

Opinion: "Moana" casts actors who match the culture of their characters

By Michael Cavanaugh, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.31.16

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An image from Disney's forthcoming "Moana." Disney

When the Disney movie "Moana" is released this November, it will feel different to many moviegoers for an unusual reason. Unlike many others before it, this animated Hollywood film cast features voice actors of color to match the depicted culture or character in the story.

"Moana" is about a young woman looking for a fabled Pacific island, with demigod Maui in tow. The main character, Princess Moana, is voiced by young Hawaiian native Auli'i Cravalho. Maui is voiced by American actor Dwayne Johnson ("The Rock"), whose mother is of Samoan descent.

The voice cast also features several actors from New Zealand who are part Maori (a native group of New Zealand). They are Jemaine Clement (from "Flight of the Conchords"), Temuera Morrison and Rachel House. Actress Nicole Scherzinger, who has Hawaiian and Filipino roots, is also part of the voice cast.

"Kubo" Received Criticism For Its Casting

"Moana" will arrive after a different American animated film received complaints for having white actors voice the Japanese characters.

"Kubo and the Two Strings" opened Friday and is set in ancient Japan. The lead roles in the movie, produced by Laika/Focus Features, are voiced by white people. The all-star lineup includes Oscar winners Matthew McConaughey and Charlize Theron and Oscar nominees Rooney Mara and Ralph Fiennes. White Irish-born teen actor Art Parkinson voices the title role. The only Japanese actors in the cast hold secondary roles. They are George Takei, Cary-Hiroiyuki Tagawa, Minae Noji, Alpha Takahashi and Ken Takemoto.

In other words, often when it comes to casting leading voices in animated films, "#CartoonsSoWhite."

The watchdog group Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) criticized Laika for casting white actors in the leading roles. "Why are white actors playing an entire extended Japanese family?" MANAA's founding president Guy Aoki says in his criticism. MANAA looks for issues like diversity and inequality that go against public interest and speaks up in hopes of inspiring change.

Gene Luen Yang, a Chinese-American cartoonist, says the decision not to hire Japanese actors for "Kubo" is strange. "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.

Hollywood's Casting History Lacks Diversity

Hollywood at large has increasingly faced accusations of "whitewashing," or when white actors are cast in historically nonwhite roles. There was Sony's movie, "Aloha," where white actress Emma Stone played a character who is part Asian and part Hawaiian. Marvel's not-yet-released movie, "Doctor Strange," casts white actress Tilda Swinton as a character from Tibet. Additionally, 2010's "The Last Airbender" featured actors who are white in the fantasy movie's tribal South Pole setting.

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

Lalo Alcaraz is a cartoonist, cultural commentator and TV show producer who criticized Hollywood's lack of diversity in its high-profile and decision-making positions.

"I have seen plenty of animated films in the last decade where the cast is almost always 100-percent Anglo [white] actors, with a token minority actor, if that," says Alcaraz. "It seems that most talking, nonhuman characters somehow always seem to be voiced by white actors."

"Moana" Helps Change The Trend

It is clear "Moana" shows just how Disney has evolved in its approach to culturally sensitive casting. In 1992, veteran Disney directors John Musker and Ron Clements released "Aladdin." The movie featured mostly white voice actors in the lead roles, but added in Asian-American actress Lea Salonga (of "Mulan").

In 1993, The New York Times reported on how a lyric in "Aladdin" mentioned a barbaric act. After receiving criticism from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Disney changed the lyric.

With directors Musker and Clements, Disney's 2009 film "The Princess and the Frog" starred actors of color, including Anika Noni Rose, Bruno Campos, Keith David and Michael-Leon Woodley. Oprah Winfrey and Terrence Howard, who are black, were also cast.

Now, with "Moana," Musker and Clements help lead the change in the way mainstream American animated movies are cast. It appears that Disney has paved the way for other movies to follow suit and change their casting practices. For example, the animated movie "Coco," which is in production, features a Day of the Dead theme and promises to be as culturally aware as "Moana."

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.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a central idea?
- (A) Maui is voiced by American actor Dwayne Johnson ("The Rock"), whose mother is of Samoan descent.
 - (B) MANAA looks for issues like diversity and inequality that go against public interest and speaks up in hopes of inspiring change.
 - (C) Hollywood at large has increasingly faced accusations of "whitewashing," or when white actors are cast in historically nonwhite roles.
 - (D) Lalo Alcaraz is a cartoonist, cultural commentator and TV show producer who criticized Hollywood's lack of diversity in its high-profile and decision-making positions.
- 2 Which of the following options is an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) A new Disney film called "Moana" has cast actors that are culturally similar to its characters. This is notable in Hollywood, which has been accused of "whitewashing" cartoons and movies by only casting white actors in lead roles.
 - (B) The fun Disney film "Moana" is a great step forward toward greater diversity in casting. Movies like "Kubo and the Two Strings" and "Coco" have also been praised for their cultural sensitivity and diversity.
 - (C) Hollywood has long been justly accused of "whitewashing" in its movies. While there are many people who protest this practice, there are others who idiotically insist on defending the movie industry.
 - (D) Casting movies that are not culturally diverse has been a problem for a long time. However, it has never been a problem in cartoons until the recent release of three films with culturally unacceptable casts.
- 3 In the article, how does the description of gradual changes in Disney's casting support the author's argument?
- (A) It illustrates different reasons why other movie studios have not yet followed Disney's example in their own casting.
 - (B) It illustrates the anger that some people still feel about the casting of movies like "Kubo and the Two Strings."
 - (C) It suggests that Hollywood will never be able to change the way that it casts movies that are not animated.
 - (D) It suggests that "Moana" is an important step forward in the long evolution toward greater diversity in casting.

- 4 Which aspect of the author's argument is MOST important in the article as a whole?
- (A) the contrast between the casting of "Moana" and other recent movies like "Kubo and the Two Strings"
 - (B) the comparison between the actors in "Moana" and other new animated movies like "Coco"
 - (C) the effects of Lalo Alcaraz on Hollywood's lack of diversity in its high-profile and decision-making positions
 - (D) the efforts of Disney directors Musker and Clements to cast actors of color in "The Princess and the Frog"