Malcolm X (1992, 202 minutes)

Directed by Spike Lee
Produced by Spike Lee and Marvin Worth
Music Terence Blanchard
Cinematography Ernest R. Dickerson
Film Editing Barry Alexander Brown
Casting Robi Reed
Production Design Wynn Thomas
Art Direction Tom Warren
Set Decoration Ted Glass
Costume Design Ruth E. Carter

Academy Awards, USA 1993
Nominated
Best Actor in a Leading Role Denzel Washington
Best Costume Design Ruth E. Carter

National Film Preservation Board, 2010

Cast
Denzel Washington…Malcolm X
Angela Bassett…Dr. Betty Shabazz
Albert Hall…Baines
Al Freeman Jr. …Elijah Muhammad
Delroy Lindo…West Indian Archie
Spice Lee…Shorty
Theresa Randle…Laura
Kate Vernon…Sophia
Lonette McKee…Louise Little
Tommy Hollis …Earl Little
James McDaniel…Brother Earl
Ernest Thomas…Sidney
Jean-Claude La Marre …Benjamin 2X
O.L. Duke…Pete
Larry McCoy…Sammy
Maurice Sneed…Cadillac
Debi Mazar…Peg
Phyllis Yvonne Stickney…Honey
Scot Anthony Robinson…Daniel
Sonny Jim Gaines…Cholly
Joe Seneca…Toomer
LaTanya Richardson Jackson…Lorraine
Giancarlo Esposito…Thomas Hayer
Leonard L. Thomas…Leon Davis
Roger Guenveur Smith…Rudy
Craig Wasson…TV Host
Bobby Seale…Speaker #1
Al Sharpton…Speaker #2
Christopher Plummer…Chaplain Gill
Karen Allen…Miss Dunne
Peter Boyle…Captain Green
William Kunstler…The Judge
Nelson Mandela…Soweto Teacher
Ossie Davis…Eulogy Performer (voice)

Spike Lee (b. Shelton Jackson Lee on March 20, 1957, in Atlanta, Georgia) moved at a very young age from pre-civil rights Georgia, to Brooklyn, New York. Lee came from
artistic, education-grounded background; his father was a jazz musician, and his mother, a schoolteacher. He attended school in Morehouse College in Atlanta and developed his film making skills at Clark Atlanta University. After graduating from Morehouse, Lee attended the Tisch School of Arts graduate film program. He made a controversial short, The Answer (1980), a reworking of D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915). In 1986, Spike Lee made the film, She's Gotta Have It (1986), a comedy about sexual relationships. The movie was made for $175,000, and earned $7 million at the box office, which launched his career and allowed him to found his own production company, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks. His next movie was School Daze (1988), which was set in a historically black school, focused mostly on the conflict between the school and the Fraternities, of which he was a strong critic, portraying them as materialistic, irresponsible, and uncaring. With his School Daze (1988) profits, Lee went on to make his landmark film, Do the Right Thing (1989), a movie based specifically on his own neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. The movie portrayed the racial tensions that emerge in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood on one very hot day. The movie garnered Oscar nominations for Best Original Screenplay, for Danny Aiello for supporting actor, and sparked a debate on racial relations. Lee went on to produce the jazz biopic Mo' Better Blues (1990), the first of many Spike Lee films to feature Denzel Washington, including tonight’s film. The pair would work together again on, He Got Game (1998), an excursion into the collegiate world showing the darker side of recruiting college athletes, as well as the 2006 film Inside Man (2006). Spike Lee's role as a documentarian has expanded over the years, highlighted by his part in Lumière and Company (1995), the Oscar-nominated 4 Little Girls (1997), to his Peabody Award-winning biographical adaptation of Black Panther leader in A Huey P. Newton Story (2001), through his 2005 Emmy Award-winning examination of post-Katrina New Orleans in When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006) and its follow-up five years later in If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise (2010). This year he was to receive an Honorary Award at the Oscars, which he boycotted due to the lack of diversity amongst nominees. Lee has directed 65 films including Chi-Raq (2015), Jerrod Carmichael: Love at the Store (2014, TV Special documentary), Da Sweet Blood of Jesus (2014), Amex Unstaged Pharrell Williams Live at the Apollo (2014, Video), Oldboy (2013), Red Hook Summer (2012), If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise (2010, TV Series documentary), Passing Strange (2009), Shark (2006, TV Series, 1 episode), When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006, TV Mini-Series documentary), Inside Man (2006), 25th Hour (2002), A Huey P. Newton Story (2001, TV Movie documentary), The Original Kings of Comedy (2000, Documentary), Pavarotti & Friends 99 for Guatemala and Kosovo (1999, TV Movie documentary), Summer of Sam (1999), He Got Game (1998), Michael Jackson: HIStory on Film - Volume II (1997, Video documentary, video "They Don't Care About Us"), Girl 6 (1996), Clockers (1995), Crooklyn (1994), Malcolm X (1992), Jungle Fever (1991), Mo' Better Blues (1990), Do the Right Thing (1989), School Daze (1988), She's Gotta Have It (1986), Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads (1983), Sarah (1981, Short), The Answer (1980, Short) and Last Hustle in Brooklyn (1979, Short).

Arnold Perl (b. April 14, 1914—d. December 11, 1971, age 57) briefly attended Cornell University, but did not graduate. He had written for the television series The Big Story, Naked City, The Doctors and the Nurses, East Side/West Side and N.Y.P.D., which he created with David Susskind. Perl co-wrote the screenplay for Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), actor Ossie Davis' film directing debut. Perl also wrote the play Tevye and his Daughters. Perl also wrote and directed the documentary film Malcolm X (1972). He was nominated posthumously for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature for his work on the film in 1973. Perl's script for the film was later re-written by Spike Lee for his 1992 film. His writing credits are: Malcolm X (1992, screenplay), Malcolm X (1972, Documentary, screen adaptation) Fiddler on the Roof (1971, adapted from Sholem Aleichem stories by special arrangement with), The Sheriff (1971, TV Movie), Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970, screenplay), N.Y.P.D. (1967-1969, TV Series, creator - 49 episodes), Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theatre (1967, TV Series, 1 episode), Die höhere Schule (1964, TV Movie), Espionage (TV Series) (1963, writer - 1 episode), The Doctors and the Nurses (1963, TV Series, 2 episodes), Tevye and His Seven Daughters (1962, TV Movie), The World of Sholom Aleichem (1959, TV Movie), Jazz on a Summer's Day (1959, Documentary), and The Big Story (1949, TV Series, 2 episodes). He has also served as the producer on 3 projects, Malcolm X (1972, Documentary, associate producer), East Side/West Side (1963-1964, TV Series, executive producer - 7 episodes), Deadline (1959, TV Series, producer - 30 episodes).

Terence Blanchard (b. March 13, 1962 in New Orleans, Louisiana). A world-renowned trumpeter/composer/band leader and Blue Note recording artist, maybe the most prolific jazz musician to ever compose for motion pictures. Blanchard was born and raised in New Orleans where he studied with the Marsalis brothers at the famed New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. In 1980, he won a scholarship to Rutgers University and immediately began


Debi Mazar (b. August 13, 1964 in Queens, New York) skipped college and went to work as a makeup artist in NYC, where she became a fixture on the 1980s downtown


**Bobby Seale** (b. October 22, 1936 in Dallas, Texas) was co-founder of The Black Panthers along with Huey Newton. Both men were heavily inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X created the Black Panther Party to resist police brutality and the killing of blacks; using violence if necessary. In 1968, Seale wanted the public to know about the formation and the history of the Black Panthers. He wrote the book, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, later published in 1970. This book describes the evolution of the Black Panthers and the continuous struggle for human liberation. Seale is one of the "Chicago 8" along with Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines, and Lee Weiner, who were charged with conspiracy and inciting to riot, in the wake of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Was sentenced to four years in prison during the "Chicago 8" trial. After constant outbursts and verbal attacks on the judge, Seale was bound and gagged and severed from the trial earlier after his sentence. From then on, the "Chicago 8" were known as the "Chicago 7". Seale has two acting credits, *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Rude Awakening* (1989).
Al Sharpton (b. October 3, 1954 in Brooklyn, New York) is an American civil rights activist, Baptist minister, television/radio talk show host and a trusted White House adviser. In 2004, he was a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. presidential election. He hosts his own radio talk show, Keepin' It Real, and he makes regular guest appearances on Fox News (such as on The O'Reilly Factor), CNN, and MSNBC. In 2011, he was named the host of MSNBC's Politics Nation, a nightly talk show. Sharpnt has been frequently in the media for leading protests against grand jury decisions exonerating white policemen in the deaths of unarmed African-Americans in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. It is also speculated that Sharpnt is the basis for the character "Reverend Bacon" in the novel and film The Bonfire of the Vanities (1990). Sharpnt has acted in 6 proper films and TV series: Triumph Awards (2015, TV Movie), Madea Goes to Jail (2009), Holla (2002, TV Series), Mr. Deeds (2002), Cold Feet (1999), and Malcolm X (1992).


Karen Allen (b. October 5, 1951 in Carrollton, Illinois) is probably best known for her portrayal of the feisty heroine pitted against Harrison Ford in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). However, Allen trained in the early part of her

**William Kunstler** (b. July 7, 1919 in New York City, New York—d. September 4, 1995, age 76, in Manhattan, New York) was known as the gravel-voiced radical lawyer whose wild hair seemed to symbolize his distrust of government and his kinship with unpopular people and causes. Often championing of left-of-center causes dated from the early days of the civil rights movement and spanned the bitterest days of the Vietnam War. One of his early clients was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the time of his death, he had a role in the defense of the suspects in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Perhaps his best-known case was that of the Chicago Seven, who were tried on charges that they conspired to incite riots that made a tumult of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Kunstler managed to get the defendants acquitted of conspiracy, although five were found guilty of crossing state lines with intent to riot. However, the lawyer's many sharp exchanges with Judge Hoffman brought Mr. Kunstler a contempt-of-court sentence of 4 years 13 days. However, all convictions, including Mr. Kunstler's, were overturned on appeal, and he spent no time in jail. Kunstler appeared in three TV shows and films: as himself for one episode of the television series *Law & Order* in the 1994 episode of "White Rabbit", as a lawyer for Jim Morrison in *The Doors* (1991) and as a judge in *Malcolm X* (1992). In late 1995, Kunstler died in New York of heart failure at the age of 76, where his last major public appearance was at the commencement ceremonies for the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning.

**Peter Boyle** (b. October 18, 1935 in Norristown, Pennsylvania—d. December 12, 2006, age 71, in New York City, New York) spent his early childhood in Philadelphia, where his father was a sought-after local TV personality and children's show host. Boyle initially considered becoming a priest, joining the Christian Brothers religious order at one point while attending La Salle University in Philadelphia. He left the monastery after only a few years when he "lost" his calling. The tall (6' 2"), hulking, prematurely bald actor wannabe struggled through a variety of odd jobs (postal worker, waiter, bouncer) while simultaneously building up his credits on stage and waiting for that first big break. Things started progressing for him after appearing in the national company of "The Odd Couple" in 1965 and landing TV commercials on the sly. Peter's breakout film role did not come without controversy as the hateful, hardhat-donning bigot-turned-murderer *Joe* (1970) in a tense, violence-prone film directed by John G. Avildsen. The role led to major notoriety, however, and some daunting supporting parts in *T.R. Baskin* (1971), *Slither* (1973) and as Robert Redford's calculating campaign manager in *The Candidate* (1972). During this time his political radicalism found a visible platform after joining Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland on anti-war crusades, which would include the anti-establishment picture *Steelyard Blues* (1973). This period also saw the forging of a strong friendship with former Beatle John Lennon. Following a superb turn as...

Nelson Mandela (b. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in Transkei, South Africa on July 18, 1918—d. December 5, 2013, age 95, in Houghton Estate, Johannesburg, South Africa) was educated at University College of Fort Hare and the University of Witwatersrand where he studied law. He joined the African National Congress in 1944 and was engaged in resistance against the ruling National Party's apartheid policies after 1948. He went on trial for treason in 1956-1961 and was acquitted in 1961. In 1963, when many fellow leaders of the ANC and the Umkhonto we Sizwe were arrested, Mandela was brought to stand trial with them for plotting to overthrow the government by violence. His statement from the dock received considerable international publicity. On June 12, 1964, eight of the accused, including Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment. From 1964 to 1982, he was incarcerated at Robben Island Prison, off Cape Town; thereafter, he was at Pollsmoor Prison, nearby on the mainland. During his years in prison, Nelson Mandela's reputation grew steadily. He was widely accepted as the most significant black leader in South Africa and became a potent symbol of resistance as the anti-apartheid movement gathered strength. He consistently refused to compromise his political position to obtain his freedom. Nelson Mandela was released on February 11, 1990. After his release, he plunged himself wholeheartedly into his life's work, striving to attain the goals he and others had set out almost four decades earlier. Mandela won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and the following year in the post-apartheid election of 1994, he was elected as the first president of a democratic South Africa. Perhaps ore millions in his lifetime than any political figure in history have venerated Nelson Mandela.

Ossie Davis (b. Raiford Chatman Davis on December 18, 1917 in Cogdell, Georgia—d. February 4, 2005, age 87, in Miami Beach, Florida) After serving in World War II, Davis embarked on an acting career that would span decades. He starred on Broadway and television and in films. He also wrote and directed. Davis and his wife, actress Ruby Dee, were prominently involved in the Civil Rights Movement. The name "Ossie" was bestowed accidentally, when a county clerk misheard his mother's pronunciation of the initials "R.C." Ossie enrolled at Howard University but dropped out in 1939 to pursue an acting career in New York City. He left New York to serve in World War II, returning in 1946. Davis modeled his career on the example of Sidney Poitier—an actor who was able to push past the stereotypical roles most frequently offered to African Americans. Like Poitier, Davis sought to bring dignity to the characters he played, including those with menial jobs or from poor background. Both Davis and Dee were civil rights activists, maintaining close relationships with Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King Jr., among others. Davis delivered a eulogy at the funeral of Malcolm X and participated in a tribute to King at a New York service for the slain leader. In 1989, Davis and Dee were inducted into the NAACP Image Awards Hall of Fame. In 1995, they received the National Medal of Arts—the nation's highest honor conferred to an artist on behalf of the country. They were honored by the Kennedy Center in 2004. Davis acted in over 100 films and TV shows, some of which are *The L Word* (2004-2005, TV Series), *Proud* (2004), *She Hate Me* (2004), *Baadasssss!* (2003), *Deacons for Defense* (2003, TV Movie), *Dinosaur* (2000), *City of Angels* (2000, TV Series), *Cosby* (1999, TV Series), *Doctor Dolittle* (1998), *12 Angry Men* (1997, TV Series), *Medium Cool* (1969), *Dope* (2001), *Fearless* (2006, TV Series), *Dream Team* (1995), *NYPD Blue* (1996).

Born Shelton Jackson Lee in Atlanta, Georgia, 20 March 1957; son of jazz musician Bill Lee. Education Morehouse College, B.A., 1979; New York University, M.A. In Filmmaking; studying with Martin Scorsese.

Spike Lee is the most famous African-American to have succeeded in breaking through the Hollywood establishment to create a notable career for himself as a major director. What makes this all the more notable is that he is not a comedian—the one role in which Hollywood has usually allowed blacks to excel—but a prodigious, creative, multifaceted talent who writes, directs, edits, and acts, a filmmaker who invites comparisons with American titans like Woody Allen, John Cassavetes, and Orson Welles.

His films, which deal with different facets of the black experience, are innovative and controversial even within the black community. Spike Lee refuses to be content with presenting blacks in their “acceptable” stereotypes: noble Poitiers demonstrating simple moral righteousness are nowhere to be found. Lee’s characters are three-dimensional and often vulnerable to moral criticism. His first feature film, She’s Gotta Have It, dealt with black sexuality, unapologetically supporting the heroine’s promiscuity. His second film, School Daze, drawing heavily upon Lee’s own experiences at Morehouse College, examined the black university experience and dealt with discrimination within the black community based on relative skin colors. His third film, Do the Right Thing, dealt with urban racial tensions and violence. His fourth film, Mo’ Better Blues, dealt with black jazz and its milieu. His fifth film, Jungle Fever, dealt with interracial sexual relationships and their political implications, by no means taking the traditional, white liberal position that love should be color blind. His sixth film, Malcolm X, attempted no less than a panoramic portrait of the entire racial struggle in the United States, as seen through the life story of the controversial activist. Not until his seventh film, Crooklyn, primarily an autobiographical family remembrance of growing up in Brooklyn, did Spike Lee take a breath to deal with a simpler subject and theme.

Lee’s breakthrough feature was She’s Gotta Have It, an independent film budgeted at $175,000 and a striking box-office success: a film made by blacks for blacks which also attracted white audiences. She’s Gotta Have It reflects the sensibilities of an already sophisticated filmmaker and harkens back to the early French New Wave in its exuberant embracing of bravura techniques—intertitles, black-and-white cinematography, a sense of improvisation, characters directly addressing the camera—all wedded nevertheless to serious philosophical/sociological examination. The considerable comedy in She’s Gotta Have It caused many critics to call Spike Lee the “black Woody Allen,” a label which would increasingly reveal itself as a rather simplistic, muddle-headed approbation, particularly as Lee’s career developed. (Indeed, in his work’s energy, style, eclecticism, and social commitment, he more resembles Martin Scorsese, a Lee mentor at the NYU film school.) Even to characterize Spike Lee as a black filmmaker is to denigrate his talent, since there are today virtually no American filmmakers (except Allen) with the ambitiousness and talent to write, direct, and perform in their own films. And Lee edits as well.

Do the Right Thing, Lee’s third full-length feature, is one of the director’s most daring and controversial achievements, presenting one sweltering day which culminates in a riot in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. From its first images—assailing jump cuts of a...
woman dancing frenetically to the rap “Fight the Power” while colored lights stylistically flash on a location ghetto block upon which Lee has constructed his set—we know we are about to witness something deeply disturbing. The film’s sound design is incredibly dense and complex, and the volume alarmingly high, as the film continues to assail us with tight close-ups, extreme angles, moving camera, colored lights, distorting lenses, and individual scenes directed like high operatic arias.

Impressive, too, is the well-constructed screenplay, particularly the perceptively drawn Italian family at the center of the film who feel so besieged by the changing, predominantly black neighborhood around them. A variety of ethnic characters are drawn sympathetically, if unsentimentally; perhaps never in American cinema has a director so accurately presented the relationships among the American urban underclasses. Particularly shocking and honest is a scene in which catalogs of racial and ethnic epithets are shouted directly into the camera. The key scene in Do the Right Thing has the character of Mookie, played by Spike Lee, throwing a garbage can through a pizzeria window as a moral gesture which works to make the riot inevitable. The film ends with two quotations: one from Martin Luther King Jr., eschewing violence; the other from Malcolm X, rationalizing violence in certain circumstances.

Do the Right Thing was one of the most controversial films of the last twenty years. Politically conservative commentators denounced the film, fearful it wouuld incite inner-city violence. Despite widespread acclaim the film was snubbed at the Cannes Film Festival, outraging certain Cannes judges; despite the accolades of many critics’ groups, the film was also largely snubbed by the Motion Picture Academy, receiving a nomination only for Spike Lee’s screenplay and Danny Aiello’s performance as the pizzeria owner.

Both Mo’ Better Blues and the much underrated Crooklyn owe a lot to Spike Lee’s appreciation of music, particularly as handed down to him by his father, the musician Billy Lee. Crooklyn is by far the gentler film, presenting Lee’s and his siblings’ memories of growing up with Bill Lee and his mother. Typical of Spike Lee, the vision in Crooklyn is by no means a sentimental one, and the father comes across as a proud, if weak, man; talented, if failing in his musical career; loving his children, if not always strong enough to do the right thing for them. The mother, played masterfully by Alfre Woodard, is the stronger of the two personalities; and the film—ending as it does with grief—seems Spike Lee’s version of Fellini’s Amarcord. For a white audience, Crooklyn came as a revelation: the sight of black children watching cartoons, eating Trix cereal, playing hopscotch, and singing along with the Partridge family, seemed strange—because the American cinema had so rarely (if ever!) Shown a struggling black family so rooted in popular-culture iconography all Americans could relate to. Scene after scene is filled with humanity, such as the little girl stealing groceries rather than be embarrassed by using her mother’s food stamps. Crooklyn’s soundtrack, like so many other Spike Lee films, is usually cacophonous, with everyone talking at once, and its improvisational style suggests Cassavetes or Scorsese. Lee’s 1995 film, Clockers, which deals with drug dealing, disadvantage, and the young ‘gansta,’ was actually produced in conjunction with Scorsese, whose own work, particularly the seminal Mean Streets, Lee’s work often recalls.

Another underrated film from Lee is Jungle Fever (from 1991). Taken for granted is how well the film communicates the African-American experience; more surprising is how persuasively and perceptively the film communicates the Italian-American experience, particularly working-class attitudes....

The most important film in the Spike Lee oeuvre (if not his best) is probably Malcolm X—important because Lee himself campaigned for the film when it seemed it would be given to a white director, creating then an epic with the sweep and majesty of David Lean and a clear political message of black empowerment. If the film on the whole seems less interesting than many of Lee’s films (because there is less Lee there), the most typical Lee touches (such as a triumphant coda which enlists South African President Nelson Mandela to play himself and teach young blacks about racism and their future) seem among the film’s most inspired and creative scenes. If more cautious and conservative, in some ways the film is also Lee’s most ambitious: with dozens of historical reconstructions, and the biggest budget in his entire career. Malcolm X proved definitively to fiscally conservative Hollywood studio executives that an African-American director could be trusted to direct a high-budget “A film.” The success of Malcolm X, coupled with the publicity machine supporting Spike Lee, helped a variety of young
black directors—like John Singleton, the Wayans brothers, and Mario Van Peebles—all break through into mainstream Hollywood features.

And indeed, Lee seems often to be virtually everywhere. On television interview shows he is called upon to comment on every issue relevant to black America: from the O.J. Simpson verdict to Louis Farrakhan and the Million Man March. In bookstores, his name can be found on a variety of published books on the making of his films, books created by his own public relations arm particularly so that others can read about the process, become empowered, find their own voices, and follow in Lee’s filmmic footsteps....There may be no other American filmmaker working today who is so willing to take on all comers, so politically committed to make films which are consistently and unapologetically in-your-face. Striking, too, is that instead of taking his inspiration from other movies, as do the gaggle of Spielberg imitators, Lee takes his inspiration from real life—whether the Howard Beach or Yusef Hawkins incidents, in which white racists killed blacks, or his own autobiographical memories of growing up black in Brooklyn.

As Spike Lee has become a leading commentator on the cultural scene, there has been an explosion of Lee scholarship, not all of it laudatory: increasing voices attack Lee and his films for either homophobia, sexism, or anti-Semitism. Lee defends both his films and himself, pointing out that because characters espouse some of these values does not imply that he himself does, only that realistic portrayal of the world as it is has no place for political correctness....

Not at all. [Pause.] The funny thing to me is when white people accuse blacks, when they see somebody black who’s angry, they say, “Why are you so angry?” [Laughs.] If they don’t know why black people are angry, then there’s no hope. I mean, it’s a miracle that black Americans are as complacent and happy-go-lucky as we are.

Malcolm said, “Yes, I’m an extremist. The black race in America is in extremely bad condition. You show me a black man who isn’t an extremist and I’ll show you one who needs psychiatric attention.”

Or is dead. But I don’t think I have that much anger. I don’t think I’m angrier than I have a right to be.

Yeah, but that wasn’t a movie about heroism. I mean, that wasn’t even an issue in that movie?

But why have two separate rules?

Do the Right Thing, even in its very title, sets up a moral universe and a code, so it’s going to provoke a kind of scrutiny on the action that a movie in which things are more relative will not.

See, I never buy that shit. Because I want my shit—I mean, if you’re going to critique my work use the same motherfucking standards for everybody. Don’t let shit slide and call me anti-Semitic every single way and then the shit goes by and nobody says nothing about the other stuff, work that’s just racist in general.

I was trying to say that the film itself, within its own universe, sets up an expectation of moral action and heroism, and—
All I’m saying is that they gave out twelve or thirteen awards. Thirteen films got awards that year and we didn’t get one.

I know you’ve complained about not receiving Oscars as well, but don’t you ever feel that your work is more validated by not receiving the awards than if you were everybody’s favorite? I understand that. See, I’m not saying that awards are validating my work, saying it’s great. But if you win an Academy Award, you know how much money a film makes after it wins one? That’s it. Studios don’t spend a million dollars on a campaign just to get the award, but they know the award will bring in a lot more revenue. That’s why I wanted it for Do the Right Thing.

...I’m not asking about Jewish-black relations, I’m asking why you think Jews are more unified than black people. As far as America is concerned? Because I don’t think Jews have ever been taught to hate themselves the way black people have. I mean that’s the whole key: self-hatred. That’s not to say that Jewish people haven’t been persecuted. I’m not saying that. But they haven’t been taught to hate themselves to the level black people have been. When you’re persecuted, it’s natural for people to come together; but when you’re also taught at the same time that you’re the lowest form of life on earth, that you’re subhuman, then why would you want to get together with other people like that? Who do you hate? Yourself....

How many people have asked you, “Does Mookie do the right thing?” [Laughs.] How many people are there in New York City?

And what’s your answer to them? Black people never ask me that. It’s only white people.

Why’s that? Because black people understood perfectly why Mookie threw the garbage can through the window. No black person has ever asked me, “Did Mookie do the right thing?” Only white people. White people are like, “Oh, I like Mookie so much up to that point. He’s a nice character. Why’d he have to throw that garbage can through the window? Black people, there’s no question in their minds why he does that.

Yeah, but why one does something and whether what one does is right are very different things. I know why he does it, but--

But only white people want to know why he does it I spoke at twenty-five universities last year and that’s all I ever got asked. “Did Mookie do the right thing?”

What do you tell them? I feel at the time he did. Mookie is doing it in response to the police murdering Radio Raheem, with the infamous Michael Stewart choke hold, in front of his face—also knowing this is not the first time that something like this has happened, nor will it be the last. What people have to understand is that almost every riot that’s happened here in America involving black people has happened because of some small incident like that: cops killing somebody, cops beating up a pregnant black woman. It’s incidents like that have sparked riots across America. And that’s all we were doing was using history. Mookie cannot lash out against the police, because the police were gone. As soon as Radio Raheem was dead, they threw his ass in the back of the car and got the hell out of there so they could make up their story.

What about attacking Sal? I think he likes Sal too much. For Mookie, in my mind, Sal’s Pizzeria represents everything, and that’s why he lashed out against it. It was Mayor Koch, it was the cops—everything.

That’s “the power” to him? It’s the power at the moment. But when it’s burnt down, he’s back to square one, even worse. Look at all those riots: black people weren’t burning downtown, they were burning their own neighborhoods....

One of the disturbing things to me about the reaction to that film is that people focused on the burning of the pizzeria and not the death of Radio Raheem, and there might be a reason for that other than just hog-calling racism. The thing I like about Do the Right Thing, especially for critics, is that it was a litmus test. I think you could really tell how people thought and who they were. And if I read a review and all it talked about was the stupidity of burning the pizzeria, the stupidity of the violence, the looting, the burning, and not one mention of the murder of Radio Raheem, I knew exactly where they were coming from. Because people that write like that, who think like that, do not put any value on black life, especially the life of young black males. They put more importance on property, white-owned property.
From Wikipedia:

Production

Producer Marvin Worth acquired the rights to The Autobiography of Malcolm X in 1967. Worth had met Malcolm X, then called "Detroit Red", as a teenager selling drugs in New York. Worth was fifteen at the time, and spending time around jazz clubs in the area. As Worth remembers: "He was selling grass. He was sixteen or seventeen but looked older. He was very witty, a funny guy, and he had this extraordinary charisma. A great dancer and a great dresser. He was very good-looking, very, very tall. Girls always noticed him. He was quite a special guy."

Early on, the production had difficulties telling the entire story, in part due to unresolved questions surrounding Malcolm X's assassination. In 1971, Worth made a well-received documentary, Malcolm X, which received an Academy Award nomination in that category. The project remained unrealized. However, several major entertainers were attached to it at various times, including Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and director Sidney Lumet.

Screenplay

In 1968, Worth commissioned a screenplay from novelist James Baldwin, who was later joined by Arnold Perl, a screenwriter who had been a victim of McCarthy-era blacklisting. However, the screenplay took longer to develop than anticipated. Perl died in 1971. Baldwin developed his work on the screenplay into the 1972 book One Day, When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Baldwin died in 1987. Several authors attempted drafts, including David Mamet, David Bradley, Charles Fuller and Calder Willingham. Once Spike Lee took over as director, he rewrote the Baldwin-Perl script. Due to the revisions, the Baldwin family asked the producer to take his name off the credits. Thus Malcolm X only credits Perl and Lee as the writers and Malcolm X and Alex Haley as the authors of The Autobiography of Malcolm X.

Production difficulties

The production was considered controversial long before filming began. The crux of the controversy was Malcolm X's inflammatory and often angry denunciation of whites before he undertook his hajj. He was, arguably, not well regarded among white citizens by and large; however, he had risen to become a hero in the black community and a symbol of blacks' struggles, particularly during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. In the three years before the movie's release, sales of The Autobiography of Malcolm X had increased 300 percent, and four of his books saw a ninefold increase in sales between 1986 and 1991.

Once Warner Bros. agreed to the project, they initially wanted Academy Award-nominated Canadian film director Norman Jewison to direct the film. Jewison, director of the seminal civil rights film In the Heat of the Night, was able to bring Denzel Washington into the project to play Malcolm X. Jewison and Washington previously worked together in the 1984 film A Soldier's Story. A protest erupted over the fact that a white director was slated to make the film. Spike Lee was one of the main voices of criticism; since college, he had considered a film adaption of The Autobiography of Malcolm X to be a dream project. Lee and others felt that it was appropriate that only a black person should direct Malcolm X.

After the public outcry against Jewison, Worth came to the conclusion that "it needed a black director at this point. It was insurmountable the other way...There's a grave responsibility here". Jewison left the project, though he noted he gave up the movie not because of the protest, but because he could not reconcile Malcolm's private and public lives and was unsatisfied with Charles Fuller's script. Lee confirmed Jewison's position, stating "If Norman actually thought he could do it, he would have really fought me. But he bowed out gracefully". Jewison and Denzel Washington would reunite several years later for The Hurricane, in which Washington played imprisoned boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who spent nearly twenty years in prison for a murder he claimed he did not commit before his conviction was overturned in 1985.

Spike Lee was soon named the director, and he made substantial changes to the script. "I'm directing this movie and I rewrote the script, and I'm an artist and there's just no two ways around it: this film about Malcolm X is going to be my vision of Malcolm X. But it's not like I'm sitting atop a mountain saying, 'Screw everyone, this is the Malcolm I see.' I've done the research, I've talked to the people who were there."

Concerns over Lee's portrayal of Malcolm X

Soon after Spike Lee was announced as the director and before its release, Malcolm X received criticism by black nationalists and members of the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, headed by poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, who were worried about how Lee would portray Malcolm X. One protest in Harlem drew over 200 people. Some based their opinion on dislike of Lee's previous films; others were concerned that he would focus on Malcolm X's life before he converted to Islam. Baraka bluntly accused Spike Lee of being a
"Buppie", stating "We will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier", compelling others to write the director and warn him "not to mess up Malcolm's life." Some, including Lee himself, noted the irony that many of the arguments they made against him mirrored those made against Norman Jewison.

Looking back on the experience of making the film and the pressure he faced to produce an accurate film, Lee jokingly stated on the DVD's audio commentary that when the film was released, he and Denzel Washington had their passports handy in case they needed to flee the country.

**Concerns over Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X**

Washington agreed to play Malcolm X while Norman Jewison was scheduled to direct the film. Still, Lee stated he never envisioned any actor other than Washington in the role. Lee, who had worked with Washington on *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), cited Washington's performance as Malcolm X in an Off Broadway play as superb. However, some purists noted that Washington was far shorter and had a far darker complexion than the real Malcolm X, who stood 6'4" and had notably reddish hair and a lighter complexion (due to his very fair-skinned Grenadian-born mother's partial white ancestry) and bore only a passing resemblance to him.

**Budget issues**

Spike Lee also encountered difficulty in securing a sufficient budget. Lee told Warner Bros. and the bond company that a budget of over US$30 million was necessary; the studio disagreed and offered a lower amount. Following advice from fellow director Francis Ford Coppola, Lee got "the movie company pregnant": taking the movie far enough along into actual production to attempt to force the studio to increase the budget. The film, initially budgeted at $28 million, climbed to nearly $33 million. Lee contributed $2 million of his own $3 million salary. Completion Bond Company, which assumed financial control in January 1992, refused to approve any more expenditures; in addition, the studio and bond company instructed Lee that the film could be no longer than two hours, fifteen minutes in length. The resulting conflict caused the project to be shut down in post-production.

The film was saved by the financial intervention of prominent black Americans, some of whom appear in the film: Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Janet Jackson, Prince, and Peggy Cooper Cafritz, founder of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Their contributions were made as donations; as Lee noted: "This is not a loan. They are not investing in the film. These are black folks with some money who came to the rescue of the movie. As a result, this film will be my version. Not the bond company's version, not Warner Brothers'. I will do the film the way it ought to be, and it will be over three hours." The actions of such prominent members of the African American community giving their money helped finish the project as Lee envisioned it.

**Request for black interviewers**

A month before the film was released, Lee asked that media outlets send black journalists to interview him. The request proved controversial. While it was common practice for celebrities to pick interviewers who were known to be sympathetic to them, it was the first time in many years in which race had been used as a qualification. Lee clarified that he was not barring white interviewers from interviewing him, but that he felt, given the subject matter of the film, that black writers have "more insight about Malcolm than white writers."1

The request was turned down by the *Los Angeles Times*, but several others agreed including *Premiere* magazine, *Vogue*, *Interview* and *Rolling Stone*. The *Los Angeles Times* explained they did not give writer approval. The editor of *Premiere* noted that the request created internal discussions that resulted in changes at the magazine: "Had we had a history of putting a lot of black writers on stories about the movie industry we'd be in a stronger position. But we didn't. It was an interesting challenge he laid down. It caused some personnel changes. We've hired a black writer and a black editor."1

**Filming**

Malcolm X's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, served as a consultant to the film. The *Fruit of Islam*, the defense arm of the Nation of Islam, provided security for the movie. When Denzel Washington took the role of Malcolm X in the play, *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost*, which dealt with the relationship between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, he admitted he knew little about Malcolm X and had not yet read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Washington prepared by reading books and articles by and about Malcolm X and went over hours of tape and film footage of speeches. The play opened in 1981 and earned Washington a warm review by Frank Rich, who was at the time the chief theater critic of *The New York Times*. Upon being cast in the film, he interviewed people who knew Malcolm X, among them Betty Shabazz and two of his brothers. Although they had different upbringings, Washington tried to focus on what he had in common with

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his character: Washington was close to Malcolm X's age when he was assassinated, both men were from large families, both of their fathers were ministers, and both were raised primarily by their mothers.

Malcolm X is the first non-documentary, and the first American film, to be given permission to film in Mecca (or within the Haram Sharif). A second unit film crew was hired to film in Mecca because non-Muslims, such as Lee, are not allowed inside the city. Lee fought very hard to get filming in Mecca but Warner Bros. initially refused to put up the money for location shooting. New Jersey was considered for filming the Mecca segments. In the end, Lee got money and permission together for filming in Mecca.https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citation_needed

In addition to Nelson Mandela, the film featured cameos by Christopher Plummer (as the prison's Catholic chaplain), Peter Boyle (as a police officer), William Kunstler (as a judge), as well as activists Al Sharpton and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale (as street preachers).

The film was made shortly after Mandela's 1990 release from prison and during the negotiations to end apartheid in South Africa. Lee explained that he made "the connection between Soweto and Harlem, Nelson and Malcolm, and what Malcolm talked about: pan-Africanism, trying to build these bridges between people of color. He is alive in children in classrooms in Harlem, in classrooms in Soweto." Mandela ends the film with a quote from Malcolm X himself, with Malcolm in a film clip saying the last four words. The quote goes: "We declare our right on this earth, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being, in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."

Reception
Malcolm X was released in North America on November 18, 1992. The film was critically acclaimed, and has since garnered a score of 91% on review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes. Denzel Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X was widely praised and he was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor. Washington lost to Al Pacino (Scent of a Woman), a decision which Lee criticized, saying "I'm not the only one who thinks Denzel was robbed on that one." Washington won the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival. The movie received a number of awards at other festivals. The film grossed $9,871,125 in its opening weekend and finished third after Home Alone 2: Lost in New York ($30 million) and Bram Stoker's Dracula ($15 million).

According to Box Office Mojo, the film ended its run with a gross of $48,169,610.

The film was widely praised upon its release. Roger Ebert ranked it No. 1 on his Top 10 list for 1992 and described the film as "one of the great screen biographies, celebrating the whole sweep of an American life that began in sorrow and bottomed out in prison before its hero reinvented himself." Ebert and Martin Scorsese both ranked Malcolm X among the ten best films of the 1990s.

In 2010, Malcolm X was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Roger Ebert on Malcolm X (Nov. 18, 1992)
Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" is one of the great screen biographies, celebrating the whole sweep of an American life that began in sorrow and bottomed out on the streets and in prison before its hero reinvented himself. Watching the film, I understood more clearly how we do have the power to change our own lives, how fate doesn't deal all of the cards. The film is inspirational and educational - and it is also entertaining, as movies must be before they can be anything else.

Its hero was born Malcolm Little. His father was a minister who preached the beliefs of Marcus Garvey, the African-American leader who taught that white America would never accept black people and that their best hope lay in returning to Africa. Years later, Malcolm would also become a minister and teach a variation on this theme, but first he had to go through a series of identities and conversions and hard lessons of life.

He was victimized by violence. His father was murdered, probably by the Klan, which had earlier burned down the family house. His mother was unable to support her children, and Malcolm was parcelled out to a foster home.

He was the brightest student in his classes but was steered away from ambitious career choices by white teachers who told him that, as a Negro, he should look for something where he could "work with his hands." One of his early jobs was as a Pullman porter, and then, in Harlem, he became a numbers runner and small-time gangster. During that stage of his life, in the late 1940s, he was known as "Detroit Red," and ran with a fast crowd - including white women who joined him for sex and burglaries. Arrested and convicted, he was sentenced to
prison; the movie quotes him that he got one year for the burglaries and seven years for associating with white women while committing them. Prison was the best thing that happened to Red, who fell into the orbit of the Black Muslim movement of Elijah Muhammad and learned self-respect.

The movie then follows Malcolm as he sheds his last name - the legacy, the Muslims preached, of slaveowners - and becomes a fiery street-corner preacher who quickly rises until he is the most charismatic figure in the Black Muslims, teaching that whites are the devil and that blacks must become independent and self-sufficient. But there was still another conversion ahead; during a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was embraced by Muslims of many colors and returned to America convinced that there were good people of peace in all races.

Not long after, in 1965, he was assassinated - probably by members of the Muslim sect he had broken with.

This is an extraordinary life, and Spike Lee has told it in an extraordinary film. Like "Gandhi," the movie gains force as it moves along; the early scenes could come from the lives of many men, but the later scenes show a great original personality coming into focus. To understand the stages of Malcolm's life is to walk for a time in the steps of many African Americans, and to glimpse where the journey might lead.

**Denzel Washington** stands at the center of the film, in a performance of enormous breadth. He never seems to be trying for an effect, and yet he is always convincing; he seems as natural in an early scene, cloaking through a railroad club car with ham sandwiches, as in a later one, holding audiences spellbound on streetcorners, in churches, on television and at Harvard. He is as persuasive early in the film, wearing a zoot suit and prowling the nightclubs of Harlem, as later, disappearing into a throng of pilgrims to Mecca. Washington is a congenial, attractive actor, and so it is especially effective to see how he shows the anger in Malcolm, the unbending dogmatic side.

Accomplished storytelling Lee tells his story against an epic background of settings and supporting characters (the movie is a gallery of the memorable people in Malcolm's life). Working with cinematographer **Ernest Dickerson**, Lee paints the early Harlem scenes in warm, sensuous colors, and then uses cold, institutional lighting for the scenes in prison. In many of the key moments in Malcolm's life as a public figure, the color photography is intercut with a black and white, quasi-documentary style that suggests how Malcolm's public image was being shaped and fixed.

That image, at the time of his death, was of a man widely considered racist and dogmatic - a hatemonger, some said. It is revealing that even Martin Luther King Jr., seen in documentary footage making a statement about Malcolm's death, hardly seems overcome with grief. The liberal orthodoxy of the mid-1960s taught that racism in America could be cured by legislation, that somehow the hopeful words in the folksongs would all come true. Malcolm doubted it would be that simple.

Yet he was not the monolithic ideologue of his public image, and one of the important achievements of Lee's film is the way he brings us along with Malcolm, so that anyone, black or white, will be able to understand the progression of his thinking. Lee's films always have an underlying fairness, an objectivity that is sometimes overlooked. A revealing scene in "Malcolm X" shows Malcolm on the campus of Columbia University, where a young white girl tells him that her heart is in the right place and that she supports his struggle. "What can I do to help?" she asks. "Nothing," Malcolm says coldly, and walks on. His single word could have been the punch line for the scene, but Lee sees more deeply, and ends the scene with the hurt on the young woman's face. There will be a time, later in Malcolm's life, when he will have a different answer to her question.

Romantic relationships are not Lee's strongest suit, but he has a warm, important one in "Malcolm X," between Malcolm and his wife, Betty (**Angela Bassett**), who reminds her future husband that even revolutionary leaders must occasionally pause to eat and sleep.

It is her sweetness and support that help him to find the gentleness that got lost in Harlem and prison.

Al Freeman Jr. is quietly amazing as Elijah Muhammad, looking and sounding like the man himself and walking the screenplay's tightrope between his character's importance and his flaws. **Albert Hall** is also effective, as the tough Muslim leader who lectures Malcolm on his self-image, who leads him by the hand into self-awareness, and then later grows jealous of Malcolm's power within the movement. And there is a powerful two-part performance by **Delroy Lindo**, as West Indian Archie, the numbers czar who first impresses Malcolm with his power and later moves him with his weakness.

Walking into "Malcolm X," I expected an angrier film than Spike Lee has made. This film is not an assault but an explanation, and it is not exclusionary; it deliberately addresses all races in its audience. White people, going into the film, may expect to meet a Malcolm X who will attack them, but they will find a Malcolm X whose experiences and motives make him understandable and finally heroic.

Reasonable viewers are likely to conclude that, having gone through similar experiences, they might also have arrived at the same place.

Black viewers will not be surprised by Malcolm's experiences and the racism he lived through, but they may be surprised to find that he was less one-dimensional than his image, that he was capable of self-criticism and was developing his ideas right up until the day he died.
Spike Lee is not only one of the best filmmakers in America, but one of the most crucially important, because his films address the central subject of race. He doesn't use sentimentality or political cliches, but shows how his characters live, and why.

Empathy has been in short supply in our nation recently. Our leaders are quick to congratulate us on our own feelings, slow to ask us to wonder how others feel. But maybe times are changing. Every Lee film is an exercise in empathy. He is not interested in congratulating the black people in his audience, or condemning the white ones. He puts human beings on the screen, and asks his audience to walk a little while in their shoes.

### COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2016 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXXII:

APR 12 CLAIRE DENIS *Beau Travail* 1999
APR 19 ARI FOLMAN *Waltz with Bashir* 2008
APR 26 MICHAEL HANEKE *Amour* 2012
MAY 3 TERRY GILLIAM *The Fisher King* 1991

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
....for cast and crew info on any film: [http://imdb.com/](http://imdb.com/)

The links underlined in the text of the handout are hot in the online version.

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Dipson Amherst Theatre, with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.
Full Schedule:

2:00 Welcome: Cristanne Miller, Satish Tripathi, Penelope Creeley

2:15 Diane Christian/ Bruce Jackson film of Creeley, Willy’s Reading

2:45 Reading by the winner of the UB Poetics/riverrun Poetry in the Community contest.

3:00 Break

3:15 The Inaugural Robert Creeley Lecture in Poetry and Poetics: Nathaniel Mackey, “Breath and Precarity”

4:30– Featured guests begin the Creeley poem reading; all are invited to read a favorite Creeley poem.

5:00 Reception in Muse Café

8:00 Community poetry reading, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Parrish Hall, 724 Delaware Avenue