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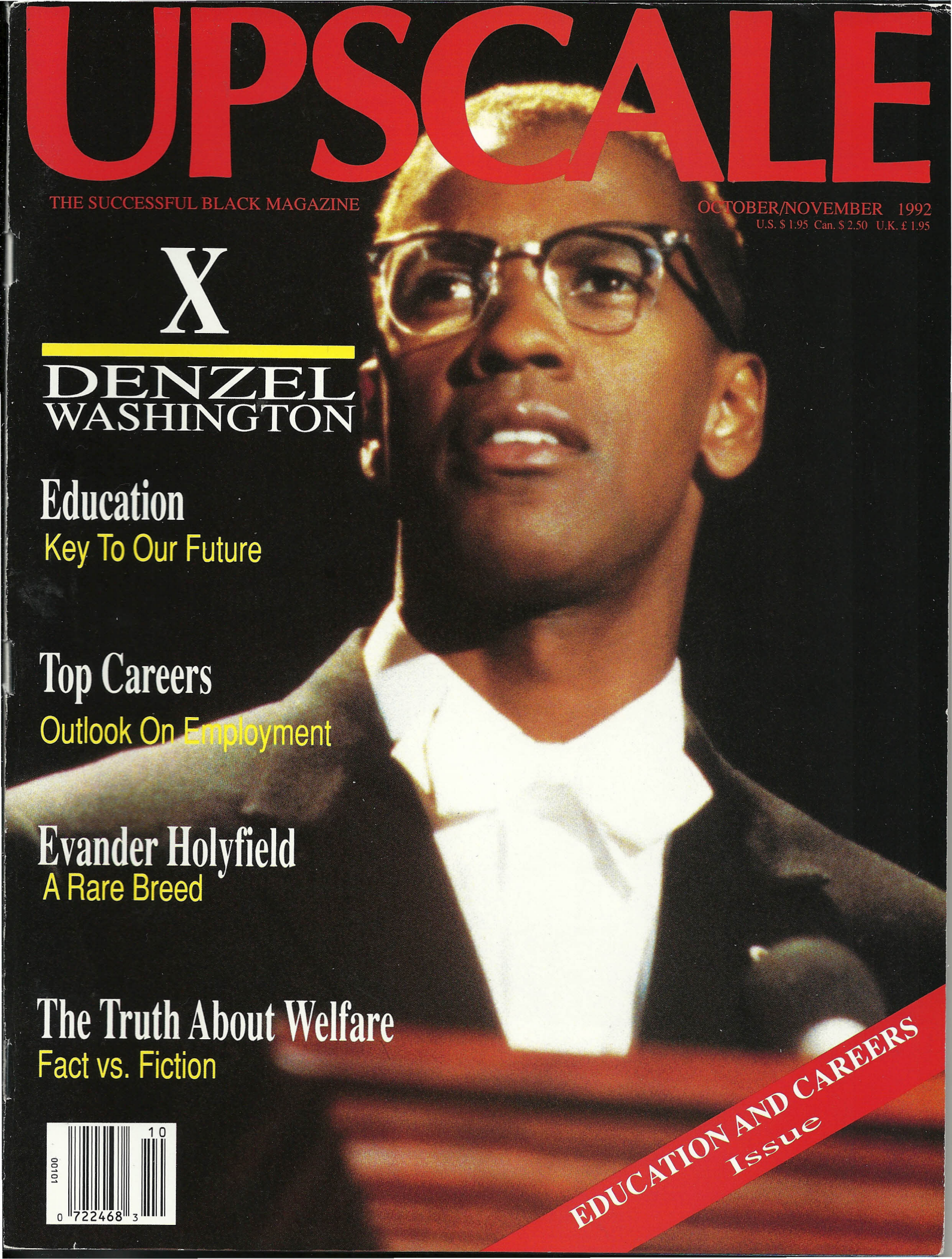

X

DENZEL WASHINGTON

Education
Key To Our Future

Top Careers
Outlook On Employment

Evander Holyfield
A Rare Breed

The Truth About Welfare
Fact vs. Fiction

EDUCATION AND CAREERS Issue

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OF
STATES
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WE MUST
HAVE
JUSTICE!
X

By Keenan Conigland

X. Perhaps no other letter in the English alphabet holds such individual sovereignty. Unconventional, misunderstood and intimidating, it is a self-sustaining symbol of perpetual strength and fortitude in search of truth. Among those familiar with its nature, history and prowess, its mere pronunciation is powerful enough to induce self-respect, spiritual nourishment, black nationalism and economic self-determination.

The enigmatic life of Malcolm X, the passionate treasure of the African-American, is finally being ushered to the forefront of the American psyche by the gifted African-American director, Spike Lee. The controversial and long-awaited film "X," examines the tumultuous life of the slain leader, from his humble and often strife-torn beginnings in the mid-West, to his stunning development as a towering international figure on the cutting-edge of global affairs. By the most discriminating standards, it is a riveting screenplay, written by the late authors James Baldwin and Arnold Perl and rewritten by Spike Lee throughout the production. All versions, however, were adapted from Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" as told by Malcolm.

All 'X' photos by David Lee

Cast in the lead role is Denzel Washington, who by now has been implanted in the minds of millions. Dressed in dark conservative suits, sporting a goatee and eyeglasses, Denzel's fierce, penetrating gaze embodies Malcolm's charismatic personality. The Oscar-winning actor, no stranger to emotionally-charged material, is more than convincing in his portrayal.

As the slain South African freedom fighter, Steven Biko, in Richard Attenborough's "Cry Freedom," Washington displayed an arousing grace rarely captured on film. And when he endured the bloody stripes of inhumanity across his back as an enraged slave turned Union soldier in "Glory," the tear which plunged down his angry cheek grazed an exposed and throbbing nerve in the body of justice and decency.

But, it was his portrayal of Malcolm X in the Negro Ensemble Company's Broadway production of "When Chickens Come Home To Roost," which served as the foundation for his latest, and perhaps most challenging role. By playing the venerated hero, Washington is in fact, duplicating Malcolm's infectious dynamism of social protest which swept black America in the '50s and '60s. Furthermore, the slain idol's grassroots endowment has apparently returned to cast a chilling indictment on America once again in the 1990s.

To his credit, Washington looked upon this opportunity to portray Malcolm X as an incredible responsibility. In order to represent his subject accurately and respectfully, Washington researched, studied and copied his character's walk, speech patterns, mannerisms and gestures. "I wanted to capture the essence of Malcolm," remarked Washington. "The key for me is spirit. I've told people, and I'll continue to say that I can't be Malcolm X. I'm not Malcom X. I'm Denzel. But I know that the same spirit, the same God that moved in him, can move through me. That was my desire and my prayer — to be moved by the same spirit he was moved by."

The film vividly recreates Harlem Square where you gain an appreciation for Washington's compelling duplication of Malcolm's penetrating and provocative oratory. Washington's performance surely has Oscar written on it.

Inevitably, one must turn their attention to the individual who won the hard-earned license to recreate the life of a figure who, more than 27 years after his death, has once again become the cause célébre of black America.

Enter, Spike Lee — maverick and genuine renegade. He is the outspoken consciousness of what ails black America, particularly in Hollywood. He aroused everyone's sensibilities with his first film, "She's Gotta Have It." With "School Daze," he succeeded in angering African-Americans by digging up a sensitive issue to black Americans: color, he eagerly smacked the beast of racism when it raised its ugly head in "Do The Right Thing." And to further incite America's senses, he unleashed "Jungle Fever," which chased America's biggest taboo (interracial dating) into a corner where it was peered at and analyzed until it nearly forgot its sensual inhibitions.

By exposing the nation's embarrassing afflictions, the Academy Award nominee has substantially elevated the cultural significance of black films, while calling attention to the financial impact and significance of African-Americans as consumers of nearly 50 percent of all movie tickets sold in the United States! Equally important, he's partly responsible for opening the floodgate of movies featuring, directed and produced by African-Americans.

Given his proclivity for tackling prickly subject matter, somehow one senses that his politics are correct, or at least in the interest of the African-American community.

Because he addresses the rashes that irritate the anatomy of black America, it's only reasonable to say that he is qualified to depict the anguish as well as aspirations of African-Americans.

But strangely enough, despite the fact that his political lens appears properly focused, Lee has received vehement opposition from a small number of detractors who expressed concern over how he would depict the fervent patriot. Critics felt the director would focus too heavily on Malcolm's criminal career as opposed to his life as a Muslim minister and leader. Malcolm X's autobiographer, Alex Haley, before he died earlier this year, stated that Lee has earned the literary license to present the story to the best of his artistic ability. He stated that no one could possibly satisfy all the groups which lay claim to Malcolm's lineage.

Acquiring the project was an arduous task, and it only came about as the result of a calculated and prolonged campaign by Lee. By lobbying Sidney Lumet, who held the rights to the movie, Lee was able to replace Norman Jewison as

director. "I knew this was going to be the toughest thing I ever did," Lee commented after being chosen as director.

The complexity of Malcolm X's life would pose a significant challenge to any director given the opportunity to bring such volatile material to life. Yet, it is the opinion of the great majority of critics that Spike Lee was best suited to craft the project. Complications associated with the movie increased considerably after Lee gained control of the project. In an attempt to create what he referred to as "an epic picture on the scale of the great films . . .," Lee encountered cost overruns for a final budget estimated between $33-40 million, a modest sum for many Hollywood undertakings.

The Completion Bond Company stepped in and attempted to impose budgetary and time restraints on the mammoth project. Reportedly, Lee contributed $2 to $3 million of his own salary to bridge the shortfall. It wasn't enough. Given the circumstances, Lee felt compelled to seek other financial assistance. It came from some of black America's most noted achievers — Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Earvin Johnson, Prince, Janet Jackson and Peggy Cooper Cafritz, who founded the Washington, D.C.-based Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

"This is not a loan. They are not investing in the film. These are black folks with some money who came to the rescue of the movie. As a result, this film will be my own version. I will do the film the way it ought to be, and it will be over three hours," stated Lee.

The fact remains that the movie was terribly under-budgeted from the outset. Under those circumstances, Lee would have been hard pressed to make the film in its entirety.

Prediction: "X," the movie, will be the blockbuster of the year and one of the most significant and top-grossing movies of this decade! Why? Because Malcolm X's legacy speaks to the current condition and future ambition of black America. Equally significant, it marks the first time affluent, well-to-do African-Americans have provided substantial financial backing to a movie project which will undoubtedly inspire the masses of African-Americans. "X," the movie, is being released at a time when hopelessness and despair are running rampant in African-American communities, particularly among youth. Likewise, in order to completely understand the movie and life of Malcolm X, one must understand that the same sense of despair and hopelessness also exercised a pervasive grip on the early portion of Malcolm's life.

Early in the movie, Lee provides much needed insight into Malcolm's childhood. Young Malcolm Little (his surname) is observed taking a romantic stroll along the beach with his female companion, Laura. During their conversation, a gripping flashback shows his family being separated by a social worker acting on behalf of the state of Michigan. As young Malcolm continues to confide in Laura, he painfully discloses how a teacher once counseled him to table his ambition of becoming a lawyer and aspire for something within his skill level, "like carpentry." As he and Laura continue their leisurely walk, he also speaks of the numerous racial epithets hurled at him so often, it caused him to view such language and its degradations as normal and acceptable.

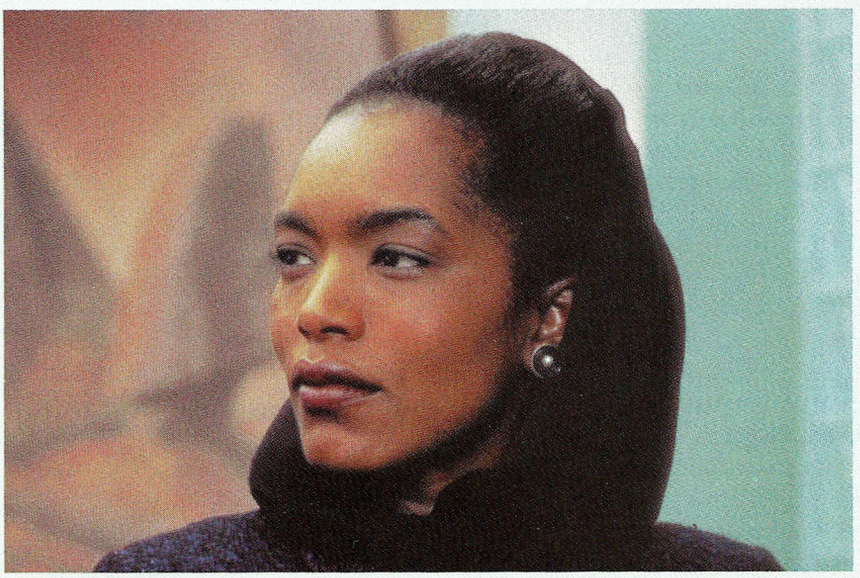
Times were hard for young Malcolm, just as they are for African-American youth today. With society's continued indifference to their plight, many children run away from their hopes and ambitions and end up in a terrifying lifelong nightmare. Malcolm Little was one such child.

Known as Detroit Red, he turns to selling heroin, committing numerous burglaries and operating a small-time prostitution ring. He even contracts a slight case of "jungle fever," which occurs with the adventurous Sophia, played by Kate Vernon, the only significant white character in the movie.

Engrossed in underworld exploits, Washington portrays Detroit Red in his entire venality. His tinted, red hair is conked and styled with a sleek arrogance. Boxed and oversized, Washington wears the popular zoot suit as he stalks Harlem's electrifying nightclubs looking for victims and the latest in excitement. His frequent prowls take him to such legendary nightspots as Club Onyx on 52nd Street, where he absorbs local vices and the ineffable voice of Lady Day.

The production team, headed by Wynn Thomas, makes excellent use of assorted textures and colors, which greatly enhances the authenticity of the nightclub scenes. The patrons of the legendary clubs are exquisitely dressed and represent the class and sophistication of Harlem in its heyday. Detroit Red has discovered Utopia, and it is Harlem.

Darkness soon eclipses Detroit Red. After a string of arrests, a judge sentences him to 10 years for burglary. He



was 21. Just as Malcolm Little disappeared into the societal vacuum of inopportunity, Detroit Red perished in the septic tank of self-destruction.

Filmed at Wilsey Street Jail in Newark, N.J., Malcolm's period of incarceration is initially characterized by despair. At this juncture in the movie, grays, blues and whites are used heavily to underscore a sense of alienation and despondency.

With Malcolm Little and Detroit Red mentally deceased, Satan makes his way into Malcolm's consciousness. He is evil, demonic, almost possessed. His disposition's so menacing, he is placed in solitary confinement for much of his sentence. Clearly, the man who once aspired to become an attorney is lost — a victim of the very system he had longed to uphold as a child. Washington's searing facial expression throughout this dismaying scene brilliantly illustrates the degradation and rejection Malcolm certainly must have felt.

Albert Hall, a Broadway, television and big-screen performer in his own right, portrays Baines, Satan's spiritual and mental redeemer. It is Baines who repeatedly articulates the principles of Islam to his listener, Satan. As the central character, Washington begins interfacing with other prison intellectuals. Within a short period, he develops an omnivorous appetite for knowledge and truth. For the first time in his life, Malcolm understands he is not a nigger, but a black man with a proud and distinguished heritage. With unprecedented discipline and intensity, he plunges into self-study by reading and copying the dictionary and learning the teachings of Islam and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Veteran actor Al Freeman Jr. portrays Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. A man revered for his relentless thirst for truth, demand for discipline and tireless scholarship, Elijah Muhammad's religious philosophies spawned Malcolm's earliest reactionary beliefs. This sequence, which captures Malcolm's evolving self-esteem, is punctuated by the uplifting musical score composed by jazz great, Terrence Blanchard. Here, as throughout the movie, the trumpeter's music reinforces the action and helps to establish and facilitate the psychological posture of the moment. All the while, Washington's portrayal of Malcolm in this period of momentous transition is nothing short of spellbinding.

When Malcolm is released from prison, he is neither the person he was, nor the person he will one day become.

Malcolm accepts the Muslim faith, studies directly under Elijah Muhammad and consequently receives his X. In the Nation of Islam, the X signifies that which is lost, such as a rightful last name, history or cultural lineage. It is adopted and used by an individual until such time as they connect with their true identity. At that juncture, the X is then replaced with a name, usually of Islamic or Arabic origin.

It is at this point that Malcolm assumes the identity that would catapult him to a legendary cult status which still continues decades after his death.

He is the "Shining Black Prince," Ossie Davis so eloquently spoke of. Having outgrown Malcolm Little, severed ties with Detroit Red and spiritually disposed of Satan, Malcolm ascends to his life-calling: that of an articulate, intellectual warrior committed to winning the battle of self-empowerment on behalf of African-Americans "by any means necessary."

Once again, it is necessary to credit Washington for the vim and vigor with which he delivers the contents of some of Malcolm's most revered speeches — it is striking! The actor seems to actually succeed in resurrecting the spirit of the heroic Muslim minister. Whether his stirring oratory focused on black leadership, black consumerism, self-help, racial pride, oppression, global struggle, the role and importance of black women, hatred, extremism, black nationalism or identification with Africa, his delivery is peppered with fury, charisma and intensity.

During his frequent public appeals, the character of Malcolm X is perennially protected by his fellow Muslims. They are crisp, clean-cut and fiercely disciplined with close-cropped haircuts, cleanly shaven faces, freshly starched white shirts and bow ties.

One senses the crowds in Harlem Square, and elsewhere, are genuinely enlightened and uplifted by the actor's series of provocative proclamations. There is little question that the movie-going public, too, will be swept up in the rhetorical energy.

Concerning this phase of the film, Wynn Thomas, the production designer stated, "Malcolm has become a leader, and he's much more serious, so we're using a lot of earth tones — browns, greens and natural tones to reflect controlled realism." The impressive speeches and the recreation of Harlem as it existed in the 1950s and '60s —

color usage, the musical score and the crowd's ambiance — helps project the movie's realism.

Unfortunately, far too many misperceptions about Malcolm X persist. Very little has ever been written in the press about his tender, sensitive side. During his courtship with his wife-to-be Betty, played by Angela Bassett, Denzel expresses Malcolm's incorrigible romanticism in a soda shop over ice cream. The exchange is light, relaxed and, therefore, markedly different from what is normally associated with the man.

During their dialogue, the two exchange deep, intimate gazes. She, no doubt, is drawn to the strength and virility of the tall, handsome Muslim minister. And, he appears magnetized by her sublime grace, striking femininity and tastefully projected beauty.

It is worth noting that Malcolm X associated the degree of progress in all societies to women. He believed that if her aspirations were nourished, she would impart those same attributes to her children. Lastly, he often credited women with being the catalyst of change and progress.

Charged with the mission of establishing new mosques across the country, Malcolm's message prompted scores of blacks to become Muslims, while many others made the conscious effort to demand more for and of themselves.

While Malcolm's massive appeal and visibility appeared to have all the makings of success, it set in motion an irreversible shift in his relationship with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Following the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in November 1963, Malcolm violated a code of silence when he referred to the tragedy as "Chickens Coming Home to Roost." Outraged, Elijah Muhammad adamantly "silenced" Malcolm from any public discussion. Malcolm's outspokenness, coupled with rumors of alleged jealousy and misconduct within the organization, helped set the stage for his eventual departure. Moreover, right or wrong, Malcolm had begun to question some of the teachings of Muhammad as well as the direction of the Nation of Islam.

Once again Malcolm was forced to undergo an abrupt, profound change in order to conquer the challenges life set before him. No longer part of the organization he spent 12 years building and promoting, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), an organization committed to an international approach for human rights. It was at this stage of his philosophical evolution that he toned down his extremism. Still bursting with the energy of a "caged tiger," as Alex Haley once described him, he took a number of trips overseas to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

One of the truly great aspects of the recreation of Malcolm X's life is that its director, Lee, took no shortcuts. Lee, the cast and crew, despite intense opposition, successfully negotiated and eventually flew to Mecca to shoot the annual hajj (holy pilgrimage), thus becoming the first commercial outfit to capture the spectacle on film. Not only did Lee go through the headache, expense and trouble to shoot in Mecca, he also duplicated his efforts in Egypt to capture authentic footage of Washington, as Malcolm, during his visit to the pyramids.

It was upon his return from the holy city of Mecca, where he had worshipped with Muslims of all races, that he rescinded his earlier positions on race. He stated, "There are worthy and godly people of all races . . . the quality of a person's spirit is what determines his worth, not the color of his skin."

As further evidence of his continuous transformation, he changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, thus concluding the search for his true identity and sense of self.

For an international figure to renounce much of what he had espoused for years takes exceptional courage. However, one must not forget that El-Shabazz was a spiritual being always in search of the truth.

With his ideology constantly evolving, he is seen in the movie turning most of his attention to international issues, particularly human rights. He was the first African-American to take America to task for its treatment of people of color at the World Court of the United Nations. And, he exhorted blacks to refer to themselves as Afro-American as opposed to Negro.

True to his commitment of capturing the life of his subject, so, too, did Lee transport us to Harlem's Audubon Ballroom on Feb. 21, 1965, the day El-Shabazz was murdered. In a grueling sequence of events shot over a five day period, the mercurial life of the icon was brought to a brutal end.

In order to understand Malcolm X,

one must gain an understanding of the conditions which gave rise to his development. He came of age in a country and period which stubbornly refused his right to rise as far as his natural talents and abilities would take him. Hence, in his life-long mission, he fought to empower the disenfranchised by advocating self-reliance. The spiritual growth he realized from traveling overseas, also led him to embrace an international framework for advancing the causes close to his heart.

He constantly interacted with youth in an attempt to provide focus for their search for answers to life's litany of puzzling questions. His lasting interest in children can be traced to the fact that his own life had been clouded by a set of circumstances which compelled him to channel his talents into illegitimate enterprises. Hence, there is little question that his appeal to and concern for children is directly attributable to his own personal experience at having been young, gifted and black — but deprived.

As a young boy, Malcolm X had known terror; he saw his father, a staunch Garveyite, brutally lynched at the hands of a white mob. He had known dispossession, having had to endure the gut-wrenching experience of having his family involuntarily separated. He had an intimate affair with alienation and rejection during his prison term. Yes, he had known deprivation.

Spike Lee was not entertaining an interpretation of his own imagination when he flew his crew over to shoot the final scene in Soweto, South Africa. He was merely fulfilling the path that his subject inevitably would have taken, had he lived. El-Shabazz had visited South Africa spiritually many, many times. It is perhaps, one of the most emotionally-compelling scenes in motion picture history, though few will ever admit it. This posthumous pilgrimage brilliantly captures El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz's endless zeal for empowering the disenfranchised and changing the world of the deprived — globally.