

TOP STORY: *The postmodern Malcolm X*

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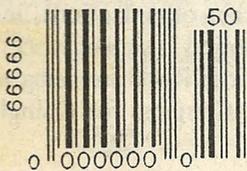
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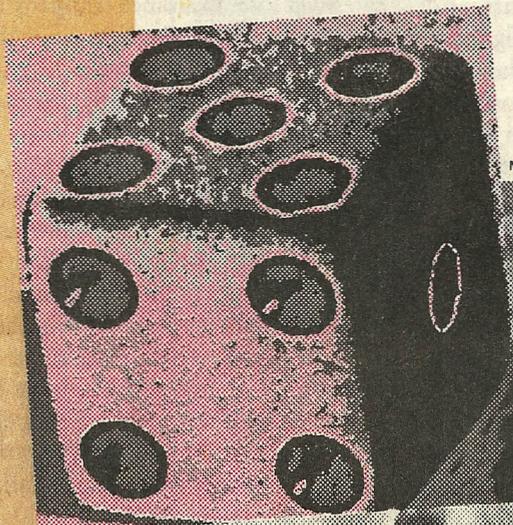
“Bill Clinton should dispatch federal marshals over to Sallie Mae to lock the doors.”

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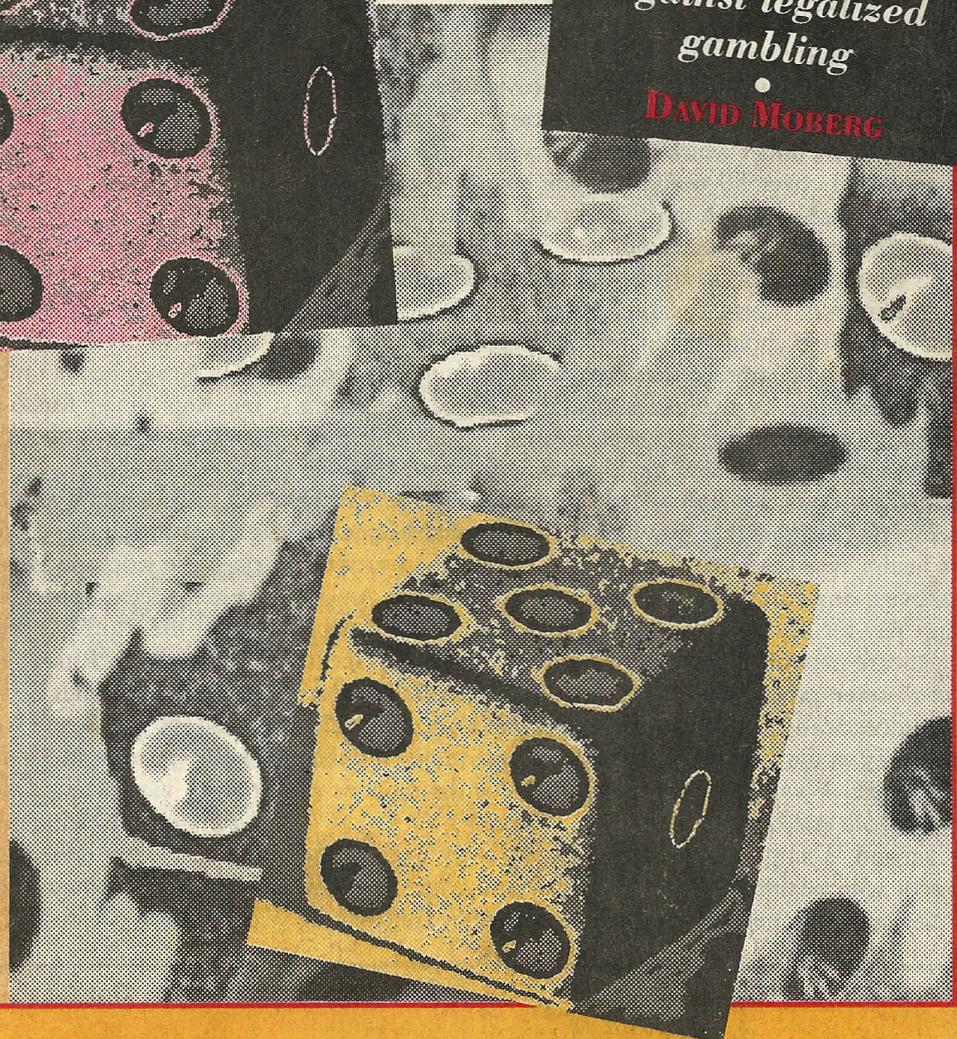


CASINO CRAPSHOOT



Miles DeCoster

The dice are loaded against legalized gambling
DAVID MOBERG



BLACK AMERICA

The postmodern Malcolm X

A

Dead for 27 years, Malcolm has become a saint, a soundbite, a commodity.

By Salim Muwakkil

African-American youth are so starved for inspirational leadership these days that they have exhumed the 27-year-dead Malcolm X, dusted him off and anointed him as their preferred leader. This back-to-the-future choice is in harmony with the current black nationalist revival, which had been surging throughout the black community long before Spike Lee began hyping his Malcolm X film.

But this wholesale and adoring appropriation of Malcolm as a black nationalist icon is problematic. For one thing, he's dead and his rougher edges have been smoothed out by the haze of history. And although Malcolm was ever-evolving, the hagiographers have frozen him in their image. But more significantly, Malcolm's legacy contains no original theo-

ries, no systematic ideology or overarching social vision.

His most publicized speeches were delivered while he was in the fold of Elijah Muhammad's racist Nation of Islam (NOI). And after abandoning the NOI's genetic theology, he embraced the more inclusive doctrines of Sunni Islam. But ideologically, Malcolm remained a black nationalist, although his program differed only slightly from those ethnic solidarity models that democratic pluralists had long advocated.

So it seems clear that Malcolm's current eminence is more a product of his "no sell-out" attitude than of any revolutionary doctrine he propounded. Frustrated by the conciliatory stances of the politicians and academics who have assumed the mantle of black leadership in these post-civil rights days, African-American youth yearn for the kind of uncompromising leadership embodied in Malcolm's "by any means necessary" persona. Many of them have watched the African-American community deteriorate even as record numbers of black politicians won political office. This sense of frustration

is acute and helps explain why current NOI chief Louis Farrakhan is so popular among young African-Americans.

And although Spike Lee has exploited this infatuation with Malcolm as a symbol of racial defiance, his film attempts to portray a more complex man. Malcolm's clearest legacy was his ability to evolve, to fearlessly follow his truth, and Lee's film subtly makes that case.

Of course, this is not to say that Malcolm's *attitude* was irrelevant. Quite the contrary: His articulate deconstruction of American racism spoke directly to African-Americans' frustrations—especially those of black urban dwellers. As a Harlem youngster in the late '50s and early '60s, I heard Malcolm X speak many times at Harlem Square, a location Lee recreated in *Malcolm X*. Malcolm was shockingly charismatic. His staccato oratory was precise and informed. His slashing denunciations of whites were delivered in sober, matter-of-fact tones and thus seemed more authentic.

We knew that Malcolm's intellect and wit were able matches for even the most educated of adversaries. Yet he identified himself as a man of the masses. It was clear to us that the gaunt Muslim minister had already graduated from the hustler-oriented street life we romanticized so foolishly. Malcolm knew the criminal justice system, the welfare system and all the ups and downs of the down-and-outs. But he transcended it all, and by his example others gained confidence in their own potential. That was the Malcolm who helped the NOI reform so many victims of the underground economy.

Almost single-handedly, Malcolm removed the stigma of "corniness" from intellectual achievement. He translated his

hip, urbane, street-life sensibility into a kind of intellectual style we all could accept. We wanted to talk like Malcolm; his meticulous diction, vast vocabulary and knowledge of history sent us to the dictionary and the library. The intellectual explosion he triggered has yet to be fully appreciated, and Lee's bio-pic offers very little illumination of that Malcolm X.

The intensity of Malcolm's identity quest, and the price he paid for making it, lit the fuse for the Black Power explosion and the various movements it provoked: the cultural nationalists, the Pan-Africanists, the black arts movement, the Black Panther Party, the black studies movement, a host of indigenous Islamic groupings and more.

But the ideological turbulence of Malcolm's last months get short shrift in Lee's film. The movie focuses instead on the pilgrimage to Mecca as a true conversion experience. This was unlikely. Malcolm had been in the Middle East in 1959 and knew of white Muslims. He had long reconciled that experience with the NOI's racist doctrines. More likely, Malcolm professed his conversion to provide himself with a theological alternative to the racial reductionist catechism of his NOI rivals.

Malcolm's post-NOI shifts have allowed a wide range of partisans to claim his legacy. Pan-Africanists insist that Malcolm's plan was to prepare black Americans for eventual emigration to Africa. Black separatists claim a nation within a nation was his ultimate aim. Cultural nationalists argue that Malcolm wanted to connect African-Americans to culture of the motherland. Muslims tout him as a great propagator of Islam. Certain socialist groups maintain that Malcolm embraced dialectical materialism before he died. Integrationists claim him for his newfound focus on the content of character rather than color. Conservatives like



Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell and the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page hail Malcolm as an evangelist for self-help and traditional family values. Ideological scavengers have plucked at his legacy so relentlessly he has become a hero-without-portfolio.

Even potato chip makers have hopped on the "X" bandwagon.

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I N T H E A R T S

Bigger than life

F

rom its first moment, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* conspicuously lays claim to a venerable Hollywood pedigree. An American flag fills the screen, recalling the opening of *Patton*, the Oscar-winning 1970 bio-pic of the controversial World War II general.

But in Lee's movie, the flag starts to burn. Instead of a patriotic pep talk from Old Blood and Guts, we get a look at the Rodney King tape. (The pep talk will come later, in Malcolm's speeches.) The flag burns down to a fragment in the shape of the film's logo (and current fashion statement), "X."

It's clear from the start that Lee wants to turn the old Hollywood pieties upside down. And to some degree he has. He's made a stirring if conventional film about Malcolm X, an epic if there ever was one. Perched somewhere between *Gandhi* and *JFK* in terms of

audacity and style, it's a first-rate teaching tool even if, in working with the terms of the Hollywood bio-pic, Lee has to whittle down a complex human being into just another hero.

Malcolm X shares with *Gandhi*, and most other bio-pics produced by the studios these days, a hugeness and ambition that tend to pre-empt quibbles. Locations all over the world! A cast of thousands! Screen-filling production numbers! (One can imagine Lee still chafing at the failure of the ambitious *School Daze*, and determined to keep on making his musical till he gets it right.)

Lee was thinking *big*, on the order of David (*Lawrence of Arabia*) Lean, according to his book about the making of *Malcolm X*—just like that other Lean wannabe, Richard Attenborough, who directed *Gandhi*.

Spike Lee is an immeasurably more imaginative filmmaker than Richard Attenborough, and one has to admire the way he keeps the sprawling story of Malcolm X on

track. Yet it's ironic that in this movie, expected to be the most controversial film of a hardly unpublicized career, Lee's direction is less dynamic and less daring than in the relatively small-scale *Do the Right Thing*.

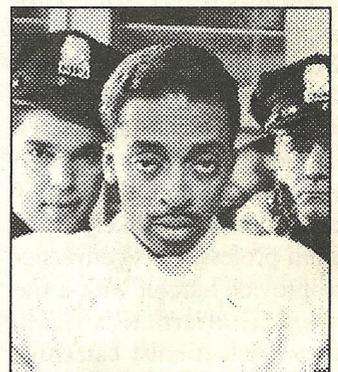
The camera does prowl and glide, using odd angles, but the director mostly avoids bold devices. Instead, Lee relies on his actors to carry the meaning—which Denzel Washington certainly does in the title role. This is a movie of startling speeches and intimate human gestures. Its most perfect scene may be the tiny gem in which a reborn Malcolm visits an old crime pal who tried to kill him once, and comforts the ailing man with selfless delicacy.

The few directorial flourishes do stand out. Late in life, an image of a threatened Malcolm in his hotel room takes a slow 360-degree spin. The next day, when he approaches the Audubon Ballroom, he floats forward on the street, as if jet-propelled for a moment toward his fate.

That fate—Malcolm's martyrdom—calls him all through the movie, an undertow common to bio-pics about murdered men. When Malcolm and Shorty (the camera-hogging buddy role that Lee takes for himself) are zoot-suited

Spike Lee, like many film biographers before him, doesn't know when to stop. Malcolm the man isn't good enough. Lee aims to make him better.

By Pat Dowell



Malcolm X
Directed by Spike Lee



Photos ©1992 Warner Bros. Inc.

teenagers, playing at gangsters and cocking fingers at each other on a tawny day in a Boston park, we hear a full-fledged gunshot. We hear it again when Malcolm samples his second line of cocaine. Destiny waits, Lee seems to be saying.

Like any biographer, Lee has to shape the life he chronicles and decide what to put in and what to leave out. He follows the bio-pic rule of removing mostly warts. The paternity suits brought against Elijah Muhammad by his former secretaries are not presented as the result of Malcolm's urging, as biographers assert they were and as even Lee discovered in his research. Would that have made Malcolm look too much like an intriguer?

Malcolm's marriage to Betty is pictured as stressless ("we've never fought") until he starts to break with Elijah.

Is this to pacify the widow Betty Shabazz, as Lee suggests in his book, or to add to the converted Malcolm's personal perfection in an era of public outcry about the deteriorating black family?

Lee also tailors Malcolm to his own needs. There's scarcely a hint of Malcolm's unflattering remarks about Jews during his fieriest days as a Black Muslim preacher. Lee too has had public skirmishes over anti-Semitism. He may not have wanted to open that can of worms again. Or perhaps he simply omitted those statements because Malcolm softened his positions late in life.

On the other hand, Lee does not include all of Malcolm's changes of heart. Malcolm's snub of a liberal white coed's offer to help his movement is a seminal movie episode, even though Malcolm expressed regret about that incident in the autobiography. The film follows that biography faithfully, leaving the book's embellishments, mythmaking and omissions largely intact.

The film goes past the memoirs, of course, to include Malcolm's death. Lee tacks on a eulogy—a device that, if a bio-pic has done its work, is entirely superfluous. This film *has*, and the eulogy *is*—but I've never seen a bio-pic yet that knew when to stop. The man is never

good enough for the movie. The bio-pic needs to make him better. It needs to certify his fame, and in so doing, it usually diminishes him. The movie's coda of newsreels and amens, especially, exhorts us to root for Malcolm rather than understand him.

Lee has been quoted as urging children to skip class for the movie, because, he said, he himself had been taken on a school field trip to see *Gone with the Wind*. Lee has shaped his movie career to answer that insult. He's trying to beat Hollywood at its own game, answering the white epic with a black one, fashioning a new African-American bio-pic by the old rules.

Lee succeeds, but at a price. Malcolm needs no apotheosis to be a great man, but he gets one in *Malcolm X*. It consolidates a personality cult of the sort he outgrew in real life. ◀