

Opinion: Disney embraces culturally aware and diverse

casting in "Moana"

When Disney's "Moana" hits theaters this November, it will feel different to many moviegoers for an unusual reason. The animated film casts voice actors of color to match the background of the characters in the story.

"Moana" is about a young woman looking for an imaginary Pacific island. The character of Princess Moana is voiced by young Hawaiian native Auli'i Cravalho. Moana also has a sidekick named Maui, voiced by American actor Dwayne Johnson, whose mother is of Samoan descent.

The voice cast also features several actors with different backgrounds. Actors Jemaine Clement, Temuera Morrison and Rachel House are part Maori, which is a native group of New Zealand. In addition, actress Nicole Scherzinger has Hawaiian and Filipino roots.

Movie Set In Japan Should Have More Japanese Actors

Not all animated movies are casting nonwhite voice actors in leading roles like "Moana." The animated movie "Kubo and the Two Strings" made by Laika/Focus Features recently opened. The movie is set in ancient Japan, and critics say there are too many white voice actors in its lead roles. The cast includes white actors Matthew McConaughey and Charlize Theron, plus Rooney Mara, Ralph Fiennes and Art Parkinson, who voices the title role.

Japanese actors are on cast but hold secondary roles, even though the story is set in their home country. They include George Takei, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Minae Noji, Alpha Takahashi and Ken Takemoto.

Critics have documented their frustration with casting white voice actors in traditionally nonwhite roles on Twitter. They call it "whitewashing" and use "#CartoonsSoWhite."

MANAA Says White Casting Doesn't Make Sense

The Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) is an advocacy group that criticized Laika for casting only white actors in leading roles. MANAA founding president Guy Aoki says this doesn't make sense. "Why are white actors playing an entire extended Japanese family?" Aoki asks.

Others agree. Gene Luen Yang is a Chinese-American cartoonist who is unhappy with the "Kubo" casting. "There are so many Asian-American actors these days. It makes me wonder why they didn't just go with one of them," Yang says.

The nonanimated movies of Hollywood have also been criticized for hiring white actors in traditionally nonwhite roles. In Sony's movie, "Aloha," white actress Emma Stone played a character who is part Asian and part Hawaiian. A Marvel movie that hasn't been released yet, called "Doctor Strange," casts white actress Tilda Swinton as a character from Tibet. And, the 2010 movie "The Last Airbender" was set in the tribal South Pole, yet featured white actors.

"Kubo" director Travis Knight said that Laika supports people of color. He cited the company's employees, who come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, as an example. In response to the movie, Knight said, "The critical conversation around diversity is one that Laika cares very deeply about."

Lalo Alcaraz is a well-known cartoonist, cultural commentator and TV show writer and

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producer. He has criticized Hollywood's lack of diversity in high-profile and decision-making positions.

"I have seen plenty of animated films in the last 10 years where the cast is almost always 100-percent Anglo [white] actors," says Alcaraz.

Disney Paves The Way For Change With "Moana"

"Moana" shows just how Disney has changed its hiring practices on animated films. The company has focused on making sure the voice actors fit the movie's culture.

In 1992, veteran Disney directors John Musker and Ron Clements released "Aladdin." While the movie featured mostly white voice actors in the lead roles, Asian-American actress Lea Salonga (of "Mulan") was also included. In addition, Musker and Clements directed Disney's 2009 film "The Princess and the Frog." The movie cast actors of color, including Oprah Winfrey and Terrence Howard.

Now, with "Moana," Disney has changed the way mainstream American animated movies are cast. It appears that other movies are inspired by Disney. Judging by early signs, the animated movie "Coco," which is in production, features a Day of the Dead theme and promises to be as culturally aware as "Moana." The Day of the Dead is a holiday celebrated in Mexico.

After all, if animated films can't find actors of color to voice their characters, what chance does the rest of Hollywood have when the film characters are real people?

Michael Cavna is an American cartoonist and "Comic Riffs" columnist for The Washington Post.

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