

Which Malcolm X Will Be in Movie?

Spike Lee's vision of Malcolm X opens on the nation's movie screens this week. Which Malcolm will show up?

Will he be the Malcolm who frightened and enraged blacks who didn't agree with his separatist philosophy?

Or will he be the puritanical Malcolm, who tells his brothers and sisters to quit smoking, drinking and engaging in irresponsible sex and to "get it together" the hard way, through education, study, self-discipline and self-determination?

"We must stop drinking, we must stop smoking, we must stop committing fornication and adultery, we must stop gambling and cheating and using profanity, we must stop showing disrespect for our women, we must reform ourselves as parents so we can set the proper example for our children."

Will he be a black Horatio Alger, celebrating the dramatic and the unconventional?

"Civil rights means that I am supposed to have the equality of opportunity to do whatever my particular talent will allow me, as long as I am not stepping on someone's toes or breaking the law."

Or will Spike Lee provoke anger, appealing to divisiveness and outrage, bitterness and despair?

What will we learn of Malcolm Little, powerless son of a Baptist preacher, who turns into "Big Red," educated on mean streets and in prison yards, who then becomes Malcolm X and later El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a powerful hero whose message directed

toward black self-betterment might have eventually fused with that of Martin Luther King?

At the time of his assassination in 1965, he was beginning to see racism as a moral struggle for humanity, not a black and white issue.

"I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being, neither white, black, brown, nor red."

Spike Lee will probably give us all the Malcolms, arousing the controversy Malcolm's autobiography did. Controversy keeps the focus on the complicated life and ideas of Malcolm X (though not necessarily Spike Lee's interpretation of them), moving us beyond the T-shirts, caps and expensive leather jackets with the letter X.

Some blacks insist that whites can't understand "Malcolm X" and shouldn't even try. I participated in one panel discussion of the commercial exploitation of the movie, and a white woman apologized for her blind spots caused, she said, by the color (or lack of it) of her skin.

Malcolm was constantly changing his ideas, but he always stressed the importance of education, the value of an expanding vocabulary (he diligently copied down every word he didn't understand

and looked it up), of using correct English, of reading books with "intellectual vitamins."

He succeeded against great odds and that was the message he wanted his people to understand. They could do it, too.

"Children have a lesson adults should learn, to not be ashamed of failing, but to get up and try again."



**Suzanne
Fields**