

Disney blacks out race in 'The Princess and the Frog'

It's not easy being green, the heroine of *The Princess and the Frog* discovers. But to judge from how this polished, hand-drawn movie addresses, or rather strenuously avoids, race, it is a lot more difficult to be black, particularly in a Disney animated feature. If you haven't heard: Disney, the company that immortalized pale pretties like Snow White and the zip-a-dee-doo-dah of plantation living in *Song of the South*, has made a fairy tale about a black heroine, a character whose shoulders and story prove far too slight for all the hopes already weighing her down. It's no wonder she's soon jumping into the bayou, green legs and all.

But before she leaps, Tiana is just another child of New Orleans. When we first meet her, sometime before World War I, Tiana (initially voiced by Elizabeth Dampier) is keeping company with her mother, a seamstress, Eudora (Oprah Winfrey), who sews princess dresses for Charlotte (initially Breanna Brooks), the pint-size daughter of the richest white man in the Crescent City, Big Daddy LaBouff (John Goodman). Life is more humble back at Tiana's home, where her own father, James (Terrence Howard, silky as always), an aspiring restaurateur, makes a gumbo that draws neighbors from their homes and, later, he helps tuck her into bed. Wearing work boots and suspenders, his sleeves rolled up, James cautions Tiana that it's fine to wish upon a star, but that hard work gets the job done.

Hard work is a recurrent theme in *Princess*, which the directors John Musker and Ron Clements, who wrote the script with Rob Edwards, further underscore when the adult Tiana (Anika Noni Rose) swans into the Jazz Age. Though the theme certainly serves the story — like her father, Tiana yearns to open a restaurant — it also displaces race, which the film, given the commercial stakes, cannot engage. Hard work separates her from Charlotte (voiced as an adult by Jennifer Cody), not race (or segregation). It drives Tiana, feeding her savings and dreams. "I don't have time for dancing," she sings. "This old town can slow me down/people taking the easy way./But I know exactly where I'm going./I'm getting closer and closer every day."

Hard work, though, also makes the adult Tiana something of a drudge and a bore. Like a lot of classic Disney heroines, Tiana is good and sweet

and pretty as a meticulously animated picture, from the top of her sleek chignon down to her high-stepping shoes. Although she can be a whirlwind of activity, as when she balances multiple plates at the cafe where she works double shifts, Tiana doesn't have the verve of the spunky little girl who bounces through the first few minutes of the movie. What she does have, like most Disney heroines, is a prince charming, Naveen (Bruno Campos), a well-chiseled slab from the fictional kingdom of Maldonia, who rolls into town with a jazzy flourish and a devious manservant, Lawrence (Peter Bartlett).

The prince, disappointingly if not surprisingly, becomes not only Tiana's salvation but also that of the movie, largely by bringing some slapstick comedy and a touch of suspense into the proceedings, along with the expected romance. Though he catches Tiana's eye (and she his), Naveen is soon set upon by both Charlotte, who's angling for a match, and Dr Facilier (a terrific Keith David), a villain who, as is true of many movies, easily steals the show. As thin as an exclamation mark and just as excited, Dr Facilier wears spats and a top hat emblazoned with a skull and bones. Long, inky shadows follow his every step, sprouting around him like dark thoughts, as in the bravura musical number *Friends on the Other Side*.

Gorgeously animated with bursts of bright purple and acid green — the realistic lines of the characters explosively give way to increasingly jagged, graphic and surreal shapes — this number erupts early in the story, setting false expectations for the rest of the movie and its songs and animation. Despite some ensuing comic relief, largely in the hefty form of a musical alligator, Louis (Michael-Leon Wooley), and a snaggletoothed Cajun firefly, Ray (Jim Cummings), the film sags without Dr Facilier and his menace. That's even the case after Tiana, in a sparkling fairy-tale moment, kisses a frog and becomes one herself, a transformation that carries her on an extended journey through the bayou and, yes, into her own heart.

There are some lovely and odd interludes on that voyage, notably in the strange, swampy residence of an ancient conjurer, Mama Odie (Jennifer Lewis), who, gumming her lines and charming her pet snake, urges Tiana to *Dig a Little Deeper* (written, like most of the forgettable songs, by Randy Newman). Big girls and little know what happens next, but, my, the movie takes an awfully long time getting there. That finale, like the story itself, represents progress of a kind, I suppose, even if this princess spends an uncommonly long time splashing around as a frog. A frog whose green hue suggests that, if nothing else, Disney finally recognizes that every little girl, no matter her color, represents a new marketing opportunity.

She may be the animation company's most prominent black heroine, but the film works hard to subsume Tiana's ethnicity under the overarching theme of hard work

BY MANOHLA DARGIS
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Film Notes

THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG

DIRECTED BY:
JOHN MUSKER

WITH THE VOICES OF:
ANIKA NONI ROSE (TIANA), TERRENCE HOWARD (JAMES), JOHN GOODMAN (BIG DADDY), KEITH DAVID (DR FACILIER), JIM CUMMINGS (RAY), JENIFER LEWIS (MAMA ODIE), OPRAH WINFREY (EUDORA)

RUNNING TIME:
95 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

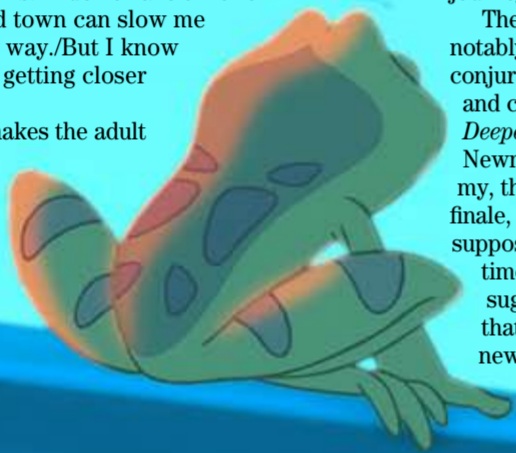


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