

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

**May 31, 2009**

## Her Prince Has Come. Critics, Too.

By [BROOKS BARNES](#)

LOS ANGELES

“THE Princess and the Frog” does not open nationwide until December, but the buzz is already breathless: For the first time in Walt Disney animation history, the fairest of them all is black.

Princess Tiana, a hand-drawn throwback to classic Disney characters like Cinderella and Snow White, has a dazzling green gown, a classy upsweep hairdo and a diamond tiara. Like her predecessors, she is a strong-willed songbird (courtesy of the Tony-winning actress [Anika Noni Rose](#)) who finds her muscle-bound boyfriend against all odds.

“Finally, here is something that all little girls, especially young black girls, can embrace,” Cori Murray, an entertainment director at Essence magazine, recently told CNN.

To the dismay of Disney executives — along with the African-American bloggers and others who side with the company — the film is also attracting chatter of an uglier nature. Is “The Princess and the Frog,” set in New Orleans in the 1920s, about to vaporize stereotypes or promote them?

The film, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, two of the men behind “The Little Mermaid,” unfolds against a raucous backdrop of voodoo and jazz. Tiana, a waitress and budding chef who dreams of owning a restaurant, is persuaded to kiss a frog who is really a prince.

The spell backfires and — poof! — she is also an amphibian. Accompanied by a Cajun firefly and a folksy alligator, the couple search for a cure.

After viewing some photographs of merchandise tied to the movie, which is still unfinished, Black Voices, a Web site on [AOL](#) dedicated to African-American culture, faulted the prince’s relatively light skin color. Prince Naveen hails from the fictional land of Maldonia and is voiced by a Brazilian actor; Disney says that he is not white.

“Disney obviously doesn’t think a black man is worthy of the title of prince,” Angela Bronner Helm wrote March 19 on the site. “His hair and features are decidedly non-black. This has left many in the community shaking their head in befuddlement and even rage.”

Others see insensitivity in the locale.

“Disney should be ashamed,” William Blackburn, a former columnist at The Charlotte Observer, told London’s Daily Telegraph. “This princess story is set in New Orleans, the setting of one of the most

devastating tragedies to beset a black community.”

ALSO under scrutiny is Ray the firefly, performed by Jim Cummings (the voice of Winnie the Pooh and Yosemite Sam). Some people think Ray sounds too much like the stereotype of an uneducated Southerner in an early trailer.

Of course, armchair critics have also been complaining about the princess. Disney originally called her Maddy (short for Madeleine). Too much like Mammy and thus racist. A rumor surfaced on the Internet that an early script called for her to be a chambermaid to a white woman, a historically correct profession. Too much like slavery.

And wait: We finally get a black princess and she spends the majority of her time on screen as a frog?

“Because of Disney’s history of stereotyping,” said Michael D. Baran, a cognitive psychologist and anthropologist who teaches at Harvard and specializes in how children learn about race, “people are really excited to see how Disney will handle her language, her culture, her physical attributes.”

Mr. Baran is reserving judgment and encourages others to do the same. But he added that the issue warrants scrutiny because of Disney’s outside impact on children.

“People think that kids don’t catch subtle messages about race and gender in movies, but it’s quite the opposite,” he said.

Donna Farmer, a Los Angeles Web designer who is African-American and has two children, applauded Disney’s efforts to add diversity.

“I don’t know how important having a black princess is to little girls — my daughter loves Ariel and I see nothing wrong with that — but I think it’s important to moms,” she said.

“Who knows if Disney will get it right,” she added. “They haven’t always in the past, but the idea that Disney is not bending over backward to be sensitive is laughable. It wants to sell a whole lot of Tiana dolls and some Tiana paper plates and make people line up to see Tiana at Disney World.”

Few people outside the company have seen footage of the movie. Among them are consultants like [Oprah Winfrey](#), whom Disney asked for input on the racial aspects of the film and was cast as Tiana’s mother. (Movie theater owners and members of the [N.A.A.C.P.](#) have also been shown scenes, and the reactions, according to a Disney spokeswoman, were “extremely positive.”)

Rather, fueling the debate are photos of related merchandise taken from a toy industry event, a one-minute teaser trailer and Disney’s enormous cultural impact.

The company wants to vanquish once and for all the whispers of racism that linger from stumbles in the past. Yes, “Dumbo” traded in black stereotypes in 1941 with its band of uneducated, pimp-hat-wearing crows. All the animals in “The Jungle Book” from 1967 speak in proper British accents except for the jive-talking monkeys who desperately want to become “real people.”

More recently, “Aladdin” ran into trouble in 1993. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

labeled certain song lyrics defamatory (“Where they cut off your ear/If they don’t like your face/It’s barbaric, but, hey, it’s home”).

The company responds that criticism of such well-worn examples — particularly of films from the ’60s and earlier — applies a 21st-century morality to movies made in sharply different times. The United States barely had a Civil Rights Act in 1967, much less a black president.

Disney executives think people should stop jumping to conclusions about “The Princess and the Frog.”

A producer of the film, Peter Del Vecho, said: “We feel a great responsibility to get this right. Every artistic decision is being carefully thought out.”

Ms. Rose, familiar to movie audiences for her role in “Dreamgirls,” has also defended Disney.

“There is no reason to get up in arms,” she told reporters at a recent Los Angeles Urban League dinner. “If there was something that I thought was disrespectful to me or to my heritage, I would certainly not be a part of it.”

Ms. Winfrey declined to comment. A spokesman for the N.A.A.C.P. said the organization had no immediate comment.

Disney often gets criticized no matter how carefully it strives to put together its television shows, theme-park attractions and movies. For years, Disney has been lambasted by some parents for not having a black princess. Now, some of those same voices are taking aim at the company without seeing the finished product. (Officially, the princesses are Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel of “The Little Mermaid,” Belle of “Beauty and the Beast” and Jasmine of “Aladdin” — all white except for Jasmine, who is Arabian. The leads from “Mulan” and “Pocahontas” are sometimes sold with the Princess merchandising line.)

Mr. Del Vecho said the idea for a black princess came about organically. The producers wanted to create a fairy tale set in the United States and centered on New Orleans, with its colorful past and deep musical history.

“As we spent time in New Orleans, we realized how truly it is a melting pot, which is how the idea of strongly multicultural characters came about,” Mr. Del Vecho said.

He described Tiana as “a resourceful and talented person” and the rare fairy tale heroine “who is not saved by a prince.” Once the decision was made to make the lead black, he added, “We wanted her to bear the traits of African-American women and be truly beautiful.”

Getting “The Princess and the Frog” right is of enormous importance to Disney. The company needs hits, as evidenced by a recently announced 97 percent drop in quarterly profit. The Disney Princess merchandising line is a \$4 billion annual business and the company has plans for Tiana to be everywhere. Get ready for Tiana dresses, elaborate dolls and [Halloween](#) costumes.

The movie also marks a return by Disney to traditional hand-drawn animation. A failure could be the final

nail in the coffin of an art form pioneered by Walt Disney himself.

In the last 20 years, Disney has made huge strides in depicting race. In 1997, the company's television division presented a live-action version of "Cinderella" with a black actress, the singer [Brandy](#), playing the lead. In 1998, "Mulan" was celebrated as a rare animated feature that depicted Chinese characters with realistic-looking eyes; most animated films (even those from Japan) had Westernized versions of Asian people until that time.

THE debate surrounding "The Princess and the Frog" illustrates how difficult it is to deal with race in animation, experts say. Cartoons by their nature trade in caricatures.

Mainstream producers have largely avoided characters of color for fear of offending minority groups, although black producers have been creating cartoons featuring stereotyped characters since the days of "Fat Albert."

Disney can take some comfort in a backlash to the backlash.

"This is one of those situations where I am ashamed of the black community," Levi Roberts said in a YouTube video. "Are we being racist ourselves by saying this movie shouldn't have a white prince?"

Perhaps the final word — for now — should come from somebody who is African-American and a former Disney animator.

"Overly sensitive people see racial or ethnic slights in every image," wrote Floyd Norman, whose credits span from "Sleeping Beauty" to "Mulan," in a 2007 essay on the Web site Jim Hill Media. "And in their zeal to sanitize and pasteurize everything, they've taken all the fun out of cartoon making."

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

In the process of excavating the film's racial contexts, this paper also addresses its reception by American critics, as well as how Disney, in its hypersensitivity to racial issues and its desire to fulfill so many competing agendas, has paradoxically created an animated feature which generally elides race, even as it redeploys multiple racial stereotypes. Her prince has come. Critics, too. The New York Times, May 29. Retrieved February 1, 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/fashion31disney.html>).