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Mr. Sam Mercer
Producer
Avatar: The Last Airbender

via email to Lauren Scott
LrnSct@hotmail.com

Dear Mr. Mercer:

On behalf of East West Players (EWP), I write to express our concerns about the casting for the upcoming M. Night Shyamalan film, AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER.

EWP, the nation's premiere Asian American theatre organization, is the oldest continuously operating theatre of color in the country. For 43 years, EWP has nurtured Asian American talent in the acting, writing and directing fields and has served as an important pipeline for Hollywood's efforts to diversify its casting practices. We are proud of the fact that about three out of every four Asian Americans in the Los Angeles chapters of the acting guilds (SAG, AFTRA, AGVA and AEA) have performed at, taken courses from or had some other contact with EWP at some point during their careers. Several members of the EWP family have performed voice work on the animated Nickelodeon TV series, AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER, including EWP's late Founding Artistic Director Mako and Dante Basco, one of the stars of EWP's current production, IXNAY. The AVATAR series unmistakably depicts ethnically Asian and Inuit characters in distinctly Asian-influenced settings replete with Asian cultural references in language, clothing, architecture, etc. Thus, when we heard that Paramount was making a live action feature based on the TV series, EWP and the Asian American acting community grew excited.

This excitement has been replaced with disappointment and, in many cases, anger as more information about the casting of AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER has come to light. We understand that three out of the four leads have been cast with relatively unknown Caucasian actors and that a Caucasian pop singer was being pursued for the fourth lead before he dropped out due to scheduling conflicts. Based on the language of the casting call – seeking "Caucasian or any other ethnicity" – rather than the more neutral and expansive "submit all ethnicities" – it appears the producers had a bias toward casting whites for the leads. And a golden opportunity was lost to cast ethnically Asian actors to play the lead roles in this Asian-inspired story.

After all, this doesn't appear to be an example of a U.S. studio taking a story set in an Asian country and transplanting it to America (e.g., SEVEN SAMURAI/THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN; SHALL WE DANCE; THE RING). Instead, it appears that AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER will continue to feature Asian-influenced settings, clothing, and cultural elements such as martial arts, even if the four different "nations" in the story (Fire, Water, Earth, Air) are made "ethnically and culturally" diverse. Indeed, casting director Deedee Ricketts was quoted in the Daily Pennsylvanian as asking potential extras to "dress in traditional cultural ethnic attire....If you're Korean, wear a kimono."

Beside the ignorance of confusing Korean hanboks with Japanese kimonos, Ms. Ricketts' call for extras to come looking ethnic and foreign could not contrast more sharply with the casting of whites for most of the leading roles. As one of these actors (Jackson Rathbone) commented, he will "have to get a tan" to properly play his character Sokka, a leader of the darker-skinned Water Tribe.

All of this raises several important questions. How exactly are the lead white actors going to represent ethnically and culturally diverse "nations," unless they resort to wearing makeup and/or prosthetics to try to appear "ethnic," whether that may mean Asian, African, Hispanic/Latin, native, or simply "darker-skinned"? Or, if the lead actors will continue to appear white, what signal does it send that they are the leaders of darker-skinned and/or ethnic societies? And how can the casting of homogeneously Caucasian actors as three out of the top four leads possibly be consistent with a story whose overarching message is diversity and harmony between different cultures?

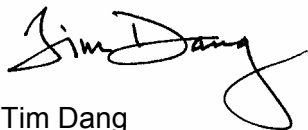
Given that AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER is so clearly based on and inspired by ancient East Asian, South Asian and Inuit civilizations, it is a major lost opportunity for the producers not to have aggressively sought out Asian talent for the lead roles. The fact that Dev Patel apparently has been cast in one of the four lead roles is a positive step but it certainly does not excuse the filmmakers from being insensitive to the negative ethnic and cultural implications of using whites to either "look like" ethnic peoples or to inexplicably lead such peoples as if they are white saviors.

Even if the filmmakers are blind to these concerns, they ought to be responsive to marketplace realities. There are millions of fans of Nickelodeon's AVATAR and they are drawn to the series' Asian themes. They are not likely to accept either a "whitewashing" of the story or an unrealistic portrayal of white actors trying to look ethnic and/or leading distinctly ethnic civilizations.

Given the serious concerns that have been raised about the casting of AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER, including furious debates that are taking place on the topic in cyberspace, we believe it would be beneficial for Paramount's executives to meet with representatives of EWP and other Asian American organizations to discuss the matter. Please contact me by phone or email to arrange a meeting at the earliest mutually convenient time.

EWP has worked with the four major broadcast television networks and various studios for several years to help them increase diversity. We look forward to working with Paramount on this important issue as well.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim Dang". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Tim Dang
Producing Artistic Director

cc: Mike DiMartino
Bryan Konietzko
Dan Martinsen, EVP corporate communications, Nickelodeon
Jenna Lutrell, executive in charge of production, Nickelodeon