

Disney's *Soul* in Denmark: New York Times disapproves of a white actor dubbing a black actor's voice

David Walsh
20 January 2021

The *New York Times* is unceasing in its campaign to racialize every important aspect of life in the US and globally, encouraging divisions in the population along ethnic lines and facilitating the growth of the far right. In this effort, it takes advantage of the selfishness and political short-sightedness of upper middle class layers, including in cultural matters.

It is difficult to overstate the political and ideological vileness of such efforts.

One recent foray along these lines has the *Times* coming out against white Danish actors dubbing a number of roles in the Disney-Pixar animated film *Soul*, featuring Jamie Foxx, Tina Fey and others.

In a subhead, a January 16 article by Lisa Abend (“Pixar’s ‘Soul’ Has a Black Hero. In Denmark, a White Actor Dubs the Voice”) asserts that the casting “has fueled a debate about racism and fanned anger about stereotyping and prejudice in European-language voice-overs, even when films have main characters of color.”

There is something terribly cynical about such pieces. With a finger in the wind, the author hopes to curry favor with that portion of the *Times*’ readership that is race-obsessed. The article itself becomes a part of the process of “fanning” or even *inciting* the “anger.”

Abend writes that Danish film critics generally greeted *Soul*, “Pixar’s first animated feature to focus on Black characters and African-American culture, with rapture, hailing its sensitive, joyful portrayal of a jazz musician on a quest to live a meaningful life.”

“What the Danish press did not initially focus on, by and large,” the *Times* article continues, “was the characters’ race. But that changed after the movie’s release on Dec. 25, when realization spread that the Danish-language version had been dubbed primarily by white actors. This is also the case in many other European-

language versions of *Soul*.”

The healthy response to that would be: so what? But the *Times* and the self-proclaimed experts it cites choose to view this as “an example of structural racism.” The artificially generated “controversy,” which probably excited no more than a handful of academics and professional activists in Copenhagen, led the actor who dubbed Foxx’s performance, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, to explain on Facebook, “My position with regards to any job is very simple. Let the man or woman who can perform the work in the best possible way get the job.” What a scandalous viewpoint! The actor should obviously be run out of the film industry.

The *Times* cites the comments of other European voice actors and directors who also suggest that casting should be essentially color-blind. A German dubbing artist Charles Rettinghaus, who feels he has a “special connection” with Foxx and has dubbed the latter’s voice in more than 20 films, argues that “It doesn’t matter if you are Black, you should be and are allowed to dub anything ... Why shouldn’t you play a white actor or an Indian or an Asian?”

Ah, but “it’s more complicated than that” assert the *Times* and its racist interviewees. Actually, it’s not. Rettinghaus is entirely correct. Of course, if there are prejudices against black performers voicing white actors and other sorts of stereotyping in Europe or anywhere else, including of the unconscious variety, such practices need to be forcefully exposed and fought against. But the worst way to “oppose” existing bias and backwardness is by means of racial quotas and barriers.

After all, if dubbing directors were obliged by law or industry decree to have only black performers voice black actors and so forth, where would that leave someone like Fily Keita, a black performer in France? The *Times* notes

that Keita doesn't "feel held back as a Black actor working in the industry" and has also lent her voice "to roles played originally by white actresses, such as Amanda Seyfried and Jamie-Lynn Sigler."

Soul has white and black co-directors, Pete Docter and Kemp Powers, respectively, and "complicating things" even more, as the *Times* article observes, "is the fact that, as a result of various plot machinations, Joe is voiced by Tina Fey for a decent chunk of the film, a decision that has drawn some criticism."

In objective terms, in the guise of opposing "structural racism," the *Times* is striving to return the cultural world to a previous age, when everyone knew his or her "place." Why isn't the *Times* outraged that African-American soprano Leontyne Price in the 1950s and 1960s became one of the leading interpreters of the operas of Giuseppe Verdi, a white Italian? The Nazis were infuriated that Jewish or anti-fascist German actors (such as Conrad Veidt, a Lutheran, who, before leaving Germany, put down "Jewish" as his religion in all official paperwork because he was married to Ilona Prager, a Hungarian Jew) portrayed German fascist officials or military officers in Hollywood films. Did they not have a point?

The American film industry treated black performers in a generally disgraceful manner for the first several decades of its existence, relegating them primarily to roles as maids, valets, porters, conductors and worse. It took the presence of left-wing writers, directors, producers and actors in the 1940s to begin changing that state of affairs.

The Nazi regime made racism in cultural matters a matter of state policy. After the Hitler forces' accession to power in early 1933, they instituted the "Aryanization" of the film and theater world, a vicious version of ethnic and racial "cleansing." In the spring of that year, Ufa, the largest German film company, laid off its Jewish employees "owing to Germany's national revolution." As filmportal.de explains, in a June 1933 directive, "the Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP) decreed that 'everyone involved in the production of a German film must be of German descent and hold German citizenship.'" Film historian Eric Rentschler writes that more than "1,500 filmmakers—many of them Jewish or politically progressive—fled Germany ... and were replaced by toadying writers and second-class opportunists."

For the Nazis, filmportal.de notes, "the question of descent" was "of central importance." Its essay continues: "One of the foundations of the Nazis' racist world view

and policy of annihilation was their instrumentalization of the genetic doctrine: Not only physical features, but character and 'nature' were considered to be inherited." Similar tastes in music, as well as "speech patterns," were signs of racial purity.

Historian Richard Dove (in *A Tale of Two Cities: The Actors Lilly Kann and Martin Miller in Berlin and London 1933–1945*) points out that after January 1933, "Jewish theatre artists were banned from performing on the German stage." The Jüdischer Kulturbund [Jewish Cultural Association] became the "only professional stage outlet for Jewish performers in Germany. All Jewish artists were required to join it, if they wished to continue to perform."

Dove writes that "the repertoire of the theatre was restricted by the refusal of the Nazi authorities to allow it to produce the German theatre classics—so familiar to both actors and audience—since a Jewish theatre was deemed inappropriate to perform them. In 1934, they were prohibited to perform plays by [Friedrich] Schiller, a ban later extended to the entire classical repertoire of German theatre."

The *Times* writers and the individuals they cite are not fascists, but there is an implacable, pernicious logic to arguments based on race and "blood."

Modern economic and cultural development leads objectively toward the destruction of national and ethnic barriers and toward global interconnectedness, underpinned by changes in production and communications. Capitalism, with its structure of warring nation-states scrambling for markets and profits, stands in the way of that process. The *Times* and its affluent body of journalists and editors advocate nationalism, chauvinism and racialism. The WSWS will continue relentlessly to oppose this.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact