

# PLAYING



# WITH THE FIRE

IN BRINGING MALCOLM X TO

LIFE ON THE SCREEN, DENZEL

WASHINGTON DISCOVERS HOW

DEEPLY THE ANGER STILL BURNS.

BY LENA WILLIAMS

IT IS EARLY AFTERNOON AND THE WORD ON 116TH Street in Harlem is that Denzel Washington is in a nearby trailer preparing to shoot a scene for Spike Lee's film "Malcolm X."

Neighborhood residents peer out their windows and mill about on the street hoping to catch a glimpse of Washington, who has been hailed by critics as one of America's most versatile and talented young actors — as well as one of the sexiest.

"Ooooooh, he's so fine — I just have to see him up close," says a young woman, squeezing the arm of a female companion. She swears the yellow ribbon that cordons off the area where the film crew is set up will not be enough to contain her.

Within minutes, members of the Fruit of Islam, the Black Muslims' defense corps that is providing security for the movie, emerge from the clutch of camera crew, cable wires, trailers and lunch tables. Nattily dressed in dark

---

*Lena Williams is a style reporter for The New York Times.*

Left: Denzel Washington reacts to being interviewed. Above: Malcolm X in 1961.

suits, crisp white shirts and their signature bow ties, the Muslims march toward Mosque No. 7, the four-story building that served as the New York headquarters for the Black Muslims in the 1960's when Malcolm was an evangelist for the movement. Denzel Washington (his first name is pronounced den-ZEL) is walking in the middle of this well-pressed army, but none of his fans seem to notice. Their eyes remain fixed on the trailer.

Inside the mosque, time appears to have been frozen. Bulletin boards announce Muslim activities. Extras — women dressed in traditional Muslim garb, their heads covered, and men in conservative business suits of the era — prepare for a scene. Washington, bespectacled, his hair dyed red and looking 10 pounds thinner than normal, paces back and forth, oblivious to the hubbub around him.

In real life, Washington, who is about 6 feet tall and the color of mocha, bears little resemblance to the reddish-brown, 6-foot-4-inch Malcolm — a fact that has not gone unnoticed by many who knew the Muslim leader.

"Action!" cries Spike Lee and Washington leans against a podium, dabs his brow with a white handkerchief and addresses the crowd of extras:

"We didn't come over here on the Niña, the Pinta or the whatchamacallit. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; Plymouth Rock landed on us! Your slavemaster, he brought you over here, and of your past everything was destroyed. Today, you do not know your tribal language or what tribe you are from. You don't even know your family's real name. You are wearing a white man's name. The white slavemaster who hates you."

The extras shout "Yeah, man," "Uh-huh," "Teach, Messenger," "Tell 'em," and seeing Washington in character, one is struck by how much he looks, moves and even sounds like Malcolm. He has caught the Muslim leader's vocal cadences exactly, the quiet intensity of his rapid-fire delivery, the underlying humor of his logic. For those moments the camera is rolling, it is 1963 — and Malcolm speaks.

WASHINGTON'S 15-YEAR ACTING career has taken him from an Obie-winning Off Broadway performance as an angry soldier in "A Soldier's Play" to a six-year stint as Dr. Phillip Chandler in the television series "St. Elsewhere" to an Academy Award in a supporting role for his searing performance as Trip, the defiant Civil War infantryman in the film "Glory." He is among a handful of gifted actors — Morgan Freeman, Wesley Snipes, Larry Fishburne and Danny Glover, among them — who are redefining how black Americans are portrayed in film.

But it was Washington who won what many in Hollywood consider the role of a lifetime: Malcolm X, the

controversial Black Muslim minister who was slain 27 years ago. Over those two and a half decades, Malcolm has become a black icon, evoked by the letter X on millions of T-shirts and baseball caps across America. A new generation of African-Americans has rediscovered him through references in Lee's earlier films and through black rap groups. Some have embraced the message of black pride, black power and black self-determination. Others, including some whites, have donned X's as a hip statement of anti-establishment cool.

There are cadres of Malcolm purists — self-appointed keepers of the

with Alex Haley, who subsequently wrote "Roots." "X" traces Malcolm's life: his early days as a thief, drug user and hustler, then his prison conversion to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. As a preacher for the sect, Malcolm proved a charismatic orator, moving tens of thousands of African-Americans with his message of pride, discipline and independence from "blue-eyed white devils," a message which scared, and still scares, whites. Eventually Malcolm broke with the Black Muslims and their racial exclusiveness. And after a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, he embraced the doctrines of Orthodox Islam, adopt-



flame — who question whether Washington, whose pretty-boy looks and sex appeal have landed him on the cover of People magazine as "one of the 50 most beautiful people in the world," is right for the part of a man who inspires reverence among some and fear among others.

But Spike Lee says he never envisioned any actor other than Washington in the role.

"First of all, Denzel was involved in this project before I was," explains Lee, noting that Washington was to have portrayed Malcolm when Norman Jewison was slated to direct the film. "He really captured Malcolm when he played him in the Off Broadway play."

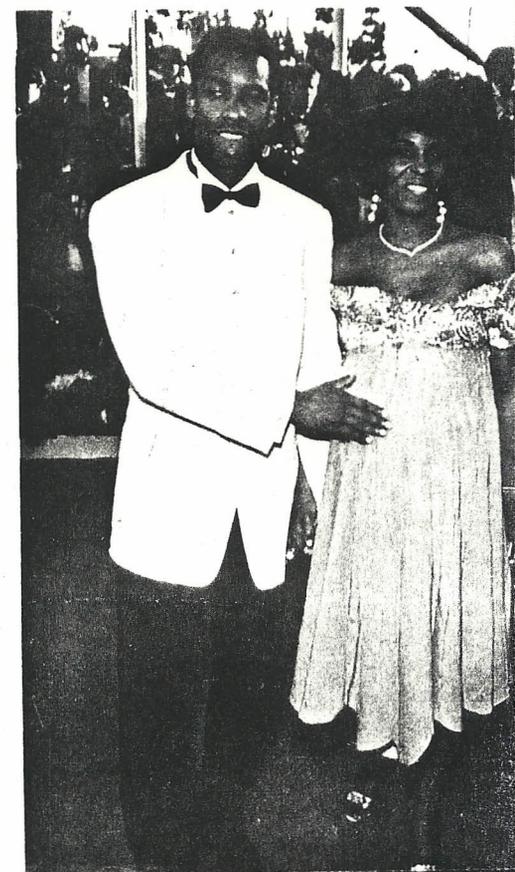
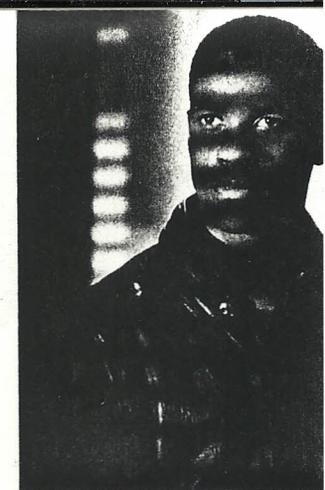
Lee is convinced that the intensity Washington brings to his roles, from the cadences of his speeches to the purposeful strides of his steps, has helped capture the essence of Malcolm and will silence detractors.

"Malcolm X," which opens nationwide on Nov. 20, is based on an adaptation of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," which was written

TOP: Denzel Washington played a struggling ex-paratrooper in the 1988 British thriller "For Queen and Country."

ABOVE: As Malcolm X, left, in a scene with Kirk Kirksey as Elijah Muhammad in a 1981 production of the Off Broadway play "When the Chickens Come Home to Roost."

RIGHT: With his wife, Pauletta, at the Academy Awards in 1991.





**LEFT:** As the defiant Trip in "Glory," a role for which he won an Academy Award as best supporting actor.

**BELOW:** In "Mo' Better Blues," Washington, left, was a two-timing trumpet player. Spike Lee, right, wrote, directed and produced the movie, as well as acted in it.

**BOTTOM:** He played the South African activist Stephen Biko in the 1987 film "Cry Freedom."



ing the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabbazz. He was assassinated by three Black Muslims in February 1965.

For the past 20 years, efforts to bring Malcolm's story to the screen have been stymied by factions within the black community. Even before filming started, there was a movement, led by the poet Amiri Baraka, to stop Lee. Baraka and his supporters warned the director against diluting the anger of Malcolm's story and making it more palatable to whites and middle-class blacks.

Washington says he doesn't take the controversy over the film personally: "I'm not Malcolm X, but the same God that moved Malcolm X can move me. This is a story about the evolution of a man. It's a spiritual, philosophical, political evolution.

My prayer is to illustrate that and have that be some kind of a healing for people. Some who knew Malcolm want to put him on a pedestal, but that's not changing anything. We want to reach that young person who is down and out, who may be wearing the X but doesn't really understand what it means or what this man stood for. We want kids to see how Malcolm was able to turn his life around, to see that Malcolm's solutions changed as he changed. We want kids to say, 'Maybe I can do that, too.' Malcolm said that if you are taught you are worthless, you will think you are worthless. We have to turn that around."

Washington's journey to understanding Malcolm X began 11 years ago, when he portrayed the black leader in the Off Broadway production "When the Chickens Come Home to Roost," a play about the relationship between Malcolm and

what it must have felt like to be so free to be able to say anything. It must have made for tension."

Washington's stage performance was a critical success. Frank Rich of The New York Times wrote in his 1981 review that Washington's "firm, likable performance" portrayed a Malcolm that was "honorable and altruistic without ever becoming a plaster saint."

To prepare for his film performance, Washington interviewed people who knew Malcolm, among them Malcolm's widow and two of his brothers. He also had an additional 10 years to grow professionally and personally. The net benefit, Washington believes, has been to give him a better understanding and appreciation of Malcolm — the man and the myth. He learned that even those who knew Malcolm well had trouble articulating a coherent picture of him. Washington says he also came to understand Malcolm's sense of humor and how the Muslim leader would use humor as a tool to create and diffuse tension. Washington discovered that some of Malcolm's most racially charged speeches occurred after incidents of racial injustice. "This was a way for him to get things off his chest," Washington says, "since Muslims weren't allowed to participate in sit-ins or acts of civil disobedience."

In talking about Malcolm X, Washington speaks of "parallels" between his life and that of the black leader's, although to an outsider the differences are more striking. Washington grew up in Mount Vernon, an integrated, middle-class suburb of New York City, and lived for most of his childhood in a family with strong, supportive parents; Malcolm, as a child, struggled through segregation, extreme poverty and the eventual loss of both parents — his father was killed and his mother institutionalized after suffering a nervous breakdown. Yet, to help strengthen his film portrayal of Malcolm, Washington draws upon and amplifies what he believes they have in common. For example, at 37, Washington is two years younger than Malcolm was at the time of his assassination; both men have large families (Malcolm had six children; Washington, four); both of their fathers were ministers; both were raised primarily by their mothers (although Malcolm was 6 when his father was killed, while Washington's parents divorced when he was 14 and his father remained in touch with his son until he died last year).

But beyond the surface similarities — tenuous as they may seem — one senses a deep emotional connection between Washington and Malcolm X. In public, Washington, like Malcolm, projects an air of self-confidence and rigorous self-control. Privately, he, like Malcolm, is enormously guarded and introspective, setting up an impenetrable barrier to his private life. Malcolm, the preacher (Continued on page 64)

his mentor, Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam. Washington's motivation then for taking on Malcolm was the \$125 weekly paycheck. He had been only marginally aware of Malcolm and hadn't even read his autobiography.

"I didn't have a view of Malcolm then," Washington admits. He pauses, trying to recall his first reaction while preparing for the stage role, to reading books and articles by and about Malcolm, listening to hours of tape and watching film footage of Malcolm's speeches: "I remember feeling two ways: Like this was heavy, mean stuff and also like this was helping me get some things off my chest. There was something invigorating about being able to say things you felt. I remember thinking

(Continued from page 39)

and teacher, was also an instinctive actor who could captivate an audience, while Denzel, the actor, has a tendency and a desire to teach. Like Malcolm, Washington uses his physical attractiveness and charm and will not hesitate to "beat you to death with it," in the words of the actor Ossie Davis, a friend of Washington's who also knew Malcolm well.

"I've been asked whether I feel the way Malcolm did, if I'm angry," Washington says of a question frequently put to him. But he never really answers the question. One senses, after several long sessions with him, that beneath his surface restraint, like many black Americans of his generation, he harbors an anger — and a disappointment — barely kept at bay.

He becomes angry, for example, recalling his frustration when, during the filming of "X," he couldn't hail a taxicab in New York:

"After I couldn't get cabs all day, I finally punched the door of a cab that passed me by," he says, pounding the desk as if it were the cab door.

AS A COLLEGE STUDENT, WASHINGTON had first wanted to be a doctor, then a journalist. You can see the vestiges of those interests in him today, in his curiosity and observation. He is also considerate: he is quick to open a door for a female guest, thanks a staffer for fetching him something to drink and compliments her on her taste in cowboy boots. He begins a conversation with an interviewer by asking, "So, do you like what you do?"

He is forthright in his answers but

chooses his words carefully, as though cautioned by a parent that if he can't say anything nice, he shouldn't say anything at all.

When asked about reports of tensions on the set of "Mo' Better Blues" between himself, Spike Lee, who directed the movie, and Cynda Williams, who co-starred as Washington's girlfriend, the actor's eyelids begin to flutter. He pulls his baseball cap off his head and runs his fingers through his hair. You get the impression that he is looking for a diplomatic yet truthful response.

"We bumped heads one day in rehearsal and it ended right there," he says finally, about the flare-up with Williams. "That was the first time Spike and I worked together, so we didn't know each other and had to learn some things. Spike's one of the most talented directors in the business today and I enjoy working with him."

While Washington is a charismatic, matinee idol on the screen, in real life he is able to walk down streets without being noticed. Part of that anonymity, he acknowledges, comes from being a black male in America. His anonymity is, in part, the kind of invisibility many African-Americans say they experience outside the workplace and in surroundings where theirs is the only dark face. But it might also be a personal characteristic that could account for Washington's ability to embody any character on whom he trains his sights.

"I'm not a real 'personality,'" he says, acknowledging that he is not histrionic in everyday life. "I couldn't just play me. I have to have a character to lock into."

One of Washington's techniques is to find a signature gesture for a

character. For Malcolm, placing his index finger to his temple, which is how the leader is frequently pictured. As Bleek, the two-timing jazz trumpet player in "Mo' Better Blues," it was stroking his top lip à la Louis Armstrong.

Washington will also use gestures to convey a character's underlying tension and complexity. In a key scene in "Cry Freedom," he gives an impassioned courtroom speech on human rights that conveys the moral strength, charisma and eloquence of Stephen Biko, the slain black South African leader. During that speech, he stiffens his shoulders to convey regal arrogance. Later, he bites his lower lip to show contained annoyance when being interrogated in court. In one scene, he looks his white inquisitor in the eye and in a voice only a decibel above a whisper responds to a question equating confrontation and violence: "Sir, we are now in confrontation, but I do not see any violence."

In developing a character, Washington says he follows no pat set of guidelines: "It depends upon who it's with, what's the story, what I'm trying to say."

Like the doctor he once aspired to be and then portrayed on "St. Elsewhere," Washington builds his characters by asking the right questions. In examining Malcolm X, he looked at the symptoms of the man — anger and disillusionment — and asked himself: "What caused these?" "How long had he felt this way?" "Were there others who felt like him and if so, why?"

"Unlike a doctor, I'm analyzing for myself, not to give a prescription," Washington explains. "I'm the instrument, so you ask all the right questions of yourself and your char-



Spike Lee, left, re-creating a 1940's nightclub in "Malcolm X." The players in this scene are Phyllis Yvonne Stickney as Honey, Denzel Washington as Malcolm and Delroy Lindo as West Indian Archie.

acter and relate it to the experiences you've had to find a formula that works."

He has a knack for delivering a range of foreign accents, and with uncanny accuracy. In a rare moment of braggadocio, he volunteers that his accent for "The Mighty Quinn," an action thriller filmed in Jamaica in which he portrayed a police chief investigating a murder, was so authentic that the director made him Americanize it so that United States audiences would understand what he was saying. In preparing for the part, Washington frequented food stands, restaurants and street markets in Jamaica and listened to people talk.

"There's some science to it, of course," he says. "You have to break stuff down phonetically. Like for the word 'that,' I would spell it t-h-e-t or t-h-i-t. In the Caribbean, they sometimes switch a 'd' or a 'g' for 'th,' so, 'something' would be pronounced 'someding.'"

In the Civil War film "Glory," he played the soldier Trip as an instigator, wild and rebellious — traits that mask the suffering he endured during his years of slavery. In a scene in which Trip is whipped after being caught leaving camp to search for shoes, Washington conveys Trip's contempt for the punishment and punisher by never making a sound. But in the end, he has tears in his eyes. Washington says the tears weren't planned: "It just happened. I was thinking there is nothing else that they can do to me. These were tears of defiance, really."

Washington researches his characters, their idiosyncrasies and cultural nuances. For his role as Biko, for which he received his first Academy Award nomination in a supporting role, Washington gained 30 pounds and mastered a South African accent. Biko was censored by the South African Government; so the actor had to rely on reading Biko's few available books, letters and speeches and interviewing his friends. In the Broadway play "Checkmates," Washington played a yuppie liquor distributor and practiced for the part by working at a liquor store in New York. He learned to play the trumpet for his role in "Mo' Better," although it had been predetermined that the music would be dubbed in the film.

To play Malcolm on screen, Washington lost weight, underwent a two-week training course with members of the Nation of Islam and subjected himself to a tortuous process of having his hair dyed red, to match that of Malcolm's, and conked, a straightening process popular among black males in the 1950's.

"It was a nightmare," says Washington, referring to what would be known on the set as "the hair situation." "I must have had my hair fried 30 times, dyed 30 times, or some kind of patchwork, streaks, tips. We'd test this, then that. It

comes out on the reddish side, but it's not the color of Malcolm's. He not only had red hair, he was red-boned. I end up with red hair."

Those who have worked with Washington say his tendency of withdrawing into himself to think things through has often been mistaken as moodiness or aloofness.

"It's funny, because sometimes you think Denzel is moody," Lee says, "but he's just doing his character and it really depends on what the scene calls for on that day. Nobody got next to him the day we had to shoot Malcolm's assassination."

Angela Bassett, the actress who plays Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's wife, in the movie, says, "He can be very warm and giving as an actor, but his work was so intense during the filming of Malcolm, that a wall would go up." Bassett says Washington once conveyed a compliment after a scene by squeezing her hand. "People would come over and try to have these conversations, but when Denzel has to go to work, he goes to work."

ALTHOUGH WASHINGTON DID not come from a family of actors, there was plenty of theater in his household. Washington was the middle child of the Rev. Denzel Washington Sr., a Pentecostal minister who worked part time at the local water department, and his wife, Lennis, a singer in the church choir and former beauty shop owner and operator.

His father taught him the importance of integrity, hard work and responsibility, he says. His strong-willed mother kept him from "becoming a sure-nuf gangster." When his parents divorced, Washington began to run the streets and started "beating people up in school."

"My mom's love for me and her desire for me to do well kept me out of trouble," Washington says. "When it came down to the moment of should I go this way or do that, I'd think about her and say: 'Naahh, let me get myself outta here before I get into trouble.' I think I was more of an actor, even back then."

The kind of militant, anti-establishment rhetoric preached by Malcolm X in the 1960's was not heard in the Washington household. "We just didn't listen to that kind of talk in my father's house," Washington says, adding that because his father was a preacher most of the talk around the house was about the Bible. "It wasn't that it was forbidden."

After the divorce, his mother enrolled him in Oakland Academy, a private school in upstate New York, to remove him from the temptations of street life and temper the natural rebelliousness of a teen-age boy being raised without a father in the house.

Washington was, in his own words, an underachiever who preferred playing football and basketball and performing in the band to studying.

During Washington's sophomore year at Fordham University, an English and dramatic literature

professor named Robinson Stone, who had played Joey in the film "Stalag 17," encouraged Washington to pursue an acting career after seeing him play the leads in "Emperor Jones" and "Othello." The advice was, Washington says, a spiritual awakening in which he discovered a real purpose in his life. At the beginning of his first acting class, he announced that his goal was to be "the greatest actor in the world."

"Everybody looked at me like, 'Who is this stuck-up son of a gun?'" he says burying his head in his hands like an embarrassed child.

Stone, however, remembers believing that Washington would make good on his boast.

"He was 22 when he got the lead in the school production of 'Othello,'" Stone says. "I thought he was much too young for the part."

Stone recalls the specific scene that changed his mind, the moment in which Iago persuades Othello to kill his wife, claiming she has been unfaithful.

"Washington was stripped to the waist," Stone says, "and he turned in the direction of Desdemona and crooked his right arm, and as he talked to her his biceps rose, and he said softly, 'Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!' Ordinarily, an actor screams that line, but he whispered it. It showed imagination was going on and that he had an ability to understand this very complex character."

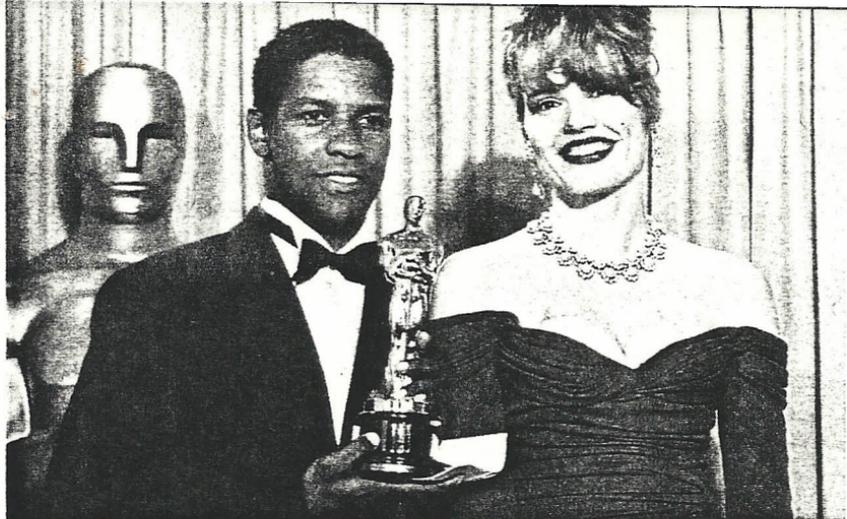
"He was easily the best Othello I had ever seen. And I had played Brabantio opposite Paul Robeson. I dragged several agents to come and see him."

One of those agents liked what he saw and cast Washington in "Wilma," the 1977 made-for-television movie about the Olympic athlete Wilma Rudolph. During filming, Washington was introduced to his future wife, Pauletta Pearson, an attractive black actress, pianist and singer who also had a bit part in the movie.

In 1978, Washington went to the prestigious American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, leaving after the first year of the two-year program to return to New York where he felt he could learn more struggling in the real theater world than in school.

In 1980, Washington got his first major film role in "Carbon Copy," playing George Segal's illegitimate son. Throughout the 1980's, he worked at the New York Shakespeare Festival and the American Place Theater, appearing in a string of Off Broadway productions, including "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men," "Othello" and "Split Second."

Although Washington says he has "no agenda" in terms of what roles he wants to play, he is constantly looking to stretch his talents. Last summer, he worked with Kenneth Branagh, the British actor and director, in the film version of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing"



Washington, Oscar and Geena Davis at the 1990 Academy Awards.

in which Washington plays Don Pedro. His next screen role is in a Jonathan Demme film in which he will play a homophobic lawyer who defends another lawyer, played by Tom Hanks, who has AIDS.

Washington offers no apologies for those movies or theatrical roles that were critical or commercial failures. His interpretation of "Richard III," whom he played in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production in August 1990, was unfavorably received by critics and fans alike.

Mel Gussow, the New York Times critic, found the actor's performance "surprisingly ... muted," and John Simon, theater critic for New York magazine, wrote that Washington played Richard as "an old-fashioned heavy: without smiling, without relaxing, always expecting — perhaps even hoping to be hissed by the crowd." Washington, however, walked away unintimidated by the experience: "I'm going to continue to take chances — fall on my face sometimes — but hopefully learn from the experience. I've grown and learned so much from acting about black history. That's the thing I'm most happy about."

WASHINGTON STRIDES INTO A trendy Los Angeles restaurant 20 minutes late for an appointment. He is dressed in a black sweatshirt, baggy jogging pants, black-and-white athletic shoes and apologizes for dressing "like a bum."

"I couldn't find the keys to my car," he says, explaining his tardiness. "I fell asleep on the sofa last night and I must have had the keys in my pants' pocket and they fell out. So I'm turning the house upside down this morning, looking all over for the keys. My wife broke the extra set off in the car door, so that's no help. Now does it ever occur to me to look under the sofa cushions? Naah, Denzel, that's too easy. And that's where they were. Were you waiting long?"

Despite being told that the focus of this article is about him as an actor, Washington is prepared to talk, is dying to talk, about other things, mostly about Malcolm X, the man,

rather than the movie. But he is also eager to talk about the riots last spring in Los Angeles, about his desire to help his friend Douglas Turner Ward revitalize the Negro Ensemble Company (which Washington credits with helping him grow as an actor), about his three-year production deal with Tri-Star Pictures, about family values and Little League.

"There's a lot of work to be done, not so much for me in terms of the roles I play in films, but in trying to do some good in this world," he says, "There's so much negativity and greed, doing things for the dollar, exploitation for ratings. It's our responsibility as African-Americans, and as entertainers who have had some success and have come through N.E.C., to lend a hand to help the thing that helped make us what we are."

These days, Washington says, he finds tremendous pleasure in working with children.

"I love it," he says of coaching Little Leaguers, "because these young minds are open and ready for what you give them. I love feeding them with positive energy, just trying to make them understand that they can do anything. Some of the parents say, 'Oh, here's the celebrity coach coming in.' But we're winning games, so there!"

He's enjoying himself now, leaning forward, then back, gesturing, laughing. "I've got to tell you this story," he says. "There's this little boy on the team, Dominique, and when I was up for the Academy Award, his mom let him stay up to watch. So his mom says he's watching me when I go up on stage and make my acceptance speech. And as I leave the stage, she said, he throws up his hands and screams: 'He didn't mention the team! Not one word about the team! I can't believe it!' And when I saw him at practice the next day, he confronted me about it, too."

LIKE MANY ACTORS, WASHINGTON seldom watches the final cut of his movies.

"It's difficult, because I can't judge," he (Continued on page 73)

## WASHINGTON

(Continued from page 65)

says. "I know the scene and I know how we shot the scene, and I'm looking to see how we put it together. So, looking at all those things, I guess I'm too close to it. Besides, I'm just kind of a worrisome person."

This "worrisome" temperament may explain why he finds reading reviews of his work sometimes painful and perplexing.

"I remember one gentleman in a review saying my performance in a play was one of the greatest he'd ever seen on Broadway," Washington recalls. "Then one year later, the same guy saw me in something and said it looked like I'd never been on stage before. The same guy!"

Much has been written about Washington being a private man who hates to talk about himself or his personal life. Washington wonders aloud where he got such a reputation:

"I think I'm a lot more open about my private life than some people in this business. I may not be an open book, but I think people know as much about me as they need to know."

And while he's been called a "star," he plays down the stereotype, thrusting out his wrist to show the \$10 Casio watch he's worn for three years. He still prefers to go to the movies "with the regular folks" and had to be goaded by his wife into buying a new black Porsche Carrera — something he'd always wanted, but thought too pretentious and impractical for a family man.

His family, he professes, helps him keep things in perspective.

"I look at it from the spiritual side, in that I don't take credit for everything," he says of life. "I'm thankful and I try to be a good reflection of the light, but I'm not the source of the light or the source of the truth. So when you look at things that way, you don't get big-headed or too pompous."

If credit must be given for Washington being the actor, father and man he is today, it belongs, he says emphatically, to his wife:

"My wife probably has as much to do with my success and my talent as anybody, because I may have gone astray had it not been for her. Maybe I would have started getting caught up in the limousines, parties and all the other stuff. But she's the rock in our marriage. And she takes on a tremendous amount of weight and pressure. Not only in the home with four children, but from the outside, the pressure of being my wife.

"We go to these events, like the Essence Awards, and women are screaming, pulling and carrying on, and she has to be tough and try not to jump on somebody. People have reached right across her, and I say, 'Wait a minute. First of all, you're disrespecting my wife, therefore you're disrespecting me... so either

you apologize or you can just get out of my face.'" But, he concedes, actors are nothing without their fans. "They make you and if they don't support you, you're done," he says. "So I tell my wife: 'Be cool. They're paying their money.'"

It is widely known in industry circles that the studios wouldn't mind having a leading black male star with crossover appeal, and whether he likes it or not Washington fits the bill. Warner Brothers is banking on his box-office star quality to carry Malcolm. And it doesn't hurt that Washington, who's known around Hollywood as a "nice guy" who has managed to avoid controversy, seems to put fans and moviegoing audiences at ease.

Some friends, however, like the director John Singleton, say he should play a villain or two. "John said, 'You've got to play a bad guy — you're playing too many of these nice guys,'" Washington says.

There is, Washington concludes, a restlessness to his nature, which is why he feels the time is right for him to move beyond acting and into producing and perhaps directing. His deal with Tri-Star Pictures gives the studio "first look" rights to all projects developed by Mundy Lane Entertainment, Washington's production company. Tri-Star will not only finance the projects it approves, it will distribute and market them as well.

Debra Martin Chase, vice president of Mundy Lane Entertainment, says that the company may co-develop "The Killer," a remake of an action thriller first made by John Woo, the Chinese director. Warner Brothers recently purchased the rights to a New York magazine article written by a black Harvard-educated lawyer who worked incognito as a busboy at an exclusive country club in Greenwich, Conn., for Mundy Lane after Tri-Star passed on the project. Mundy Lane plans to develop the project, entitled "The Invisible Man," with Spring Creek, another production company. Also, Tri-Star has purchased for Mundy Lane the rights to the book "Ota Benga," the true story of the Pygmy who was exhibited at the Bronx Zoo in 1906.

Washington may have reached a triumphant moment in his life and career, but is also facing an actor's terror: After the role of a lifetime, what does one do for a follow-up.

"Having done Malcolm, there are a lot of films I feel I can't do because I don't want to do them," he says. "It's easy to say, 'Nothing is going to change, so I'll make this movie over here and get paid.' But unless we take a stand individually to make a difference, then there will be no difference made. And that means swimming upstream in this society, because it's coming downstream on us. Hard!"

Sounds a lot like Malcolm, but it's pure Denzel. ■