

The Next Level

November 1992

Three Dollars

DOLLAR SENSE T.M.

Annual Beverage Food
& Tobacco Report

for America's Thoughtleaders

**WHO'S WHO
AND WHO
OWNS
WHAT**

★ ★

**CAROL
MOSELEY
BRAUN**

**FIRST
BLACK WOMAN
U.S. SENATOR**

★ ★ ★

Denzel Washington
as Malcolm X

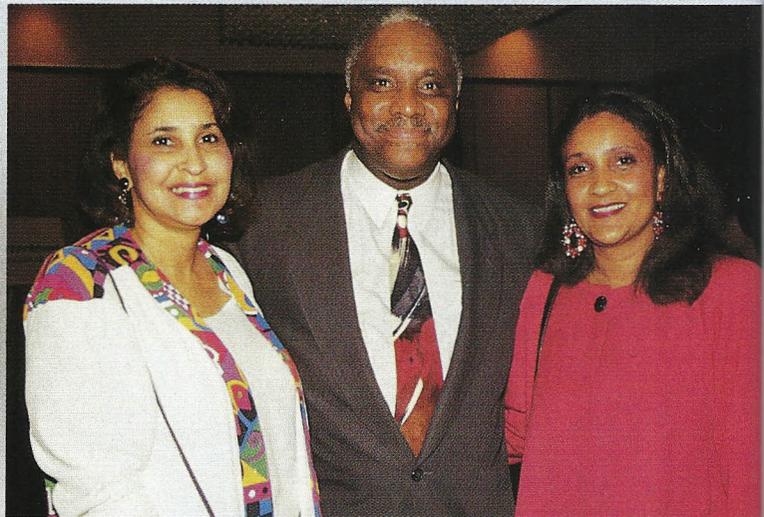
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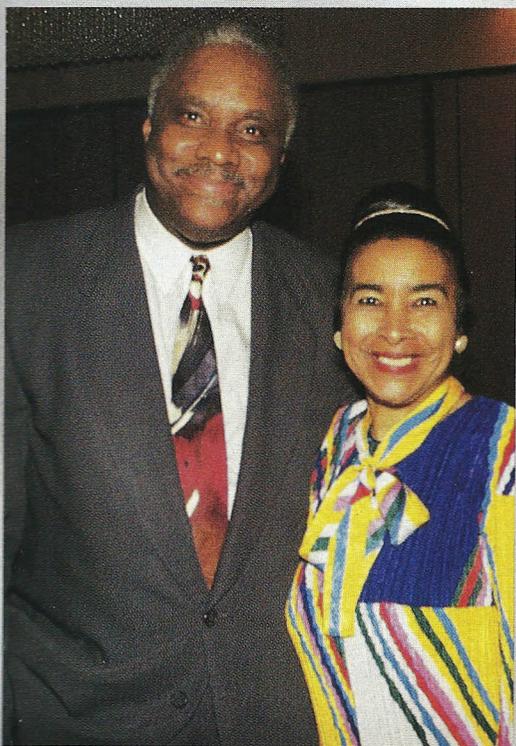
HIGHLIGHTS CONT.



FESTIVE FOUR: Donald C. Walker, publisher of *Dollars & Sense* magazine, VIPW awardees Sarah Burroughs, vice president/general manager of Burrell Advertising in Atlanta; Ingrid Saunders Jones, vice president of corporate external affairs, The Coca-Cola Co., and chairperson, The Coca-Cola Foundation; and Burrell Advertising CEO Tom Burrell.



FRIENDLY RELATIONS: Cousins and individual entrepreneurs Lind DeCuir, (left) president of Data Collection Co.; and Paula A. Pete, president of Paula Pete & Associates, pose with Donald C. Walker, publisher of *Dollars & Sense* magazine.



GRACIOUS HOSTS: Donald C. Walker, creator and producer of the Tribute, stops to share a smile with Tribute General Co-Chairperson and mistress of ceremonies for the weekend, Xernona Clayton, corporate vice president of Turner Broadcasting System.

FAMILY AFFAIR:

Honoree William D. Brown (2nd from right), assistant controller with Kaiser Permanente in Raleigh, NC, and his family. (L-R) A. Washington, Bill Brown Sr., Dee Long, and Oliver Brown.

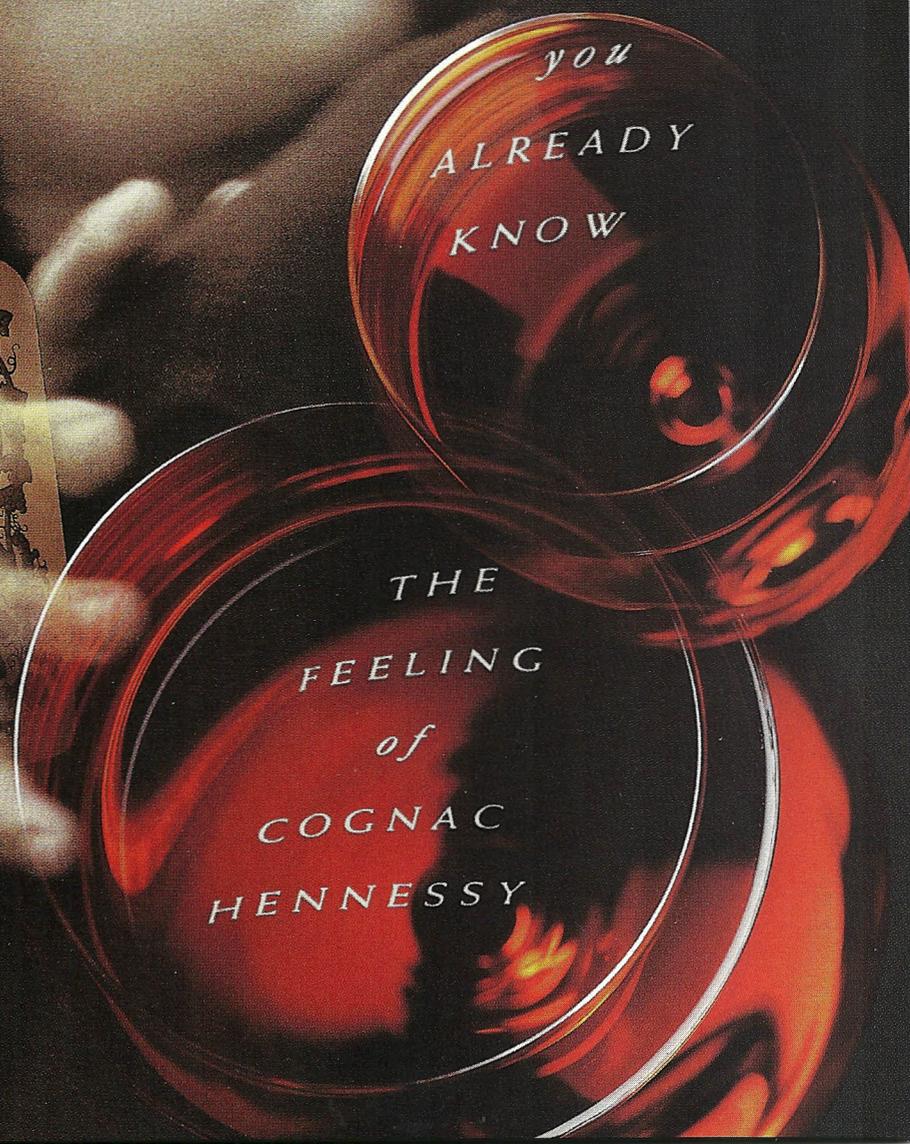


LOCKHEED: Vance M. Holley, (4th from left), director of equal opportunity grants, Lockheed, poses with Lockheed representatives and guests.

*If
YOU'VE
EVER
BEEN
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*you
ALREADY
KNOW*

*THE
FEELING
of
COGNAC
HENNESSY*



MALCOLM

X

The Movie

The Financial Configuration

Spike Lee is standing alone in the corridor of a swank hotel in downtown Detroit listening to "Happy Days Are Here Again" bum rush the walls of a nearby ballroom. How ironic. He's about to introduce film clips of his beloved "Malcolm X" to hundreds of

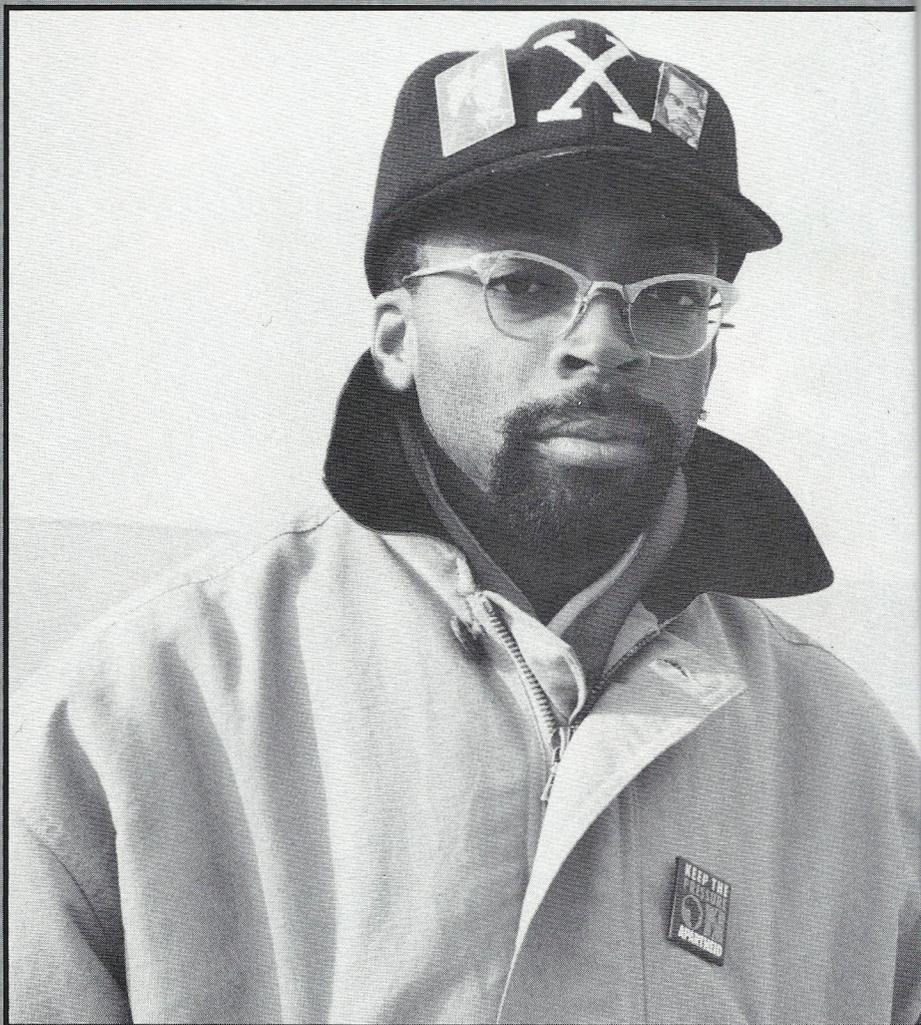
black journalists who have stood in line for over an hour, and right next door is a, excuse the pun, white tie gala welcoming Democratic presidential nominee **Bill Clinton** to the Motor City.

"Time for a change" is the gala's theme—it's on **Clinton's** buttons and in the faces of his supporters—which is funny to **Lee** since that's exactly the phrase running through his mind from the time he woke up this morning.

These are, indeed, changing times for **Lee**. For years he watched as major film projects, films made about black people for black people, went to white directors and producers, cinematographers and editors, usually with end results that were, to put it gently, less than satisfactory. When **Lee** first became a filmmaker, one of his many goals was to show Hollywood that audiences wanted to be entertained and challenged at the same time, and that black directors and writers and producers had a better inside

track in capturing the complexities of black subjects than whites.

In what sounds like a whisper, thanks to the **Clinton** delegation, **Lee** is recounting how he first muscled in on the **Malcolm X** project, one he'd been kicking around in the back of his mind for at least a decade. **Norman Jewison**

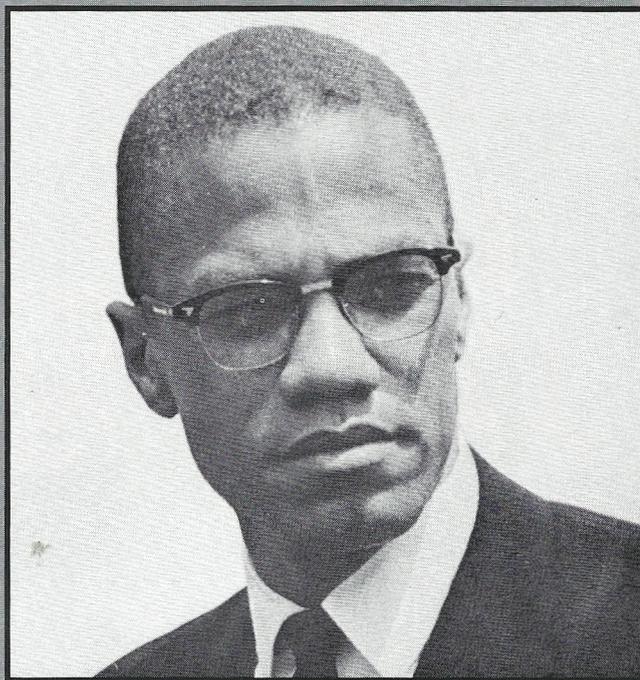


was set to direct the film that had been turned down at least once a year in Hollywood since producer **Marvin Worth** commissioned a **James Baldwin** and **Arnold Perl** screenplay in 1968. Even then, a film project involving **Malcolm X** was controversial, and it hadn't even passed the manuscript stage. "I think at one time or another, every black director for the past three decades at least thought about doing a

film on **Malcolm**," says **Lee**. "But here I am."

Yeah, here he is. **Spike Lee**. A little guy with a big film. A film that cost \$34 million to make, more than his most financially successful film ever grossed. A film that was nearly yanked out of his hands when Warner Bros. warned him to keep the budget at \$28 million. A film that nearly fell into the hands of the infamous Completion Bond Company, a Century City, California, firm that insures investors against films going over budget and over schedule. A film that was saved only when **Lee** turned to black celebrities like **Magic Johnson**, **Bill Cosby**, **Michael Jordan** and **Oprah Winfrey** to kick in close to \$200,000, enough to politically pressure Warner Bros. to ante up the remaining nearly \$6 million the director needed to do it his way.

And he wants to make something clear. "That money," he says, talking about the black celebs, "wasn't a loan. You know what I mean? That wasn't a loan. I don't have to pay it back. They



Malcolm X

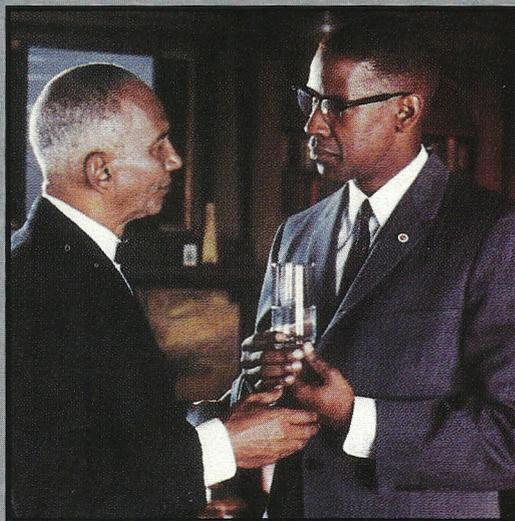
GAVE that money to me because they believed in the film."

Few films have received the kind of attention—wanted and unwanted—as "Malcolm X." Through it all, **Lee**, perhaps the quintessential pitchman, has contended what a hard sell "Malcolm X" has been. Not that he's surprised. He's had a difficult time making his five previous films—those books lining the walls of his Spike Lee Joint in Brooklyn attest to it.

All along, **Lee**, who never spent more than \$14 million on a film, contended that "Malcolm X" could never be made for a penny shy of \$34 million. So he asked for \$40 million, citing that

shooting four distinct periods in **Malcolm's** life could cost no less. Warner Bros. said "no way," and offered \$20 million. **Lee** dipped his offer to \$35 million. The studio climbed to \$25 million, and when **Lee** wouldn't budge, gave a "final" offer sheet of \$28 million, nothing more.

Lee, who has had critical and modest financial success with movies such as "Do The Right Thing," "School Daze" and "Jungle Fever," had grand plans for "Malcolm X." He hired Oscar-winner **Denzel Washington** to play **Malcolm**, accomplished veteran **Al Freeman Jr.** to



The Honorable Elijah Muhammad (**Al Freeman Jr.**, left) greets **Malcolm X** upon his release from prison.

be **Elijah Muhammad** and landed red-hot **Angela Bassett** ("Boyz N The Hood") to take the role of **Malcolm's** wife. He even invested a sizeable amount of his reported \$3 million salary in the project. The script was 176 pages long and called for huge period sets, mass



Malcolm X electrifies a placard-carrying crowd at a rally in Harlem.

rallies using thousands of extras and distant location shots. In fact, principal shooting began in Harlem, then moved to Upstate New York, and eventually to Egypt and South Africa, two locations Warner Bros. tried in vain to halt or at least scale down.

"It was an insult when they thought we

should shoot the Mecca scene on some Hollywood lot just to save money," says Lee. "There was just no way. The problem from the start is that they looked at this as just another film. I saw it as an epic. And it should be treated as such." Lee kept spending as he closed in on the \$28 million budget. He didn't care. His pro-

jections were still in the neighborhood of \$30 million plus. Warner Bros. finally stepped in when Lee tipped \$28 million. Suddenly, the Completion Bond Co. (CBC) was given legal power to finish the movie and deliver it by the end of the year.

Here's how bond companies work: backers of many films are protected by completion bonds. But only a small percentage of movies are taken over by such



Ernest Thomas (Brother Sidney, far left) and James McDaniel (Brother Earl far right) surround Malcolm X and his bride, Betty Shabazz (Angela Bassett) during their nuptials.

companies, which are reluctant to assume control of over-budget films anyway, both because it is disruptive (filmmakers are hardly accommodating and can make life miserable) and because the company must then pay the costs of completing the film.

The option was that Lee would have to adhere to strict cost-cutting measures while the three-hour plus movie went into post-production, which meant the all-important editing, of which Lee wants full control. At one point, as the bond representatives breathed down his back, Lee even considered giving up a portion of his profit share in the film as an enticement for Warner Bros. to kick in the remaining \$5 million. It wouldn't.

But the question, says Lee, is why "Malcolm X" had to fight for the money it received and why the budget generated so much attention when it's quite common for Hollywood films. Little, for instance, was made of Kevin Costner's troubles on the set of "Dances with Wolves" when the film ballooned over budget, or even the budget overruns during the filming of "Fried Green Tomatoes." The films' respective studios bailed them out by simply writing more checks.

What happened with "Malcolm X" is that Warner Bros. had decided that its bank was closed to Lee. So it called out the Completion

Bond Co. and while "only about 1 percent" of films have actually been taken over by CBC in its 10-year existence, says spokesman Steven Fayne, it was ready to yank "Malcolm" away

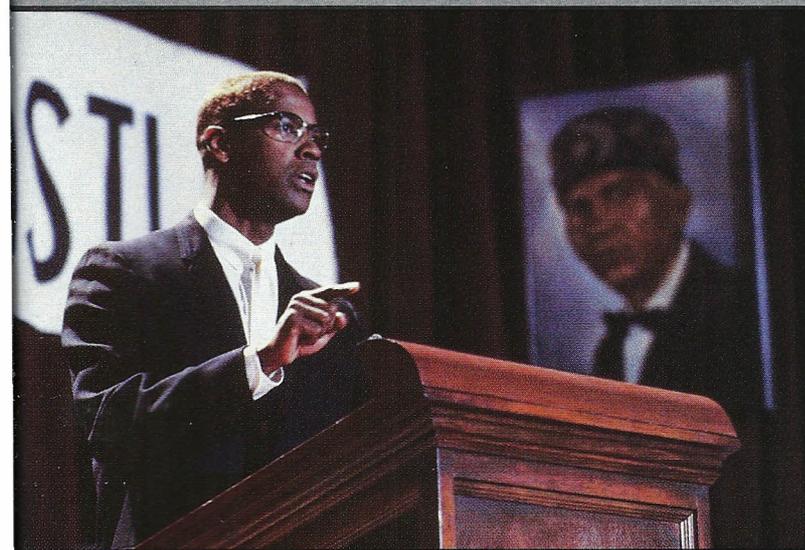


Malcolm X visits Mecca to gain spiritual enlightenment.

from Lee until his black benefactors stepped in with monetary aid. What's interesting, says Lee, is that there was little made of CBC's takeover of Barbra Streisand's 1983 film, "Yentl," paying more than \$1 million to finish it. CBC also provided coverage for such films as "Driving Miss Daisy" and "The Last Emperor." And then there's the case of "Heaven's Gate," made for \$36 million, \$29 million over budget.

The problem with Lee, in Hollywood's eyes at least, is that his films are simply too political, and political films rarely have wide appeal. The films are also too black, and black films have trouble attracting mass white audiences. Both are reasons the studio only wanted to give the director \$20 million in the first place and fought tooth and nail before handing over anything above that.

"I don't know why anyone should be surprised that this film is being made right now as opposed to earlier," says Lee. "Money, yeah, they were pretty scared of the film, and still are. But



Under the watchful eye of his mentor Malcolm X lectures to Nation of Islam followers.



Malcolm X delivers a speech next door to the Apollo Theater in Harlem.

having this **Malcolm** reawakening, having someone like **Denzel** and myself on the project, which means publicity they didn't have to buy, they took a look at the bottom line and figured they could make a great deal of money off the film. That's the bitter and the sweet of Hollywood.

"Nothing great is ever easy, that's what we kept telling ourselves as we made the film," **Lee** continues. "We went through the fire on this one. We really got tested. And we came through."

Now with the film headed for theaters, **Lee** has turned to other concerns, but everyone within the black community is waiting to learn how **Lee** portrayed **Malcolm** in the movie. **Malcolm** had many lives. He was pimp, hustler, black nationalist, leading minister. His was a life in the middle of another major shift when, in 1965 at age 39, he was gunned down.

Even before **Lee** started filming, there was a movement lead by poet **Amiri Baraka** to make certain the filmmaker would do the right thing and not "mess up" **Malcolm's** life. **Baraka's** concerns were based purely on **Lee's** previous films, from "She's Gotta Have It," to last year's "Jungle Fever," which reduced interracial relationships to nothing more than animalistic curiosity. It frightened **Baraka** and others who thought **Lee** was playing with a raging fire he could never get under control.

Betty Shabazz, **Malcolm's** widow, who is listed in the film's credits as "consultant," told *The New York Times* that the rallying cry against

Lee was not a personal vendetta, but that anyone attempting to do a film on **Malcolm** would receive such scrutiny.

"I think what is happening is that people who really knew **Malcolm** and who understood the thrust and importance of his leadership have a right to question anyone who is doing anything on **Malcolm**," **Shabazz** told the newspaper before filming began. "**Malcolm** always said that we're not discriminated against because we're Methodists, Christians, Catholics, or whether we're Democrats, Marxists, Republicans or liberals. Our human rights are violated because we are black. I think it's extremely important for people to understand that. All these people coming from different philosophical persuasions understand. (**Malcolm**) cannot be pigeonholed in some myopic closed container. He belongs to everyone."

Lee agrees, which is why he rewrote much of the original **Baldwin** script to include information that has surfaced since 1969. Everybody has their own **Malcolm** who is dear to them, **Lee** says. "Each **Malcolm** fits a different personal and political agenda. So everybody claims him in whatever period of life they were in at that particular time. All I can say is that I am putting on the screen the **Malcolm** that I have held with me all these years.

"What's for sure is that I stayed away from lies, innuendo, hearsay, gossip. I just wish and hope people reserve their comments until they've seen the film. We want to leave it up

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to the audience to choose which **Malcolm** they agree with, but we want to show all of his lives.”

Lee also stayed away from the assassination as being the final picture audiences see. That isn't **Lee's** aim. Or his style. He saw **Malcolm's** life as a metaphor for the African-American experience in the United States as it appears today. That's why **Lee** fought hard to keep in the beginning of the film the haunting video images of **Rodney King** being beaten by Los Angeles police officers while the American flag burns to a crisp. “I felt it would be too much of a down note, the assassination, and negate the impact he's had since his death,” says **Lee**, who shows scenes of Soweto, South Africa, even though **Malcolm** never went there. “**Malcolm** talked about Pan Africanism and he wanted to show the connection between black Americans and African people and the connection between Soweto and Harlem, Soweto and the South Side of Chicago, Soweto and South Central LA, Soweto and Roxbury.”

Pressure to stay true to the **Malcolm** image trickled down to the cast, mainly **Denzel Washington**, who studied videotapes of **Malcolm** and listened to his speeches. **Angela Bassett**, who plays **Betty Shabazz**, says it was her most difficult role to date.

“I made sure I did my research, my homework,” she says. “I read everything I could on **Malcolm**. I looked at every tape I could find. I observed **Betty**, of course, the way she looked, her focus, the way she held her hands, what she was wearing, what was her hair like. I just put her under this microscope.”

Bassett landed the role by videotaping herself in '50s and '60s style clothing and wearing no makeup. **Bassett** was among the few dozen to make it to a casting audition in Los Angeles where she read scenes with **Washington**. She'd read with **Washington** before—a year ago for the film “**Ricochet**,” a part she didn't get. This time, though, “it just clicked,” she says. **Denzel** and **I** worked really well together. It was generosity, I guess. That's a term I use. I mean, the give and the take was there.

“**Spike** kept telling us to be confident, to show the dedication, to show the passion. He wanted me to give **Betty Shabazz** depth and humor. We all knew how the story ended. We knew at a certain point it would get rough. What people want to know is how their lives were before then.”

One of the more controversial parts of “**Malcolm X**” will be the handling of the rift between **Malcolm** and the Honorable **Elijah Muhammad** played by veteran actor **Al Freeman Jr.**

“That split came at a difficult time for both of them because they were very close,” says **Freeman**,

who once played **Malcolm** on stage. “The other thing is that **Denzel** and **I** are playing two people who talked quite a bit behind closed doors, and those two people who knew exactly what was said are dead. So we don't know precisely what they said. We can only go with what happened before and what happened after. So in that sense there will be no grand revelations. We just wanted to give the essence of the force of these two giants who became instrumental in the other person's life.

“What's certain, though,” **Freeman** adds, “is that those particular scenes were the most challenging for me. Actually, just playing **Elijah** was a challenge. His voice was a higher pitch (than mine) and he had an odd way of putting together sentences that was unique only to him. He had a fourth grade education, was born in Georgia, but he was very articulate and at times sounded as though he were West Indian. But as far as putting it all together, I think **Spike** has done the right thing. He was able to give a sense of these two complicated persons.”

Lee says all he wants is for audiences to have an understanding of **Malcolm**, the man. “Right now I think it's limited since most young people don't read anymore,” he says. “This film will let them know about **Malcolm** and how he felt about race relations. **Malcolm** always stressed intelligence and education. They, hopefully, will pick up on that.”

As for “**Malcolm X**,” the entertaining motion picture, it has that wavering, artful documentary feel that has accompanied all of **Mr. Lee's** movies shot by long time cinematographer and pal **Ernest Dickerson** (also director of “**Juice**”).

“The critics will have to fall in line with this one,” **Lee** adds. “That's how powerful this film is. It's three hours plus, but the time is relative. This is a fast-paced, emotional movie that will fly right before your eyes.

“And this is a major black film that black people must support if we are going to be able to make anything else in Hollywood, at least anything of this magnitude,” he says. “A lot of the films being made now are for numbskulls, disposal entertainment you see and two minutes later don't know what you've seen. And it's a **Catch 22**. Hollywood thinks this is what the public wants, so it continues to make them. And the public keeps going to see them. So directors say, ok, that's what I'll make.”

Lee doesn't believe the hype. That's never been his plan, never his agenda. “I want to make thought-provoking films, and I think I've done that six times in the last seven years,” he says. “Especially with ‘**Malcolm**.’ I definitely feel that this is where I've demonstrated that you can produce a film that's both thought-provoking and entertaining.”

—Ken Parish Perkins
and Bruce Williams