

Malcolm X too long, but powerful

By Henry Herx
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — An uneven, overlong screen biography, *Malcolm X* (Warner Bros.) tells of the African-American leader — who lived from 1925-65 — whose voice was tragically stilled at a crucial turning point in his life.

What makes it work dramatically is Denzel Washington's riveting performance in the title role, which captures the mature Malcolm's charismatic personality, intellectual depth and oratorical skill in attacking racism in American society.

Writer-producer-director Spike Lee goes all over the lot in re-creating Malcolm's life and times — often in strangely idiosyncratic ways.

The first part of the narrative is devoted to a melodramatic treatment of young Malcolm Little's criminal escapades that eventually end with prison.

Through flashbacks of Malcolm's childhood, we see his father's murder at the hands of the KKK, his mother's nervous breakdown and the separation

of the family's youngsters, with the embittered Malcolm growing up in a white children's home.

The second portion of the film — his conversion while in prison to the Nation of Islam — is the weakest.

Within a matter of minutes in screen time, a complete transformation from egotistical criminal to sincere believer in Allah takes place.

In the next scene, he is a different person entirely. He has dropped his slave name of Little and has become Malcolm X, working in Harlem on behalf of the Nation of Islam and its founder, Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman Jr.).

His very success in winning blacks to the cause leads to fears of his growing power among Muhammad's chief ministers and ultimately to his expulsion from the Nation.

He returns from a pilgrimage to Mecca freed of his hatred of whites, renounces black separatism and declares himself ready to work together with the civil rights movement.

Within months of his return,

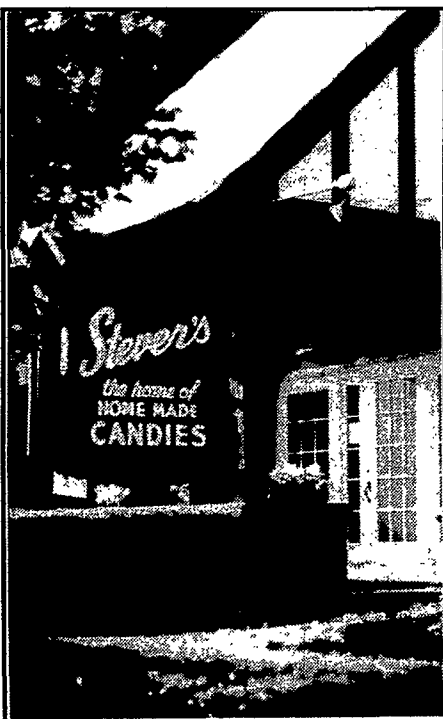
however, Malcolm is cruelly assassinated by Nation members in concert with some white agents of a CIA-like organization.

The film's message is that of Malcolm's encouragement of black pride and attacks on white racism rather than Malcolm's final evolution in calling for Americans to work together for interracial justice.

For all the movie's flaws, Lee is to be commended for presenting a black perspective of a black leader without the excesses that marred his earlier works.

The result may be discomforting for white viewers, but that's part of its intention.

Because of occasional stylized violence and substance abuse, some sexual references and minimal rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.



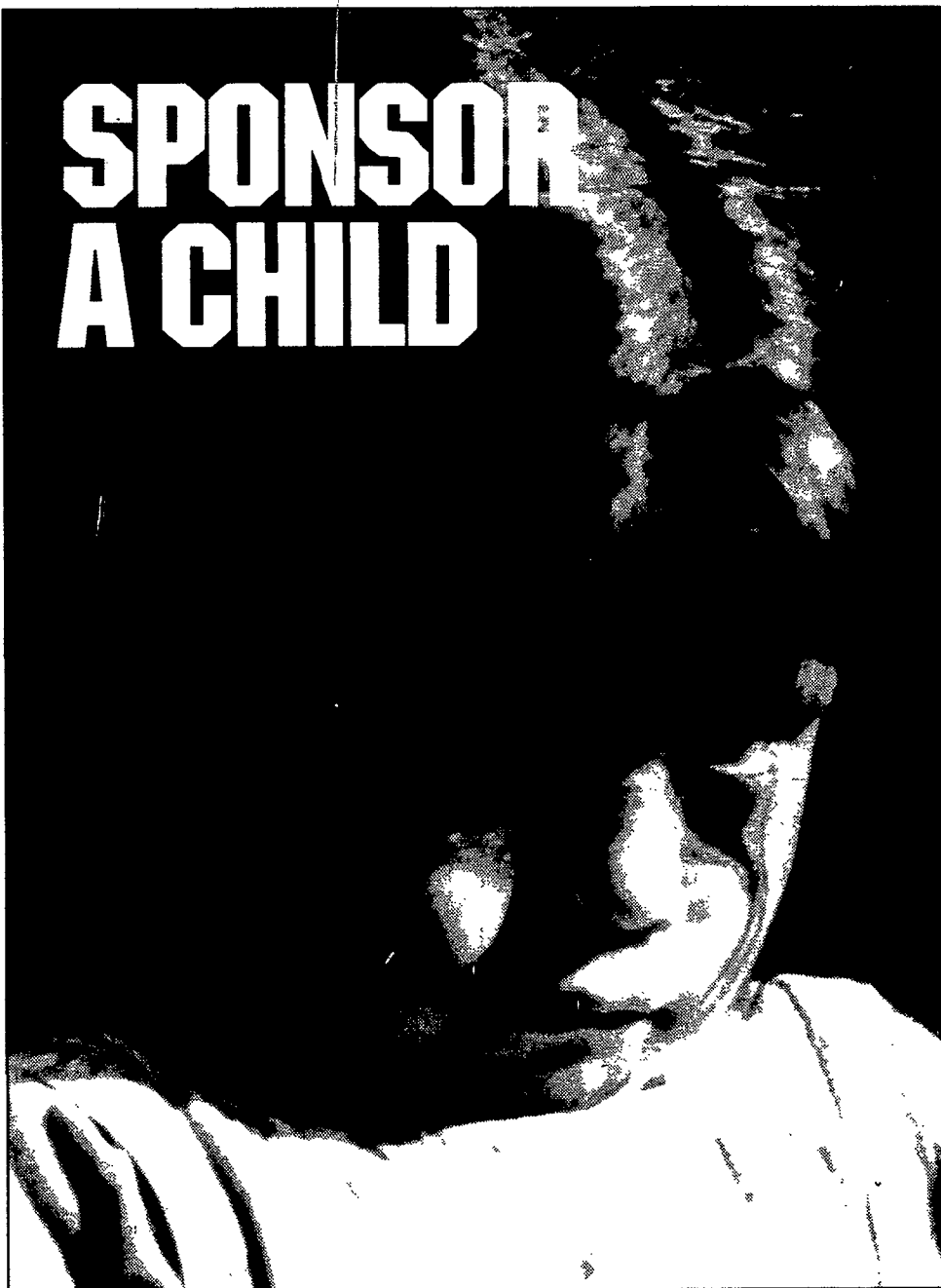
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