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advocating just and equal opportunity in film and television

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Contact: Marissa Lee mlee@racebending.com

FAN GROUP CONDEMNS RACIAL BIAS IN CASTING OF "THE LAST AIRBENDER"

Racebending.com alleges discrimination against actors of color in Paramount Pictures' movie adaptation of Asian-based TV series.

LOS ANGELES, CA -- Thousands of fans are protesting M. Night Shyamalan's "The Last Airbender", blasting the Paramount Pictures for its racial bias in selecting white actors to portray characters of color.

Racebending.com, a grassroots organization comprised of fans of the "Avatar: The Last Airbender" franchise, began mobilizing immediately after principal casting was announced. Only white actors were cast in the lead protagonist roles, a decision Racebending.com alleges is rooted in Hollywood's historical bias against casting actors of color in lead roles.

"American actors of color rarely get to play the hero, if ever," said Marissa Lee, one of the protest's co-founders. "We're really disappointed. Paramount felt that white actors were better suited to play heroes of color than hardworking, underrepresented actors who are actually of Asian or Inuit descent."

Comprised of thousands of supporters from over 50 countries worldwide, Racebending.com continues to monitor the production of the film to hold Paramount Pictures accountable. The burgeoning fan movement has been invited to present at academic conferences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania, and hosted its own table at WonderCon 2010 in April.

"Racebending is more than just a protest group," said Loraine Sammy, another co-founder of the fan protest. "It also provides a safe space for people to challenge privilege and discrimination in the media industry, in pop culture, and within their own communities."

August 2008 casting sheets for the film's heroic leading characters read, "Caucasian or any other ethnicity," even though the original animated series was widely advertised by Nickelodeon as set in an "Asian fantasy world."

"It was like a job advertisement straight out of the sixties," said Catherine Bugayong, Racebending.com's Northwest coordinator. "And they got what they asked for. They made it very clear that white actors were preferable to anyone else, regardless of talent."

Immediately after the casting announcement, thousands of outraged fans mobilized to protest through a letter writing campaign, petition, and protests. The production has since cast actors of color, but only in villainous, supporting, and background roles. Paramount ignored all letters from the public but responded to a letter sent from the Media Action Network for Asian Americans. A letter from the producers stated that the setting would be diverse.

"Even if there are actors of color in secondary roles, that's still a glass ceiling," Lee said. "The main characters were originally people of color. In this movie, actors of color should have been the leads, not scenery."

Racebending.com articles point out that Paramount Pictures released over 100 films between 2000 and 2010. None have featured Asian American or Inuit actors as the leading man or woman.

"The 'Airbender' franchise is the only franchise Paramount has with Asian- and Inuit-leading heroes," Lee said. "If Paramount wasn't willing to cast actors of color to play the heroes in something as obvious as 'Airbender,' then when are they going to cast actors of color as leads?"

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