

Debate over Disney's decision to make "The Little Mermaid" black

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Image 1. Halle Bailey, of the R&B duo Chloe x Halle, will be starring as Ariel in the upcoming live-action adaptation of "The Little Mermaid." On July 3, Bailey wrote on Twitter and Instagram that the casting was a "dream come true," sharing an edited image of Ariel that showed her with dark skin, brown eyes and black hair. Photo by: Dylan Bonner via Chloe x Halle Twitter

Ariel first splashed into movie theaters nearly 30 years ago. The star of Disney's animated film "The Little Mermaid" had a certain look.

She had huge blue eyes, white skin and bright red hair. Her only clothing was a purple top made of seashells. Instead of legs, she sported a green fish tail.

Disney is remaking the 1989 movie. It will be live-action instead of animation. In it, Ariel will have a new look.

New Choice For Disney

On July 3, Disney announced that Halle Bailey, a black actress and singer, will play Ariel in the new film. She is 19 years old. It is the first time Disney has selected a woman of color to play a traditionally white princess in one of its live-action movies, news reports said.

The news received praise from celebrities and many fans. However, it brought online protests from some who were upset by the change from the character's image.

Disney has yet to respond to the protests. However, Freeform, a Disney-owned TV network, gave a statement. The actress, who is also in the musical duo Chloe X Halle, stars on the network's show "Grown-ish."

In an online post, Freeform suggested that people have a problem if they cannot accept the choice of Bailey. It called her "the incredible, sensational, highly-talented, gorgeous Halle Bailey."

Divided Opinion

The debate over a black Ariel shows how attempts to diversify iconic characters can divide opinions. In 2016, Leslie Jones, a black actress, faced online attacks involving her race and sex. She was in the all-female "Ghostbusters" movie. The first "Ghostbusters" film had white men in the main roles. News reports said Jones took a break from Twitter because of the attacks, just days after her movie hit theaters.

Last year, Kelly Marie Tran was the first Asian-American actress to have a leading role in a "Star Wars" movie. She faced online bullying following her appearance in "Star Wars: The Last Jedi."

Rob Marshall is making the new "Little Mermaid." They chose Bailey after a broad search, he said.

Bailey has "spirit, heart, youth, innocence" and a great singing voice, Marshall said.

On July 3, Bailey wrote online that the part was a "dream come true." She shared an image of Ariel. It showed her with dark skin, brown eyes and black hair.

Celebrities and fans congratulated her.

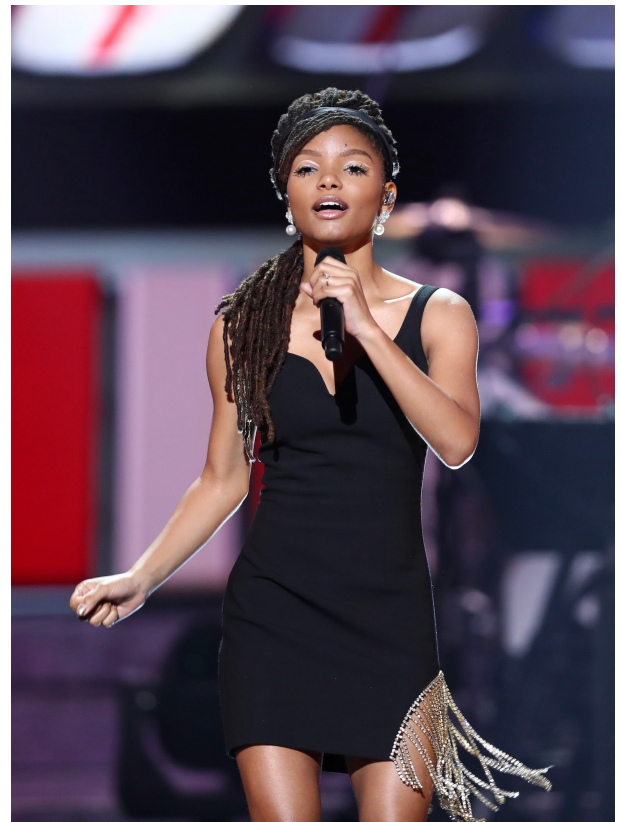
"My kids and I are so excited," singer Mariah Carey said on Twitter.

The choice also received support from Jodi Benson. She voiced Ariel in the original animated film. She was asked about a woman of color playing Ariel. Benson said Disney wants "to communicate with all of us in the audience so that we can fall in love with the film again."

"The spirit of a character is what really matters," she said. "What you bring to the table in a character as far as their heart and their spirit is what really counts."

Benson added, "The most important thing for a film is to be able to tell a story. We need to be storytellers, no matter what we look like on the outside."

Whether Bailey shows the spirit of the mermaid did not seem to matter to critics. They focused instead on the animated character's look.



"You are the worst choice that Disney has ever made," one person wrote on Twitter.

"You will never be Ariel," another person said.

Critics Called Racist

Bailey's supporters hit back at critics. They called them "racists." However, several people said their concerns were about wanting to represent Ariel's character accurately.

One person compared Ariel's casting to Disney's approach for "The Lion King." The movie was remade this year.

"It was a HUGE issue that the lion king had to have an African cast right?" the person wrote. "Well it's a HUGE issue that Ariel isn't an accurate ginger," or redhead.

Some said that because Ariel is a fictional character, her look isn't key to the story.