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The Elevation of MALCOLM X

By RICHARD CORLISS

The movie's first minutes promise the fire this time. A Patton-size U.S. flag fills the screen and is set ablaze. Video clips of Los Angeles cops pummeling a helpless Rodney King are underlaid with the words of Malcolm X fulminating against the white devil. Flames of black rage gnaw at the fabric of the flag until it is burned into a huge X. America, the image says, created Malcolm X in a centuries-old crucible of race hatred. And the legacy of Malcolm, murdered in 1965, helped define the battered field of today's Stars and Stripes.

Spike Lee is a logo maker of genius. It seems as if half the T shirts worn by American kids tout Lee's BUTTON YOUR FLY campaign for Levi's jeans, and half of the baseball caps carry the defiant initial X -- a clever device that raised consciousness of Malcolm and, not incidentally, advertised Lee's movie biography a year before its release.

Now the film arrives, in more than the usual storm of tumult and hype that attends the premiere of a Spike Lee Joint. Even before shooting began, Lee conferred with Black Muslim minister Louis Farrakhan, an early associate of Malcolm's who has vexed many with his antiwhite, anti-Jewish harangues. Lee also hired a Black Muslim security force as bodyguards on the set. He fought publicly with his distributor (Warner Bros.) and insurer (the Completion Bond Co.) when work on the overbudget film was suspended. Then he solicited and received gifts from black entertainers (Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey) to help him complete postproduction. He urged kids to skip school and see Malcolm X on its opening day. He discouraged white reporters from interviewing him about the film. Whatever rancorous agenda this served, it got the film's name in the papers. Lee is also a self-promoter of genius.

He is no filmmaker of genius. And yet you have to cherish, like a guilty conscience, any writer-director who can outrage so many people with a melodrama set in the ghetto tinderbox (Do the Right Thing), a musical about skin-tone prejudice among blacks (School Daze), an interracial love and lust story (Jungle Fever).

So the big surprise about Malcolm X is how ordinary it is. The film is a lavish, linear, way-too-long (3 hr. 21 min.) storybook of Malcolm's career, the movie equivalent of an authorized biography, a cautious primer

for black pride. It is Lee's biggest film, and the least Spikey. At one point in producer Marvin Worth's 26-year hajj to get this movie made, and before he was persuaded that an African American should direct the movie, Norman Jewison (A Soldier's Story) wanted to do it. If Jewison had, the product would be about the same. Only the label would be different.

The lure of movie biography is to show the contours in a life of significance. Working from a screenplay written in the late '60s by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl, Lee splays Malcolm's story across a 40-year panorama of Americana (the film cost $34 million, but it looks twice as expensive and expansive). In the mid-'20s, Malcolm Little's parents are threatened by the Ku , Klux Klan. In the '30s he finds both acceptance and isolation in white foster homes and white schools. In the '40s Malcolm (embodied with potent charm by Denzel Washington) is a rakish dude, running numbers and lording it over his white mistress Sophia. In the '50s he finds Allah in jail and becomes a minister of the Black Muslim faith under the sect's founder, Elijah Muhammad. In the '60s, with the encouragement of his wife Betty, he breaks from the racist Nation of Islam and pays for this social enlightenment with his life.

Lee sketches Malcolm's life colorfully, if by the numbers. But he falls victim to the danger of movie biography: he elevates Malcolm's importance until the vital historical context is obscured. Malcolm came of age in an era of great black oratory. Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Eldridge Cleaver, Maya Angelou had no power but in their minds and throats and pens. And what force, what rage, what music they found there!

Malcolm's style was cooler than King's, more lawyerly than evangelical; its bitter logic cut like a knife at the throat of complacent white America. Even in the time of Malcolm's most toxic demagoguery -- defaming liberals as white devils, civil rights heroes as Uncle Toms and Jews for sapping "the very lifeblood of the so-called Negroes to maintain the state of Israel" -- his steely charisma beguiled the white media. In Harlem he was something more than a diversion: he was the prophet of the black male underclass. "It was manhood time," says Al Freeman Jr., who played Malcolm in the TV mini-series Roots II and is Elijah Muhammad here.

Lee could have scared folks by foregrounding Malcolm's seductive racism. But he takes the safe route, viewing his subject less as a flamethrower of incendiary rhetoric than as a victim. Until his late break with the Black Muslims, Malcolm is mostly a tool: of white racists, black gangsters, jail- cell preachers and the Hon. Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm's uniqueness is lost, his personality blurred. He begins as Little and ends as X: still the unknown.

Lee is more a producer -- a hustler after the big picture, an entrepreneur of scalding emotions -- than a director. As such, he is not one to attend to the shading of character. As Washington says, "He basically left me alone and let me run with it." Lee's moods had opposite effects on the excellent actresses who play Malcolm's wife and his white hussy. "He laughs, laughs large," says Angela Bassett (Betty). "He's energy plus." But Kate Vernon (Sophia) says, "He was belligerent and disrespectful in tone toward me. There's a boys' club, and women are not allowed -- especially white women. I hated the idea of feeling excluded

because I was white. The set was tense. I've heard all his sets are tense."

If that is so, it is because the director sees so much riding on each of his films: the future of cinema, precious testimony from an African-American perspective and, not least, the reputation -- carefully nourished, always vulnerable -- of Spike Lee. "Spike was on the set," recalls an observer who was close to the shooting, "and a guy comes up and tells him, 'I know you! I saw your film -- Boyz N the Hood.' " Lee was miffed, but the crew members laughed seditiously. They surely knew that John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood earned about as much money as Jungle Fever and Do the Right Thing did together. Lee doesn't care to be overtaken by the young black directors whose careers his success helped make possible.

Nor would he settle for a Malcolm-like niche in movie history: the radical prophet who achieved his stature posthumously. Lee would rather be a top- grossing auteur now than a biopic subject later. Perhaps that is why his movie is so stately, reverent and academic, so suitable for the Oscars with which Hollywood rewards high-minded mediocrity. Some other director will have to find a way to merge the danger of a brilliant, racist orator with the seismic jolt of energized filmmaking. That picture will be worth skipping school for.

Moviegoers may accept Lee's burning logo and tepid melodrama as cinema's vision of Malcolm X now. They can hope for the fire next time.