

What Malcolm really did

WASHINGTON—James Farmer, a famous civil-rights leader in the '60s, took on the unenviable task of debating Malcolm X on television several times during the years when Malcolm still made it his mission to put a scare into white folks.

Fortunately for Farmer, he was a much better debater than the hapless character Spike Lee puts against Malcolm in one rather amusing scene in his hit movie, "Malcolm X."

Lee's Malcolm thrashes his black bourgeois opponent by comparing him to "house slaves" who were so loyal to their plantation masters that they would stay on the plantation even when freedom was offered to them by rebellious "field slaves."

The scene is drawn directly from life. Malcolm's talent for destroying his opponents with wit, logic and audacity went so notorious that National Urban League leader Whitney Young advised other civil-rights leaders not to take him on, lest they embarrass the movement.

Farmer, then national director of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), kindly declined Young's advice. His strategy: Never debate Malcolm's diagnosis of the problem. Press him instead for prescriptions.

"As long as Malcolm attacked the sins of the white man against blacks, he was on solid ground," Farmer, who now teaches history at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Va., recalled in a telephone interview. "You couldn't argue with him on that without appearing to be either an Uncle Tom or a fool."

"But Malcolm was weak when he had to provide a solution or a program. He didn't have much to rely on except the teachings of his mentor, the Hon. Elijah Muhammad. So, he'd call for black people to separate, distance themselves from whites on some island somewhere."

But, Farmer pointed out, if whites hated blacks as much as Malcolm said they did, they could kill us all off with one bomb or strangle us with emphyseas. "We're better off dispersed," Farmer said. "We're harder to hit."

Malcolm's lack of practical solutions rattled civil-rights leaders then and it continues to rattle some now. "I still see no reason to say he [Malcolm X] is a great person, a great Negro," retired Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who once was threatened by Black Muslims who didn't like his pro-integration stance, said in 1991. "and I ask a simple question: What did he ever do? Name me one concrete thing he ever did."

He has a point. Now that Spike Lee's movie has aroused renewed interest in the life of Malcolm X, who already was experiencing a surprising revival among young African-Americans too young to remember his life, it is important to take a closer look at both Malcolm's value as a leader and his limits.

Malcolm X desegregated to schools, registered no voters and passed no laws. Many other black leaders have done a much better job of that, without major motion pictures about their lives.

Malcolm continues to grab attention in part because he provokes the sense of dread whites feel about the

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possibility that blacks might someday treat whites the way whites have treated blacks. Many blacks, at the same time, feel delighted when any black leader, even a demagogue, forces whites to pay attention, one way or another, to black discontent.

A more useful reason many of us care about Malcolm X is that we hope this remarkable man's life story taken as a whole, not selectively edited for the most award-worthy parts, might succeed where others have failed in reaching young people who need a spiritually and morally uplifting message in their lives.

What did he do? I think he did quite a bit simply by showing us the unique and boundless capacity of human beings to change.

As Lee's movie and Denzel Washington's acting brilliantly illustrate, Malcolm X was a poor but bright child, robbed of hope and a father by a series of man-related calamities. He drifted into a nihilistic life of crime and street hustling, but was spared long enough to find spiritual redemption in prison, spiritual empowerment with his father figure, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, and, after a transforming trip to Mecca, liberation as a human-rights leader, "willing to work with anyone who will work with us."

By then, Malcolm became a close friend of James Farmer, his old debate opponent. In a postcard to Farmer from Mecca, he marveled that, contrary to Elijah Muhammad's teachings, he had found a multitude of "pilgrims of all colors" in the holy city.

Farmer takes particular satisfaction that Malcolm underlined the words "of all colors."

In a second postcard, Malcolm said he had seen so much of "the dangers narrow-mindedness can do" that he would now devote the rest of his life "to repairing that damage."

It is this Malcolm, transformed from a black leader to a human-rights leader, who so many of us hope young people will learn more about, now that their attention has been grabbed by "X" caps and other trinkets of the Malcolm fan.

What did Malcolm "do"? He only built self-esteem in a people who felt perpetually beaten down. To help yourself, he said, you must respect yourself, educate yourself, improve yourself and protect yourself.

Attachment to drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, material goods and short-term rewards are just a new form of slavery, Malcolm taught. Liberation comes with health, education, responsibility, financial independence and community service.

These were the wholesome values he kept until the end. Eventually he would die by the sword he had raised for so long in defiance of others. But he left a legacy so that others might live.

That's all he did. Maybe that's all he needed to do.