The Battle to Film Malcolm X

To portray the black hero his way, Spike Lee has taken on rival directors, black activists, the studio and the budget

By JANICE C. SIMPSON

School Daze? Blacks complained that it demeaned black coeds. Do the Right Thing? Whites fumed that it promoted interracial violence. Jungle Fever? The director himself groused that racism deprived it of an award at the Cannes Film Festival. Feisty black filmmaker Spike Lee is stranger to controversy. Each of the five movies he has made since 1986 about the African-American experience has stirred up some kind of fuss. But none of Lee's previous flaps compares to the troubles that have stalked his latest, most ambitious film, Malcolm X.

X, as insiders call it, won't be released until the Christmas season. But already Lee has fought off rival attempts to make the film, wrangled with the poet Amiri Baraka (once known as LeRoi Jones) and other black nationalists about how their hero should be portrayed on the screen, knocked heads with Warner Bros. over how much money and playing time are needed to tell Malcolm's story, and lost financial control of the project. "I knew this was going to be the toughest thing I ever did," he says, sitting wearily in his editing room. "The film is huge in the complexity of Malcolm X."

Before shooting began in New York City last September, Baraka publicly warned Lee "not to mess up Malcolm's life" and organized a protest rally. After Lee lashed back at Baraka, a truce was declared. But disagreements with Warner Bros. haven't been resolved as easily. The studio refused to kick in additional funds when Lee went $4 million over his $28 million budget, prompting the bond company that insured the completion of the film to assume financial control of the project. That means Lee must get approval from the bond company for each dollar he spends. "They have financial control—they don't have creative control," he says. "They can't finish this film without me."

Lee also continues to insist that he needs at least three hours of screen time to trace the dramatic transformations of Malcolm's life: from the street hustler who sold drugs and women into the charismatic spokesman for the Black Muslims who preached black self-determination and antiwhite rhetoric and, finally, into the orthodox Muslim who made a hajj to Mecca and embraced universal equality. The studio would prefer a brisk compression of the story. Twice in the past month, Lee and studio executives have faced off in shouting matches in which Lee cited Oliver Stone's 3-hr., 8-min. JFK. If a slain white hero like John F. Kennedy deserves three hours, Lee argued, then so does a slain black hero.

Since being gunned down in a Harlem ballroom 27 years ago, Malcolm X, once viewed as an alarming extremist by whites and many blacks as well, has evolved into an icon in the black community, revered by African Americans ranging from Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to the members of the raging rap group Public Enemy. Making a movie to satisfy all these constituencies would seem an impossible task. At various times since producer Marvin Worth sewed up the rights in 1968, novelists James Baldwin and David Bradley and playwrights David Mamet and Charles Fuller tried their hand at writing a screenplay. Actors Billy Dee Williams and Richard Pryor expressed interest in playing Malcolm, and Sidney Lumet and Norman Jewison considered directing. But nobody wanted to do the film more than Lee.

When he heard that Jewison had had the go-ahead for the project, Lee waged a protest campaign, arguing in the press that only a black director could do the right thing with Malcolm's story and pestering Worth with countless phone calls, insisting, "I'm the guy, I'm the guy." Worth finally relented, and Jewison bowed out. Warner Bros. agreed to finance the Baldwin script, as rewritten and directed by Lee, starring Academy Award-winner Denzel Washington.

"I think they felt it would be more of an event with Spike," Worth says.

Certainly it was a financial event. Lee, who had never spent more than $14 million on a film, demanded $40 million in order to portray four distinct periods in Malcolm's life and to go on location for such crucial sequences as his pilgrimage to Mecca. When the studio refused, Lee trimmed his budget to $33 million. Sorry, said the studio, but $20 million was as high as it was willing to go. Lee made up some of the difference by selling the foreign rights for $8.5 million in order to portray four distinct periods in Malcolm's life and to go on location for such crucial sequences as his pilgrimage to Mecca. When the studio refused, Lee trimmed his budget to $33 million. Sorry, said the studio, but $20 million was as high as it was willing to go. Lee made up some of the difference by selling the foreign rights for $8.5 million, then went ahead with shooting based on his $33 million projection. He hoped that Warner would come through once filming was under way. It didn't—a decision that Lee attributes to racism. "There are two realities in Hollywood, one black and one white," he says. "Unless you're Eddie Murphy, there's a glass ceiling on how much they're going to spend on black films."

Still, Lee is so determined not to make compromises that he has taken the unusual step of investing a sizable amount of his reported $3 million salary in the project. Malcolm X once famously said blacks would achieve their rights "by any means necessary." Lee clearly feels the same way about his movie.