

'X'-CEPTIONAL

Denzel Washington, a minister's son, finds deep significance and satisfaction in playing the title role in Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X'

By JUDY GERSTEL

It was a small thing, maybe insignificant. Maybe not.

Denzel Washington was preparing for one of the prison scenes in "Malcolm X," the one in which Malcolm reads a letter from Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad.

"The Messenger of Allah wrote me, a nobody, a junkie, a pimp and a convict," he says in wonder. The letter has such a profound impact on Malcolm that he envisions Muhammad in his cell, surrounded by light.

But something about the scene was bothering Washington. The prop that was made to look like a letter from Muhammad lacked a signature. Unsigned, it felt inauthentic to Washington, and that made him uncomfortable. So he went over to Al Freeman Jr., the actor playing Elijah Muhammad, and asked him to sign the letter as Muhammad.

It wasn't a big deal, says Washington, just another opportunity to connect with the characters, "to make their lives come alive."

In Spike Lee's epic movie biography opening Wednesday, Washington reincarnates the controversial African-American leader who was assassinated 27 years ago. But for all that Denzel Washington does for Malcolm X — he makes him flesh, accessible, a man for all seasons — Malcolm does something for Denzel. He makes him a superstar.

Dazzling on screen, Washington in person is handsome but not extraordinary. He's wearing a black pullover sweater, Reeboks and a gold wedding

and sexiness that explode on screen into Malcolm X, like invisible vapors ignited by the touch of fire. "I knew there was no way I could be Malcolm," he says. "But the same spirit that moved through him moved through me."

The actor says he never felt overwhelmed by the role. He'd already played the charismatic leader 11 years ago in a one-act Off-Broadway show, "When the Chickens Come Home to Roost," about a fictional meeting between Malcolm and Muhammad. "People who knew Malcolm said it was like he was brought back to life," says Washington about that show.

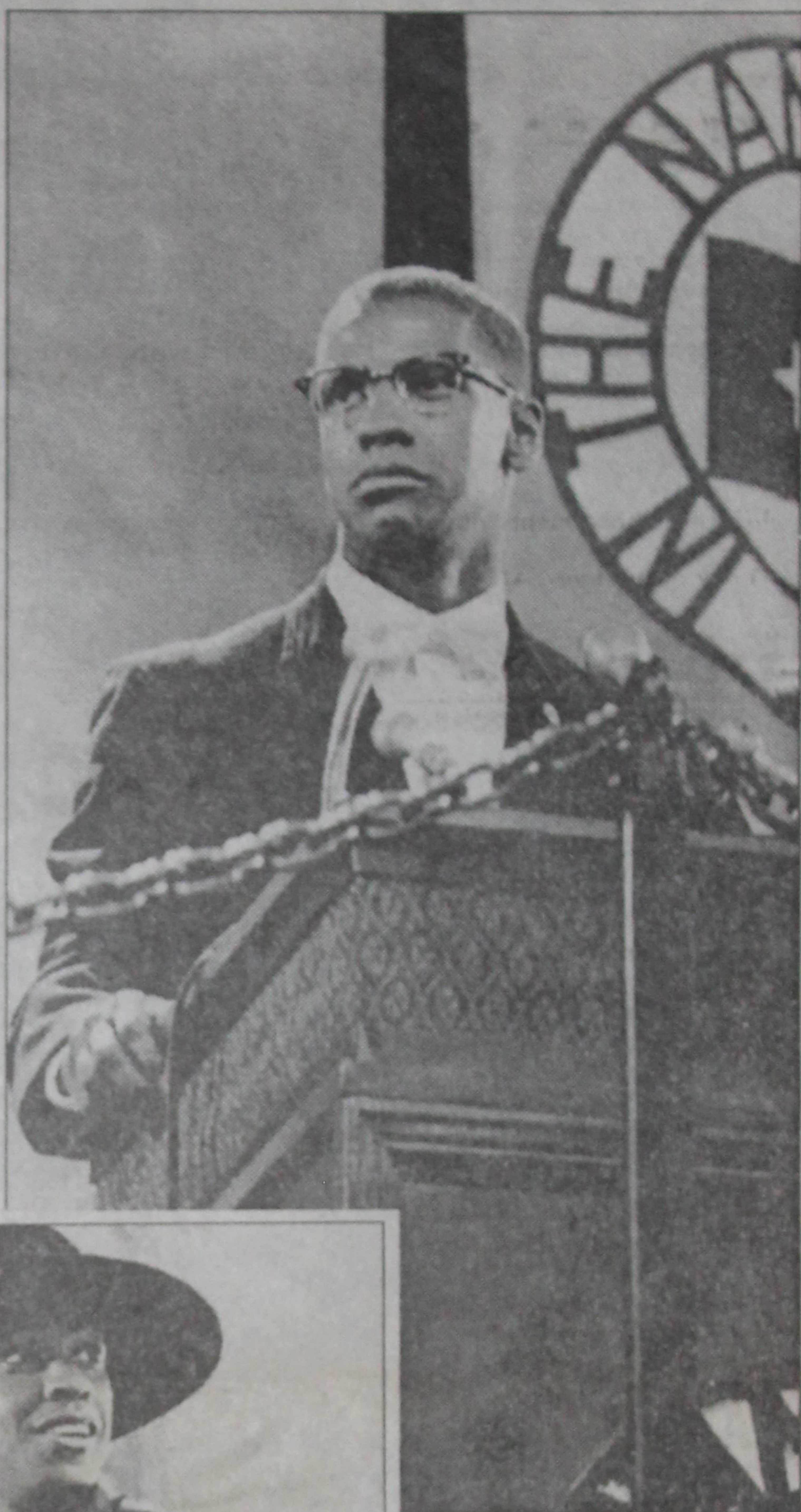
But he says the key to playing Malcolm in the movie was prayer. "A lot of prayer. First thing in the morning. Last thing at night. Any moment in between. I had some strong spiritual men around me while

remember hearing anything about him," Washington says.

After his parents divorced when he was 14, he went away to a prep school in upstate New York and then to Fordham University. There, he wavered between premed and journalism, until one summer when he took part in a talent show at the Connecticut YMCA camp where he was working. A star was born, and he enrolled in a drama class at Fordham.

Appearing Off-Broadway in 1981 as Malcolm X jump-started Washington's drive to stardom. That same year, he joined the prestigious Negro Ensemble Company for "A Soldier's Play" and won an Obie Award. (He reprised the role three years later in the film version, "A Soldier's Story.")

His first movie, "Carbon Copy," was also made in '81 and led directly to the long-



A MAN IN TRANSITION: In "Malcolm X," Denzel Washington plays the titular hero, who goes from a zoot-suited Boston hustler (above, r., with Spike Lee) to a monumental leader (top).

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band. (He's been married since 1983 to singer Pauletta Pearson; they have two small children, John David and Katia.)

The weight Washington lost for this role — about 20 pounds — is back. So is his moustache. His hair is back, too, in its natural state. Most of it fell out during filming after being repeatedly dyed and fried ("conked") to look like Malcolm's in the early days.

Talking to reporters, the 37-year-old actor keeps the wattage low and the lid on tight. Quiescent under a genial but guarded surface is the spirituality, magnetism, intelligence

I was filming "Security on the set was provided by members of the Nation of Islam. "We were always sharing ideas, and we would have prayers together and fellowship," he says.

Washington is the second of three children of a Pentecostal minister who died just as rehearsals began for "Malcolm X." "In a lot of ways, I did an imitation of my own father when it comes to preaching," he says. "I used him as an example as much as I did Malcolm, because the cadence is the same — build 'em up, knock 'em down. It's an art form."

The minister's son grew up in the racially mixed suburb of Mt. Vernon. "I was 11 when Malcolm was killed, and I don't

running TV series "St. Elsewhere," in which he played the low-key Dr. Phillip Chandler.

He went on to play African leader Steve Biko in "Cry Freedom" and a jazz musician in Spike Lee's "Mo' Better Blues." For his performance as a young soldier in "Glory," he won the 1989 Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. He's made almost a dozen movies, including "Much Ado About Nothing" with Kenneth Branagh, to be released next year.

Currently, he's shooting a picture with Tom Hanks in Philadelphia for red-hot director Jonathan Demme ("Silence of the Lambs"). Washington plays a conservative, homophobic lawyer who defends a gay lawyer with AIDS in a dis-

crimination suit.

Washington is known for turning down scripts that don't uphold his standards for portrayals of African-Americans. He's outspoken and angry about the treatment of African-Americans in this country.

"We haven't really dealt with black people," he says. "White people haven't really dealt with what went on in this country. We were taught to hate ourselves because the man that enslaved us justified what he was doing by making us less than human."

From the beginning, from the first time he played Malcolm, and then Biko and the Civil War soldier in "Glory," Washington has researched intensively the men he portrays,

learning about their era and about himself as an African-American and a man.

Freeman, the actor playing Muhammad in the movie, talks about a pivotal scene where Malcolm meets the leader of Islam for the first time. When Malcolm can finally bring himself to look at his idol, the tears run down his face.

Says Freeman, "It was a giving moment, a very full moment for both of us." The scene, he says, is "a measure of Denzel as an actor, an artist."

Washington says the emotions that came out in that scene were not planned. "But I knew they were right."

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NOLO CONTENDERE

Abel Ferrara is no stranger to the almighty MPAA, though the film maker probably would like to be less familiar with the L.A.-based ratings board. Ferrara, who successfully fought the MPAA over the initial X ratings of "Ms. 45" and "King of New York," says he has "stopped caring about a bunch of Beverly Hills housewives judging my movies" and will not contest the NC-17 rating of *Bad Lieutenant*. The movie, starring Harvey Keitel as a rotten-to-the-core cop, opens Friday.

— Maris Perlow