

Critics: 'Airbender' & 'Prince' were 'whitewashed'

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Tuesday, May 25, 2010



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(05-25) 09:10 PDT New York (AP) --

The hopes of many are resting on the shoulders of 12-year-old Aang.

Ever since he first came out of a block of ice in the Nickelodeon cartoon series "Avatar: The Last Airbender," the other tribes in his fictional, Asian-inspired world saw Aang and his power over the elements as their last chance for peace after a century of conflict.

Now Paramount Pictures and director M. Night Shyamalan also have high hopes for Aang: that he will attract audiences to see their big-screen — and big budget — version of "The Last Airbender," opening July 2.

Yet fans of the original TV series say whatever hopes they had for the live-action movie have been dashed by what is known as "whitewashing" — the selection of white actors to fill the main hero roles instead of the people of color they say the source material requires.

"To take this incredibly loved children's series, and really distort not only the ethnicity of the individual characters but the message of acceptance and cultural diversity that the original series advocated, is a huge blow," said Michael Le of Racebending.com, a fan site calling for a boycott of the martial-arts fantasy.

Paramount defends the film's casting, noting more than half of the credited speaking roles were filled by people of color.

"Night's vision of 'The Last Airbender' includes a large and ethnically diverse cast that represents cultures from around the world," Paramount said in a statement.

That doesn't impress the movie's critics, who claim most of that diversity is found among secondary characters and background extras.

They say "Airbender" casting is just the latest example of a long history in Hollywood of demeaning people of color — from having white actors in makeup portray minorities to sidelining them in second-tier roles



to replacing them entirely, as they say is the case with "Airbender."

They point to examples like the 2008 film "21," which was based on a book inspired by the true-life story of a mostly Asian American group of card players, yet was cast with mostly white actors in the main roles.

They also note this weekend's release of "Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time," a live-action adaptation of a video game that stars white actor Jake Gyllenhaal in the title role instead of an actor with a Middle Eastern background.

"This part really needed to go to someone who's Persian," said Jehanzeb Dar, a blogger and independent filmmaker who is a fan of the video game but has no intention of supporting the movie.

"It's not only insulting to Persians, it's also insulting to white people. It's saying white people can't enjoy movies unless the protagonist is white," he said.

Disney did not return an e-mail asking for comment on the casting.

"It becomes very clear that it's part of the historical pattern of Hollywood and it's not an isolated incident and it's not because they happen to be fictional characters," Le said. "It's because this is the standard procedure for Hollywood films, and it really shouldn't be. It's 2010."

But 2010 is also a time of huge stakes in the movie business — when only a small fraction of the films that are released make the vast majority of the industry's profits, said economics professor Arthur De Vany, author of "Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry."

Because of the financial risk, studios try to control anything that goes into a movie before its release in an effort to maximize box office receipts — from the storyline to the cast to the marketing, De Vany explained.

"They're trying to control the initial conditions of a chaotic process," he said. "There's only so much room at the top."

During the era of segregation in this country, Hollywood routinely considered race when making and releasing a film. For example, actress Lena Horne, who died May 9 at 92, saw her parts in movies cut out when those films were shown in the South.

Over time, "it's what has become habitual practice," said Chon Noriega, professor of cinema and media studies at UCLA. "I think it's the default setting and it takes a conscious choice to change," he said.

"Airbender's" creators, Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, have said they purposely chose to base their cartoon in an Asian-inspired setting as opposed to a European one, incorporating different kinds of martial arts, as well as other cultural elements like Chinese calligraphy. At least some of the main

characters were drawn as people of color.

Yet when it came time to cast the movie, unknown Noah Ringer was picked to play Aang, Nicola Peltz was chosen to play Katara, the girl who finds Aang in the ice, and "Twilight" actor Jackson Rathbone was named for the role of Sokka, Katara's brother. Jesse McCartney was originally slated to play the anti-hero Zuko, but dropped out due to scheduling reasons and was replaced by Dev Patel of "Slumdog Millionaire."

That the initial casting had four white actors in the main roles, and that the three heroes are still all played by whites, is an outrage, said Guy Aoki of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans.

"It speaks volumes when the initial casting decision was to cast four white leads," he said. "For them to be comfortable with that ... it's embarrassing, it says a lot about their attitudes."

Le said Racebending.com has organized a letter-writing campaign to Paramount, but has received no response. Aoki said his organization had sent a letter asking for a meeting, but was ignored until filming had already started. The group met later with Paramount president Adam Goodman, who offered a prescreening.

But that hasn't happened yet, Aoki said, even though Paramount has expressed confidence that people will embrace the film once they see it.

"The filmmaker's interpretation reflects the myriad qualities that have made this series a global phenomenon," Paramount said in its statement. "We believe fans of the original and new audiences alike will respond positively once they see it."

Yet Harvard journalism instructor Martha Nichols said that while there are times when the case can be made for a movie to change something from the source material, this isn't one of them. She's the mother of an adopted 8-year-old Asian boy who is a big fan of the cartoon series, in part because of its homage to Asian cultures and characters.

The moviemakers "seem to have no clue that there's this huge fan base of young Asian-Americans who were delighted to see themselves" on screen," said Nichols, who blogs at Athena's Head.

She said her son would have loved to see a hero on screen who looked like him. "It could have really been groundbreaking. That's what is so sad about this."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2010/05/25/entertainment/e083357D96.DTL>

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