

Only Lee could've created this movie

Movie, opening Wednesday, could be impetus for a cinematic movement for black directors.

LOS ANGELES — Merchants in this city's Westwood section are bracing for an eruption when *Malcolm X* opens Wednesday.

Not the violence that hit the area last year when *New Jack City* premiered days after the police beating of Rodney King outraged much of this nation, but an outpouring of well-mannered, image-starved moviegoers to see the story behind the first tree of life that writer Alex Haley explored and which director Spike Lee and producer Marvin Worth now bring to the silver screen.

Lee, the sometimes outrageous, often contentious, always controversial director, was right. Norman Jewison could not have made this movie.

Not the blockbuster Lee has created. Not a film that will make millions of Af-

frican-Americans swell with pride and convulse with rage. Not one that will anger some white moviegoers — and enlighten others.

Not this black epic. Only Lee could create this film.

His *Malcolm X* is not a movie so much as it is, I hope, the beginning of a cinematic movement: a film about the life and times of an important black figure told from a black perspective. Lee has given the film an authenticity which equals that of Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy about Italian mobsters, or any story Neil Simon has told about Jews in Brooklyn.

Jewison, a quality director with a great sensitivity for black themes, would have done a credible job with the movie he was first asked to direct. But Lee proved his point: Only a black director, working with raw nerves and courage, could give a movie about Malcolm X the legitimacy it demands.

The Malcolm X he brings to the screen is strikingly similar to

the man I discovered as a teen in the '60s while listening to *The Ballot or the Bullet*, an album of his speeches. He is the Malcolm I came to understand in reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* — a man too complex, too defiantly black for any white director to be entrusted with making a movie about his life.

From the opening scene of a U.S. flag that ignites in flames as Malcolm X's words fill the theater, to the closing shots of non-violent civil rights activists being brutally beaten by police, Lee delicately weaves into his story a broader tale of black life in America, spanning the numbers-running heydays of the '40s to the police beating of Rodney King. It is all part of the broad mosaic of a movie that Lee has created.

Some who see the film will question the way he tells the story of the life of this black nationalist, but few can argue convincingly against the end result. Lee has bound over the essential essence of Malcolm X to millions of Americans who might not ever have come to know him.

Movies — all movies — about real people are a mix of fact and fiction. This one is no exception. But Lee's re-creation of Malcolm's life does not stray very far from the autobiography the black nationalist co-wrote with Alex Haley. It is the way the black filmmaker tells this story, and the wonderful visual images he creates, that gives the film its power and substance.

But, of course, the ultimate success of this movie will be measured in dollars and cents. Having cost \$34 million to make, *Malcolm X* will have to earn three times that much to be a financial success. That's the standard by which Hollywood will decide whether other stories about black men and women of distinction — people like Madame C.J. Walker, Franz Fanon or Marcus Garvey — will be made by the people who should know and understand them best.

So everyone who craves such stories must go see Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. Not once, but twice.



By DeWayne Wickham, a columnist for Gannett News Service and USA TODAY.

Context

MALCOLM X'S OWN WORDS

"Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery."

"Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me feel sad; they've always made me feel glad."

"You show me a capitalist, I'll show you a bloodsucker."

"Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality. . . . If you're a man, you take it."

"You're not supposed to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it or who says it."

"You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom."

"I have learned that not all white people are racists. . . . I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against racists, by any means that are necessary."