

POINTS OF VIEW

Conference shows more to learn about tolerance

Against a backdrop of the beating death of Malice Green, a long-planned community conference on racism was held in Birmingham last week.

Sponsored by the Birmingham Bloomfield Task Force on Race Relations, Focus: HOPE and the Race Relations Council of Metropolitan Detroit, it attracted a large, well-integrated, well-intentioned audience bent on "Getting to the heart of it: Taking our pulse on racism."

What was quite obvious from the general discussion and that which went on in small groups around the room was that the blacks attending knew a whole lot more about whites than we knew about them.

Let's just talk about the word "honky" — an epithet applied to whites by blacks. Most whites have had so little experience with blacks, except on our own terms, that we don't know its full meaning.

So when the groups analyzed a situation in which a white is referred to as a

"honky" and a black as a "nigger," the whites didn't really know whether they could be equated.

How very little I know was recently reinforced when, purely by chance, I was part of an otherwise all-black audience.

My husband and I were in Chicago two weekends ago, and went with our younger daughter and her friend to a comedy club.

When we were seated, I looked around and noticed that my husband, daughter and I were the only white people there, with the exception of one waitress.

The truth: Had we known we would be the only whites, we would have been afraid to go.

And we would have missed a lot. We missed a lot anyway. Much of the humor and dialogue is hard to catch, when you have our small frame of reference. Yet, we expect blacks to negotiate in a white world every day.

"Hey, I see some whites up in the colored section," the black comedian said to good-natured laughter. A few



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minutes later, he called for applause because "they're supporting black comedy."

I thought of that experience when Lila Cabbil, president of LMC Diversified Consulting, pointed out at the conference that blacks support white businesses but whites completely ignore black businesses, such as along the "Avenue of Fashion" at Livernois and Seven Mile Road.

I thought of that experience when keynote speaker Father William Cunningham from Focus: HOPE explained how carefully he trained young black men and women to take jobs in the white community — including how to talk to and treat "Mrs. Levandowski of Rochester."

"If you talk to Mrs. Levandowski, you can remember black is beautiful, but business is business," he tells them.

One Vietnam veteran told his group at the conference there had been virtually no discrimination in his military

unit — probably because it was a case of survival.

Which drew the response: "We're not looking at this issue as a survival issue — but we probably need to."

Incidents such as the beating death of Malice Green, the incessant killing of black children, and the fear that keeps many blacks on one side of Eight Mile and suburban whites on the other, attest to that.

Over five years, the task force in Birmingham has taken steps, such as this conference, designed to re-educate its institutions and residents.

It meets at 8 a.m. the third Monday of the month at The Community House in Birmingham. It's a time for others to find out what the task force is doing and apply it to their communities.

You see, it's a matter of survival.

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Movie misses depth, honesty of 'Autobiography'

The critics are stumbling over themselves to praise Spike Lee's "Malcolm X." The words "masterpiece" and "epic" are being freely thrown about.

Unfortunately, the praise smacks of patronization because these critics briefly suggest what is wrong with this film and then scurry on as if they didn't want to offend the great black auteur or his black audience. Lee and his films are too important to be so shamelessly patronized.

"Malcolm X" is a big, ambitious and important movie. It is a must-see for those who have any interest in American history and in strong, intelligent films. On the plus side, Lee stays true to the "Autobiography." He doesn't reject the controversial ending in which Malcolm moves from strict separatism and racial hatred to a more accommodating position.

Denzel Washington gives an outstanding performance as Malcolm. He captures the fire and anger, but he also captures the humanity in his shy

smiles and in the growing awareness of his spiritual being. Other performances, especially Al Freeman Jr.'s dead-on Elijah Muhammad, are excellent. Lee's experiments with the medium are about 75 percent successful, especially the use of black and white as memory jolts to those of us who saw Malcolm through early '60s television.

So what is wrong? As in other Lee "joins" (his word for his works), there is a basic dishonesty in his portrayal of black inner city neighborhoods and life. In "Do The Right Thing," Lee's New York slum resembled nothing so much as a Sesame Street set. The streets were tidy, the conflicts until the end were also a little too tidy. In the end Lee's concepts were foggy. Danny Aiello's pizza parlor owner was the most humane character, which seems not at all what Lee had in mind. That movie, too, was provocative and well acted but disquieting and disappointing.

In "Malcolm X" the problem is more serious. In the Alex Haley penned "Au-



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tobiography," which is one of the greatest books of our time, Malcolm goes through several spiritual transformations. The early part of the book tells explicitly what Malcolm went through as a child and young man. He is brutally honest about his life as a pimp, pusher, drug addict and thief. He is blunt about his views of racism, but he is also blunt about the lack of self-esteem and responsible behavior in the black community.

The movie sadly misses all of this.

The scene in which a teacher tells Malcolm to forget about being a lawyer and study for a Negro trade is one of the strongest in the book because it is told with subtlety and presented after establishing Malcolm's love of books and his good showing as a student.

In the movie, it is played for laughs with a caricatured white bigot teacher in loud clothes with a loud mouth. And it is only briefly mentioned that Malcolm was a good student. Later, Christopher Plummer plays another comic white, a vulgar preacher who knows God is a white man. In fact, all whites are reduced to comic walk ons as racists or twits (no doubt Lee's revenge for Steppin' Fetchit).

In the movie, the Harlem of the '40s is a way cool black amusement park where Malcolm and his little buddy, played by Lee, walk around in blinding zoot suits and wide brimmed hats. The music is hot and the games are slick. This is in the book but so is the other side. Where is the poverty, where is the brutal crime, where is the ravaging ad-

diction, where is the irresponsibility that Malcolm later rebelled against? Malcolm's crimes are also treated lightly. This is far from the spiritual depths that the book details.

It has been suggested that Lee toned this down to win a PG rating. It wasn't necessary to totally dilute the impact of Malcolm's transformation to get that rating. I think, instead, Lee didn't want to deal with the reality of life in the black inner city in the '40s any more than he wanted to deal with the real inner city of the '80s in "Do the Right Thing." Unfortunately, that makes him less honest than Malcolm X and his movie less than the masterpiece it is based on.

Do the right thing, see the movie, yes, but more importantly read the book!

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