



Controversial civil-rights leader Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) addresses an audience of Harlem residents outside the legendary Apollo Theatre.

Twenty-seven years after his assassination, the black American civil-rights leader, Malcolm X, remains in the public consciousness nearly as much as he did in the early 1960s.

What's more, the concerns about racism that Malcolm raised in his impassioned, charismatic public appearances are still with us a quarter of a century later — as the rioting in Los Angeles earlier this year attests. Among those issues: the roots of violence between blacks and whites and whether or not the two races can ever live together amicably in one society.

"Malcolm is one of my heroes," says filmmaker Spike Lee, explaining why he has now made a movie, **Malcolm X**, starring Denzel Washington, about the life and death of the slain civil-rights leader. Malcolm X, who was gunned down in New York City in 1965 by three Black Muslims, remains a hero to many. Rap performers like Public

Enemy use his words in their songs, Harlem street vendors still sell T-shirts bearing his likeness, and college students continue to carry around copies of his autobiography.

"He belongs to everyone," Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, said recently, noting that her martyred husband was embraced by "people of all philosophical persuasions."

"Malcolm always said that we're not discriminated against because we're Methodists, Christians, Catholics or whether we're Democrats, Marxists, Republicans or liberals," adds Dr. Shabazz, who served as a consultant on **Malcolm X**. "Our human rights are violated because we are black. I think it's extremely important for people to understand that. All these people coming from different philosophical persuasions, understand. He cannot be pigeonholed in some myopic closed container."

Malcolm X grew up as Malcolm Little in Lansing, Mich. As a child he saw his home burned to the ground by the Ku Klux Klan. By the

age of 21 he was in prison serving seven years for burglary. It was there he was converted to the Black Muslim faith, also known as the Nation of Islam, and after his release was assigned by Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad to work in a New York City mosque.

"Speaking with bitter eloquence against white exploitation of his people," one biographer has written, "Malcolm developed a brilliant platform style which soon won him a large and dedicated following." But his fiery oratory — at times he advocated black separatism and condoned violence in self-defense — ran counter to the nonviolent civil-rights movement headed by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Eventually even Elijah Muhammad quarreled with Malcolm, suspending him from the Black Muslim movement. That in turn led to an internecine rivalry and, finally, to the assassination of Malcolm X at age 39.

Out of this rich material, Spike Lee has fashioned what he describes as "an epic picture on the scale of the great films that

David Lean did." Star Denzel Washington promises **Malcolm X** will be "the most controversial film of the decade."

The screenplay, based on the posthumously published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was written more than 20 years ago by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl and has now been revised by Lee, who also directs. Filmed on location in New York, Egypt and Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the picture costars Angela Bassett (from *Boyz n the Hood*), Albert Hall (*Apocalypse Now*), Kate Vernon (*Pretty in Pink*), Theresa Randle (*Jungle Fever*) and Delroy Lindo (*The Hard Way*).

"It's a great responsibility," Lee has said about the job of faithfully putting Malcolm X's life on screen, "but I'm up for it."

— Allen Gerrard



DENZEL WASHINGTON STARS IN DIRECTOR SPIKE LEE'S EPIC DRAMA