



MARK SELIGER FOR TIME

WORDS WITH SPIKE

Making Malcolm X, says director Spike Lee, was a way to bring the slain leader's message to a new generation

By JANICE C. SIMPSON

Q. Why was making this movie so important to you?

A. Well, Malcolm is very important to me, and the reality is that young people—not just black but white kids also—don't read anymore. They get their information from movies, television, radio. So this is going to be a history lesson. This is going to open up the history book.

Q. Malcolm is revered by many young African Americans. Why is that?

A. I think that Ossie Davis put it best when he said, "Malcolm is our shining black prince, our black manhood." There's a void in that right now among young black males. And, you know, Malcolm's a great model. Public Enemy and KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions were not sampling "I Have a Dream" in their songs, you know. It was Malcolm X.

Q. Does it bother you that many of these young people revere Malcolm's militancy but know so little about his own reverence for education?

A. Yes. I think that it really just comes down to people having a very limited view of Malcolm, and not understanding that the man evolved, was constantly evolving, even at the time of the assassination. You know that line, "by any means necessary"? That way of thinking was not the complete Malcolm X. If young black men really want to pay a tribute to Malcolm X, they should look at themselves in the mirror and talk about their education and put more emphasis on it.

Q. If you agree that education is important, then why did you say kids should skip school to see your movie?

A. I don't think that it's such a radical idea. In fourth grade I had to go see *Gone With the Wind* for a class trip and then write a report on the history of the Civil War according to that film. Many people have come up to me and said, "Spike, I was taking the day off anyway, even before you said that." And they're going to go. I think there'll be black families in droves. That was our intent. That's why the film is rated PG-13. I've never made a PG-13 film before, ever. We did not want to give parents nor schoolteachers nor educational systems an excuse why this film cannot be used as a class trip, or why it could not be a part of their curriculum.

Q. What do you think is Malcolm's primary legacy?

A. The main reason Malcolm X told his story to Alex Haley was to put his life up there as an example for African Americans—or anybody, really—that you could change your life around if you really apply yourself. He says, "Look, people, I was a criminal. I peddled grass, I was a steerer, I was a criminal, I snorted cocaine. I got so depraved that even in prison I was called Satan." But he turned it around.

Q. Why did you feel so strongly about having a black director do the picture?

A. White directors wouldn't have thought of putting the Rodney King footage in the movie, or of the American flag burning to the X, or even of using Nelson Mandela. Richard Attenborough did a movie called *Cry Freedom* that was supposed to be

about Stephen Biko. But that movie is more about Donald Woods and his family trying to get out of South Africa. So if Attenborough had done this film, the main character would have been a sympathetic white reporter and nothing about Malcolm X.

Q. But didn't Attenborough do a sympathetic portrayal of Gandhi?

A. How does a white director have a copy right on epics? What, a black director is only supposed to do small little films that take place in ghettos or in the projects? You can't shoot a film like a white director. That's bull_____.

Q. Why did you include Rodney King and Nelson Mandela in the film?

A. Because the stuff Malcolm X talks about is still with us today. I still feel African Americans are second citizens in this country, just like Malcolm said.

Q. Why is the film so long?

A. Because there was so much to tell, and this was not going to be an abbreviated, abridged version of Malcolm X.

Q. Were you too respectful of Malcolm?

A. No. If we were too respectful, we would never have had Malcolm snorting cocaine, or had a white woman kiss his face. There's a difference between respect and love. I think that if you see this film, or love for Malcolm is up there on the screen.

Q. No matter what you did, there is going to be criticism. Where do you think it will come from?

A. Criticism is going to come all over. I'm going to come from people like [writer Amiri] Baraka who felt I was too bourgeois to do this film. And it's going to come from the other side: people who believe that I'm a racist and antiwhite and anti-Semitic and preach hatred.

Q. What will this movie's success or failure mean for you and other black filmmakers?

A. First of all, this film is not going to be a failure. This film is going to be a big success and it's really going to crumble that tired Hollywood axiom that the white moviegoing masses are not going to see a black film that's a drama, or a film that's not a comedy and musical, or that doesn't have Eddie Murphy in it. No matter what lip service the executives say, that is still their belief. Just look at TV. Every single show that is about black folks, they're all situational comedies. I mean, you can't get out of our lives? But that's because I feel that white people won't be interested. I really think they're underestimating the intelligence of the white moviegoing masses, who will see anything it's done good.