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Review/Film

'Malcolm X,' as Complex as Its Subject

By VINCENT CANBY

Malcolm X lived a dozen different lives, each in its way a defining aspect of the black American experience from nightmare to dream. There was never any in-between for the man who was initially called Malcolm Little, the son of a Nebraska preacher, and who, when he died, was known by his Muslim name, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm traveled far, through many incarnations to become as much admired as he was feared as the black liberation movement's most militant spokesman and unrelenting conscience.

Malcolm was already something of a myth when he was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom in New York on Feb. 21, 1965, just three months short of his 40th birthday. The publication later that year of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," his remarkably vivid testament written with Alex Haley, eventually consolidated his position as a great American folk hero, someone whose life speaks with uncanny pertinence to succeeding generations, white as well as black.

Taking the autobiography and a screenplay by Arnold Perl that was begun more than 20 years ago (Perl died in 1971), Spike Lee has attempted the impossible and almost brought it off. His new "Malcolm X" is not exactly the equal, or even the equivalent, of the book, but it's an ambitious, tough, seriously considered biographical film that, with honor, eludes easy characterization.

"Malcolm X" will offend many people for all the wrong reasons. It is neither so inflammatory as Mr. Lee's statements about it would have you believe nor so comforting as might be wished by those who would call a halt to speculation concerning Malcolm's murder. It is full of color and exuberance as it tells of life on the streets in Boston and New York, but it grows increasingly austere when Malcolm is arrested for theft and sent to prison, where he finds his life's mission. The movie becomes proper, well mannered and somber, like Malcolm's dark suits and narrow ties, as it dramatizes his rise in the Nation of Islam, founded by Elijah Muhammad.

Mr. Lee treats the Nation of Islam and its black separatist teachings seriously and, just as seriously, Malcolm's disillusionment when Elijah Muhammad's fondness for pretty young secretaries is revealed. When, after his split from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm goes on his pilgrimage to Mecca, the film celebrates his



David Lee/Warner Bros.

Denzel Washington addressing Harlem residents outside the Apollo Theater in Spike Lee's "Malcolm X."

new insight into racial brotherhood, which makes his assassination all the more sorrowful.

In the film's view, a god has been recognized, then lost.

Mr. Lee means for "Malcolm X" to be an epic, and it is in its concerns and its physical scope. In Denzel Washington it also has a fine actor who does for "Malcolm X" what Ben Kingsley did for "Gandhi." Mr. Washington not only looks the part, but he also has the psychological heft, the intelligence and the reserve to give the film the dramatic excitement that isn't always apparent in the screenplay.

This isn't a grave fault, nor is it

singular. Biographical films, except those about romantic figures long since dead like "Lawrence of Arabia," carry with them responsibilities that tend to inhibit. Mr. Lee has not been inhibited so much as simultaneously awe struck and hard pressed.

"Malcolm X" is frank about what it sees as the murder conspiracy, which involves a combination of people representing the Nation of Islam and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Yet in trying to cover Malcolm's life from his boyhood to his death, it sometimes seems more breathlessly desperate than cogently revealing.

The movie picks up Malcolm's

story in the 1940's on his arrival in wartime Boston as a bright but square teen-ager from rural Michigan. Malcolm eagerly falls in with the wrong crowd, initially represented by Shorty (Mr. Lee), a street hustler who shows him how to dress (a pearl gray zoot suit) and introduces him to the fast set at the Roseland Ballroom. Malcolm learns how to Lindy and how to wheel and deal. He discovers women and drugs. In addition to his attachment to Laura (Theresa Randle), a sweet young black woman, he develops a far steamier liaison with a thrill-seeking young white woman,

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Sophia, played by Kate Vernon, who looks a lot like Carroll Baker in her "Baby Doll" days.

As the film moves forward from the 40's, it suffers spasms of flashbacks to Malcolm's childhood in Nebraska and Michigan. These are so fragmented that they may mean nothing to anyone who hasn't read the autobiography. They also don't do justice to the early experiences themselves, especially to Malcolm's time in a white foster home where he excelled in school and was encouraged by well-meaning adults who did not hesitate to refer to him as a "nigger."

Mr. Lee is very good in his handling of individual sequences, but until very near the end, "Malcolm X" fails to acquire the momentum that makes everything that happens seem inevitable. The film goes on and on in a kind of reverential narrative monotone.

The story of Malcolm X is fraught with pitfalls for any movie maker. Mr. Lee is creating a film about a man he admires for an audience that includes those who have a direct interest in the story, those who may not have an interest but know the details intimately and those who know nothing or only parts of the story. It's a tricky situation for anyone committed to both art and historical truth.

Mr. Lee's method is almost self-effacing. He never appears to stand between the material and the audience. He himself does not preach. There are no carefully inserted speeches designed to tell the audience what it should think. He lets Malcolm speak and act for himself. The moments of confrontational melodrama, something for which Mr. Lee has a particular gift, are quite consciously underplayed.

In this era of aggressive anti-intellectualism, the film's most controversial subtext might not even be recognized: Malcolm's increasing awareness of the importance of language in his struggle to raise black consciousness. Vaguely articulated feelings aren't enough. Ideas can be expressed only through a command of words.

Before Mr. Lee came to the "Malcolm X" project, other people had worked on it. In addition to Perl's

Malcolm X

Directed by Spike Lee; screenplay by Arnold Perl and Mr. Lee, based on the book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" as told to Alex Haley; director of photography, Ernest Dickerson; edited by Barry Alexander Brown; music by Terence Blanchard; production designer, Wynn Thomas; produced by Marvin Worth, Mr. Lee, Monty Ross, Jon Kilik and Preston Holmes; released by Warner Brothers. Running time: 199 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

Malcolm X.....	Denzel Washington
Betty Shabazz.....	Angela Bassett
Elijah Muhammad.....	Al Freeman Jr.
West Indian Archie.....	Delroy Lindo
Baines.....	Albert Hall
Shorty.....	Spike Lee
Laura.....	Theresa Randle
Sophia.....	Kate Vernon
Louise Little.....	Lonette McKee
Earl Little.....	Tommy Hollis
Brother Earl.....	James McDaniel
Sidney.....	Ernest Thompson
Benjamin 2X.....	Jean LaMarre
Speaker No. 1.....	Bobby Seale
Speaker No. 2.....	Al Sharpton
Chaplain Gill.....	Christopher Plummer
Miss Dunne.....	Karen Allen
Captain Green.....	Peter Boyle
Judge.....	William Kunstler

screenplay, there were adaptations by James Baldwin, David Mamet, Calder Willingham, David Bradley and Charles Fuller. In retrospect, it's easy to see what their difficulties might have been.

Though the autobiography is full of characters and incidents, they are only peripheral to the larger story of Malcolm's awkward journey toward intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Then too, Malcolm's life ended before the journey could be said to have been completed. This is not the sort of thing movies accommodate with ease.

"Malcolm X" never bursts with the free-flowing energy of the director's own fiction, but that's a reflection of the genre, the subject and Mr. Lee's sense of mission. Though the film is being promoted with all sorts of merchandise on the order of T-shirts and baseball caps, the one item that promotes it best is the new book, "By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of 'Malcolm X,'" by Mr. Lee with Ralph Wiley, published by Hyperion.

In addition to the screenplay, the book has an extensive report on the research Mr. Lee did before starting the production. Among the people he interviewed was the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, who succeeded Elijah Muhammad as the head of the Nation of Islam. It was apparently a polite encounter, but Mr. Lee remains sharp, skeptical and uninhibited. He's not a reporter to let anyone else have the last word. It's this sort of liveliness that is most missed in the film.

The real triumph of "Malcolm X" is that Mr. Lee was able to make it at all. As photographed by Ernest Dickerson and designed by Wynn Thomas, the movie looks as authentic as any David Lean epic. The large cast of featured players, including Al Freeman Jr., who plays Elijah Muhammad, and Angela Barrett, who plays Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz, is supplemented by, among others, Al Sharpton, Christopher Plummer, Bobby Seale, William Kunstler and Peter Boyle in cameo roles.

Nelson Mandela, photographed in Soweto, appears at the end to speak a kind of benediction.

"Malcolm X" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has vulgar language and some violence.