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Spike Lee Defends 'Malcolm' : Movies: Students criticize the filmmaker at USC session for pinning assassination on Nation of Islam members.

December 05, 1992 | TERRY PRISTIN | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Film director Spike Lee was put on the defensive Thursday night by black students who angrily attacked his film, "Malcolm X," for showing that the fiery black leader was assassinated by members of the Nation of Islam rather than agents of the U.S. government.

"How can you say that the Nation of Islam killed him? You can't prove that," shouted one student during a question-and-answer period following a talk by Lee at USC. Even if individual Muslims were involved in Malcolm's 1965 murder, the questioner asserted, that does not demonstrate that the leadership was to blame.

"The Nation of Islam is run like the military . . . There's no way anyone in the Nation would have taken that upon himself and gone out and shot Malcolm X without orders," Lee responded as other students yelled at the questioner to leave the microphone.

Lee appeared at the university following a daylong tour of South-Central Los Angeles and Compton. The Brooklyn-based director, who was wearing a varsity jacket and a baseball cap emblazoned with the word "Crooklyn," confronted a mostly friendly audience, which gave him a standing ovation even before he began speaking. He had explained during his speech that it was "common knowledge" that five members of the Nation of Islam were responsible for the assassination. Only one was caught. This man later pointed the finger at four other Muslims and said two others were wrongly convicted.

"It's easy to blame the CIA or the FBI," Lee told the packed hall at Bovard Auditorium. "I'm not going to say that they weren't involved. At the very least, they let it happen. They had Malcolm under constant surveillance."

But he said extensive research shows that the government did not conspire in the actual murder.

Continuing to raise questions about the ending, one student suggested that the film would cause animosity toward Black Muslims.

"We portray the Nation of Islam in a very favorable light," Lee replied.

A third student said she hoped "your intention was not to cause disunity" among blacks.

"My intention was to tell the truth," Lee retorted testily. He also pointed out that this film "is not 'JFK.' It does not concentrate solely on the assassination."

In attacking Lee, the students echoed criticisms leveled against the contentious filmmaker by Amiri Baraka, the scholar, essayist and playwright who used to be known as LeRoi Jones. Baraka organized a movement last year solely to protest Lee's selection to make the movie.

Accusing Lee of selling out to Hollywood in order to get his film made, Baraka said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Newark, N.J., that his worst fears had been realized. "He (Lee) did what I said he was going to do. He did worse . . . Nobody has been able to deliver a death blow to the Nation of Islam like Spike Lee . . . That was the only way the film could be made. He had to put the blame on black people."

Asked at a news conference at USC earlier Thursday if he planned to respond to Baraka, Lee said, "I don't have to."