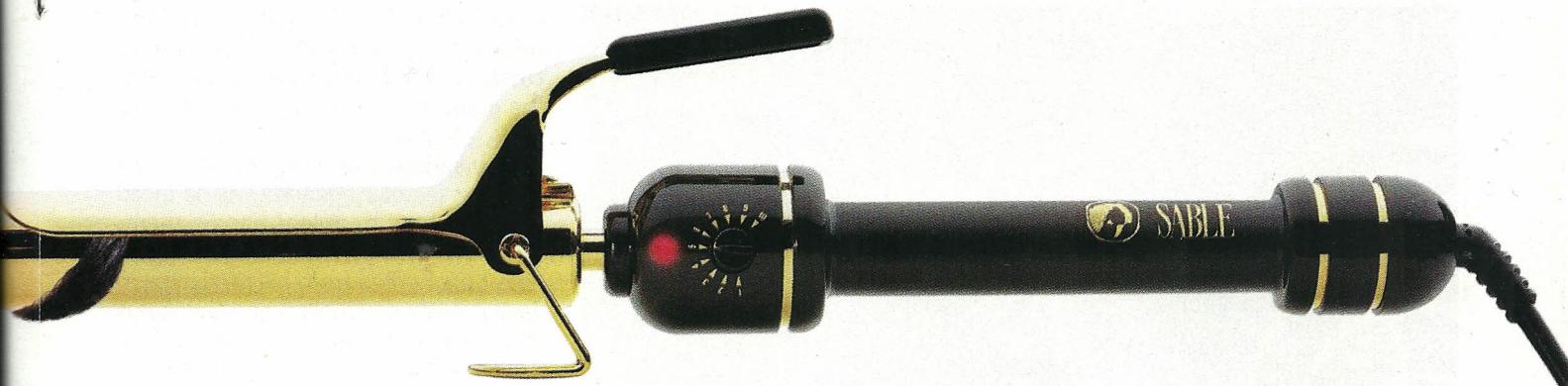
All rumors aside, what is indisputably

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true is Lee's determination to keep his opening scenes intact. Warner Brothers were reportedly upset over a depiction of a burning American flag that dissolves into an X at the start of the film. "There is no way I'm going to change this," Lee said, "It will stay in the film." He also said he would not cut out footage of the white police officers beating Rodney King in Los Angeles in March 1991. "It's not Hollywood, this ain't Walt Disney," Lee asserted. "This is about the state of race relations in the world." Nor has the filmmaker relented in his determination to maintain the length of the film, which is reported to be three and a half hours.

Earlier this year, Lee became incensed by Warner Bros. and what he called "industry racism," when he was denied additional funds to complete the film. In March, a completion bond company assumed control of the film and demanded that Lee trim the movie. It is still uncertain how Lee resolved this impasse. He told a gathering at the Schomburg Center in Harlem a few months ago that he was rescued by financial contributions from such notables as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Prince

and Janet Jackson. However, *Billboard* magazine said Warner Bros. capitulated and provided the money Lee needed.

Meanwhile, Lee continues to stir things up, contending at a recent conference of black journalists in Detroit, that children should skip school and that blacks should forgo a day at work to attend the opening of his film on Friday, November 20. Lee suggested that skipping school for the premiere was appropriate because the film presents something "the American history [students] are not getting in school." He said that "If they go see the film and write a report of what they've seen, the teachers can't hold that against them. We're telling them they've got to turn out to support this film and to support Malcolm."

Politicians and educators across the country were livid at this suggestion. "Why must they rush to see the film when it opens?" asked New York City's Mayor David Dinkins. "They can see it after school and we can see it after work." A Los Angeles educator said it was shocking that Lee was telling youngsters to stay out of school. "These kids

need all the time in school possible. This Malcolm X film is one that's from his point of view—it's not documentary," the teacher observed. "I'm afraid that Mr. Lee is hungry for publicity—to get his name in the headlines." Historian Taylor Branch, author of *Parting of the Waters*, said that the film, *Malcolm X*, is not history. And that it would be a travesty to make young people believe it is. "The definitive work has yet to be done on Malcolm. This means a sound historical framework, not something focusing on dramatics and a bigger than life image."

It is still several more weeks until the movie opens—and there is sure to be more sauce for the media—but until then, the best advice, no matter what your feelings about Malcolm X and his legacy, is to wait and see how Lee handles it all. "I don't want to dictate or decide how people are going to be affected by [the film]," Washington said. "But I would say that it's a film about the spiritual, philosophical and political evolution of a man in search of truth."

—Herb Boyd