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Spike Lee tells of experiences as filmmaker

By Ruth Halikman

Spectator Staff Writer

The critically-acclaimed and controversial director Spike Lee described his experiences as an African American filmmaker and the incidents of racism he has encountered to a packed Wollman Auditorium last night.

From the start of the lecture, which kicked off Columbiafest, Lee made it clear that he had not come to Columbia to discuss politics.

“Please do not ask me how to end racism, AIDS, homelessness, world hunger, or anything else that afflicts us. I’m a filmmaker. I do not have the answer to those problems that are oppressing us all,” Lee said.

Beginning with his college days at Morehouse College and New York University Film School of the Tisch School of the Arts, Lee recounted the racism he encountered when embarking upon a career in film.

Describing his early collaboration with his NYU classmate, cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, who is black, Lee said the two of them felt they had to work especially hard to prove themselves in a white-dominated industry.

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“Like any successful African American, we knew we had to be 10 times better than our white classmates. Any African American person who is successful, they have to be 10 times better than their white counterparts. It’s not fair, but that’s how it is,” Lee said.

Lee’s first commercial success was the 1985 film “She’s Gotta Have It,” which he shot in 12 days for only \$175,000. The film eventually grossed about \$8.5 million at the box office.

After shooting “School Daze,” a film inspired by his experiences as an undergraduate student at Morehouse, Lee’s next project was the controversial “Do the Right Thing,” which depicted the violent

culmination of racial tensions between blacks and Italian Americans during a hot summer day in Brooklyn.

Lee said the idea for "Do the Right Thing" came from a news story about two black men who were chased out of a Queens pizzeria and onto an expressway by a group of Italian American men after they had asked the men to call a tow truck for their car, which had broken down. One of the black men was struck by a car and killed.

"We felt 'Do the Right Thing' was an up-to-date bulletin on race relations, not just in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bensonhurst, but in the nation as a whole," Lee said.

Much of the speech and the question and answer session that followed focused on Lee's most recent film, "Malcolm X." Addressing a topic often debated during the movie's production, Lee argued that his personal experiences as a victim of racism made him a better choice to direct the film than Norman Jewison, who had originally been chosen as director.

"'Malcolm X' is about the African American experience, and we felt Norman Jewison could not know what it was like to be a black male," Lee said.

Lee also praised Denzel Washington's portrayal of Malcolm X, for which the actor received an Academy Award nomination. By reading the Koran and practicing Islamic customs such as abstaining

from eating pork and from drinking alcohol, Washington began preparing for the role more than a year before filming began.

“Denzel’s one of the smartest actors I have ever worked with,” Lee said, adding that he thought Washington deserved the Academy Award for best actor.

Because every person has a different perspective on Malcolm X, Lee said he never expected his movie to please everyone who watched it.

“People as different as Chuck D from Public Enemy and [U. S. Supreme Court Justice] Clarence Thomas cite Malcolm X as their hero. We’re not trying to have the final word on Malcolm X, just our personal vision of the man,” Lee said.

During the question and answer session, several members of the audience criticized Lee’s portrayal of black women, arguing that strong female characters appeared in only a few of his films, such as “She’s Gotta Have It” and “Jungle Fever.”

Lee responded that African American women will only have adequate representation in movies when they write and direct for themselves, citing Leslie Harris’s recent film “Just Another Girl on the IRT” as an example.

“African American women are never going to be satisfied until they write and direct those films themselves, and that’s how it should be,” Lee said.

After the lecture, Heather Rafferty, BC ’94, said Lee’s notoriety gives him the obligation to change the way he portrays black women in

his films.

"He has the power, why doesn't he do something about it? A black woman has two hard things to get through, but he's already up there," Rafferty said.

Lee was also questioned on his opinion of last May's Los Angeles riots, which were provoked by the acquittal of the four police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King.

The opening credits of "Malcolm X" include videotaped footage of the beating.

The director said that while he does not necessarily condone violence, he understands why people felt the need to express their anger by rioting. He referred to the killing of the character in "Do the Right Thing" named Radio Raheem.

"Radio Raheem was not the first black male to get killed by the cops, and he won't be the last. At some point, people get fed up," Lee said, adding that he "would not be surprised" if another riot occurs after the announcement of the verdict in the federal trial of the police officers on the charge of violating King's civil rights.

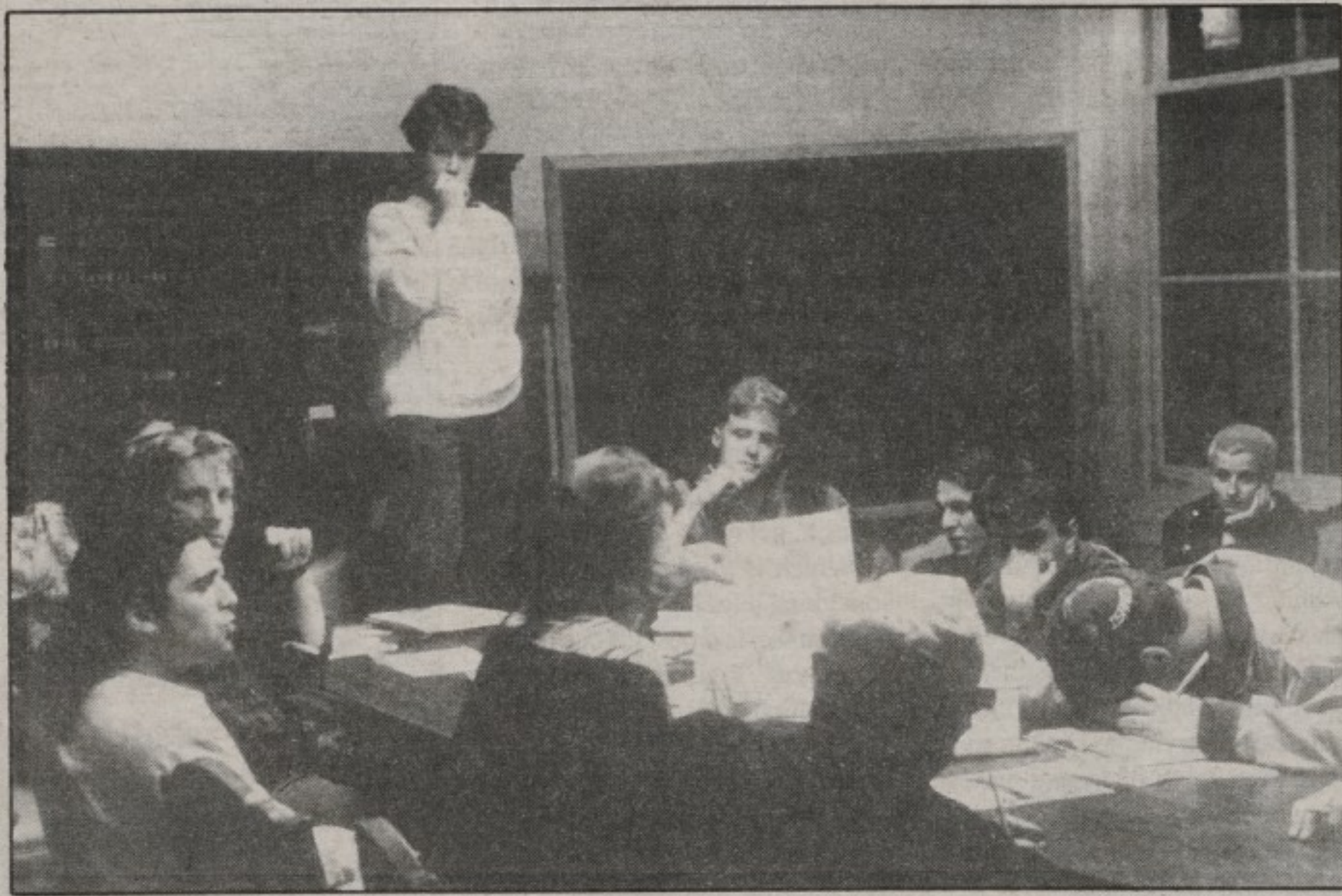
"When people feel they have nowhere else to turn, and [violence is] the only way they can be heard, I understand perfectly why people respond the way they do. I don't think it's a solution, but it wakes people up," Lee said.

Lee also said he did not support Columbia's construction of a biotechnical research center on the site of the Audubon Ballroom, where

Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. This contradicted claims made by University administrators that the director had endorsed it.

Tammie Rhee, CC '95, one of the coordinators of the lecture, said she was pleased by the audience's response to the event.

"I think most of the people here admire him, and that was evident in their questions," Rhee said.



SPECTATOR/MICHAEL FEIN

Despite attempts to open communication at last night's meeting of the Student Governing Board of Earl Hall, led by President Andrea Boykowycz, CC '93, tensions led to little constructive dialogue.



SPECTATOR/DARA FEIVELSON

Spike Lee, the controversial and critically-acclaimed filmmaker, spoke on his experiences last night in Wollman Auditorium.