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Review: New 'Malcolm' DVD brilliant

2-disc package includes documentary, commentary

By Glenn Abel
 The Hollywood Reporter
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LOS ANGELES, California (Hollywood Reporter) -- Born of trouble, snubbed by the Oscars and faded from memories, Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" thunders back in a DVD set keyed to the 40th anniversary of its subject's death.

The film did a better job of selling "X" hats than cinema tickets upon release in 1992, partly because of its running time of about 3 1/2 hours.

Lee's "labor of love" feels at home on DVD, where viewers can pause on any of the film's organic chapter breaks, delineated by cinematographer Ernest Dickerson's dramatic shifts in visual style.

Warner's double-disc special edition of "Malcolm X" (retail \$26.99) comes remastered with generous and to-the-point extras. The film stretches over both discs. The audio and widescreen images are first class, with almost no signs of wear or damage. The DVD set replaces a single-disc version released five years ago.

Lee's stylish and eclectic vision holds up well, but Denzel Washington's performance as the polarizing black activist of the 1960s remains the reason to revisit "Malcolm X." Washington's portrayal is "one of the best in American movies," Martin Scorsese maintains in the DVD extras.

Washington spent a year transforming himself into the Nation of Islam spokesman, swearing off pork and alcohol while studying the Koran. Critics and the film Academy hailed his work, but the best actor



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Oscar went to Al Pacino for "Scent of a Woman." "Denzel did his thing in this film, Academy Award or not," Lee said. Unfortunately, Washington didn't do interviews on the DVD's excellent making-of featurette and doesn't appear on its commentary.

The extent to which Washington embodied his character becomes clear while viewing the DVD set's other outstanding Malcolm X film, the Oscar-winning documentary of the same name from 1972. The film relies on audio from Malcolm X's speeches for most of its narrative drive. There's no political correctness on display here, only the raw emotions of the era. "The devil is the white man," Malcolm X informs his audience. "By nature he is evil."

The documentary opens with Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" over a stark black screen. Images of lynchings and other racial brutality follow, along with amazing stock footage. Later, Malcolm X recounts in his steady, dignified voice how hillbilly racists burned his childhood home, killed his father and drove his mother into an insane asylum. Thus the Malcolm X credo: Self-defense and revolutionary change must come "by any means necessary."

Both films closely follow what Lee said is the most important book he's ever read: "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," as told to Alex Haley. TV writer-turned-filmmaker Marvin Worth held the rights, producing the documentary and Lee movie two decades apart. (Arnold Perl, who died shortly after directing the documentary gets a writing credit on the feature.)

Worth's "Malcolm X" feature project went through numerous scripts and directors over the years before settling with Norman Jewison at Warner Bros. Hotshot Lee pressed for the job, calling on the socially conscious white director to step aside, which he did. (Lee praises and thanks Jewison several times in the DVD extras.)

Warners wanted a Spike Lee film -- hip and snappy. Lee envisioned "some David Lean s---," an epic film of four hours that followed Malcolm X's journey from coke-snorting hustler to black messiah.

Lee tells how he couldn't venture into the black community without being told, "Spike, don't mess up Malcolm!"

Lee and cinematographer Dickerson, a pal from NYU film school, studied the work of Gordon Willis on "The Godfather," seeking to reproduce his technique of using great locations to maximize a medium-sized budget. Still, costs from Lee's big opening street scene, the MGM musicals-inspired dance-hall number and Malcolm X's journey to Mecca -- shot on location in the holy city -- exhausted goodwill at the studio.

Warners brought in a bond completion outfit. At one point, Lee was told to cancel plans to film in Egypt and use the beaches of New Jersey instead. Lee got his way, until postproduction, when the overseers fired his staffers.

The director turned to Malcolm X's teachings of self-determination, calling upon wealthy black celebrities to fund completion. "It was a hard thing to do," Lee recalls. "It was a gift (with no possibility of returns). The first person I called was Bill Cosby." Other angels included Oprah Winfrey, Prince, Janet Jackson and Magic Johnson.

Lee persuaded Warners to release the film at 202 minutes, pointing to the

Spike Lee

Denzel Washington

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length of the studio's "JFK." "We felt our subject matter was just as important. . . . We needed the full three hours."

On DVD, Lee has more footage to share, introducing deleted scenes he said he didn't remember shooting. One shows Malcolm X toying with an overeager volunteer. "People don't realize, he had a great sense of humor," Lee said.

Joining the director on the commentary are longtime collaborators Dickerson, editor Barry Alexander Brown and costume designer Ruth Carter. Their talks were recorded separately and edited together reasonably well, but there are awkward moments -- as when Lee says something profound about Malcolm X's legacy and Dickerson immediately begins talking about light bulbs. The commentary rarely drags, and Dickerson and Carter make good use of the opportunity to address the specifics of their crafts.

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