Disney's 'politically correct' Pocahontas. By: Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn, Cineaste, 00097004, Dec95, Vol. 21, Issue 4

**RACE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA: PART 5**

When I walked into the theater to see Pocahontas, I had my choice of venue. It was playing on three of six screens, and the line waiting to get in never seemed to diminish. Later, I looked at the film section of the local paper and found that somewhere in the vicinity the movie was starting every fifteen minutes. Now that was a depressing thought.

In an interview with The New York Times, Eric Goldberg, the film's codirector (with Mike Gabriel), said, "We've gone from being accused of being too white bread to being accused of racism in Aladdin to being accused of being too politically correct in Pocahontas. That's progress to me." As much as I wanted to like Disney's production, I must disagree with Goldberg. Instead of progress in depicting Native Americans, this film takes a step backwards--a very dangerous step because it is so carefully glossed as "authentic" and "respectful."

The visual is emotionally more compelling than the written word, to say nothing of being more accessible, and since few people will read about Pocahontas, this film will exist as 'fact' in the minds of generations of American children. They will believe in the Romeo and Juliet in the wilds of North America that Disney has presented, which, as Robert Eaglestaff, principal of the American Indian Heritage School in Seattle, has said, is much like "trying to teach about the Holocaust and putting in a nice story about Anne Frank falling in love with a German officer."

It might seem a moot point at best to debate the authenticity or reality of an animated film in which a tree speaks words of wisdom and the protagonist guides her canoe over a deadly looking waterfall without mussing her hair. If this were a story about a fictional character in a fictional situation, I would agree. I like Mickey Mouse, too. But Pocahontas was a real woman who lived during the pivotal time of first contact with the outside force that would ultimately decimate her people. Although we know of her only from the English reports, and some of the details are a bit hazy, there are some facts that are well supported. For one thing, she was not a voluptuous young woman when she met John Smith but a ten- to twelve-year-old girl, and John Smith was a thirty-something mercenary.
who more resembled a brick than a blonde Adonis.

Smith's report of Pocahontas's brave act in saving his life was nowhere to be found in his initial description of his capture by Powhatan in 1608, surfacing only eight years later in a letter to the queen. There are a couple of possibilities to explain why that might have been. He could have been embarrassed, given the macho community of Jamestown boys, to admit a child had saved his life, or he might have stolen the story, possibly from the account published around the same time about Juan Ortiz and the Utica woman who saved him about eighty years before Smith met Pocahontas.

Assuming she did save his life, it could have been her idea, or it could have been her father's. If Powhatan had his own reasons for wanting Smith to live, he might have instructed her to do as she did to save face. Smith's report said she wanted her father to keep him alive but in captivity so he could make bells and beads for her, which, according to John Gould Fletcher (John Smith--Also Pocahontas, 1928), would have provided a cover story to eliminate the censure of the tribe for Powhatan's benevolent act and which would have been in keeping with their traditions.

Assuming Smith stole the story, he could have done so because he turned into a chronicler of his adventures in the New World after it became clear he was not going to be able to return to America to have more of them. He tried repeatedly to return, but even the first settlers in New England were happy to accept his advice but refused his company.

What we do know of Pocahontas is that she met John Smith in 1608, was probably responsible for some trading between the settlers and her people, was kidnapped and raped by the English but later married a tobacco planter named John Rolfe, had a son in 1615 and sailed to England in 1616. She was introduced to Ben Jonson and made such an impression that he wrote her into one of his comedies, The Staple of News; she attended a court masque that he wrote and evidently impressed the king and queen as well. She attempted to return home but became ill on the voyage and had to turn back to England, where she died, probably of smallpox, at the age of twenty-two. We have no idea how she or her people felt about any of this, except that some of the contemporary reports said
she died "of a broken heart."

That's a pretty interesting story, but not the sort of thing animated Disney films are known for. For one thing, it's much too violent and sad. According to James Pentecost, the film's producer, the changes that were made were due to the fact that Pocahontas's real story was simply too long. He said, "We decided to dramatize what we felt was the essence of Pocahontas." Now the logic may be a little tough to follow here, but evidently what that means is that they changed her age, her body, and gave her a motive for her actions that boils down to going gaga over the first white man she sees.

Ignoring for a moment the very non-PC, nonfeminist content of that change, there lies within it a very old stereotype of Native American women. In hundreds of films made during the last century, Indian women have been seen sacrificing themselves and their tribal communities for their white loves. I'm sure the irony is unintentional in Pocahontas as she paddles her canoe along, having just refused to marry the stereotypically stoic and noble Kocoum, singing about the change that is waiting "just around the river bend." The change that waits is another man and another culture in the form of John Smith.

The Disney folks have made much of the fact that Pocahontas is the driving force of this movie, which is, I suppose, to mean it makes some sort of feminist statement. She does sing to John about living naturally in tune with the Earth--also skirting dangerously close to another stereotype, that of the 'natural ecologist'--but does she have to do it in an off-the-shoulder miniskirt? And I would love to see a report on the physics of her body. Would she, like Barbie, fall over if really given those dimensions? Glen Keane, the film's supervising animator, researched the paintings of the real Pocahontas but wasn't very impressed, so he made a few "adjustments." Besides her beautiful "more Asian" eyes, he gave her a body with a wasp waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts that are truly impressive. He says, "Some people might see her as sexy, but she's not Jessica Rabbit. I think she looks rather athletic." Uh huh. Mel Gibson (the voice of John Smith) put it more succinctly when he said, "She's a babe." Or, what the heck, maybe she's just drawn that way.

To give the Disney folk their due, they apparently made some effort to be
nonoffensive, hiring Native Americans to work on the film and to act as consultants. Unfortunately, there seems to have been some miscommunication of concept. The Disney people were making an animated film about a fictional character. They knew she was fictional because they created her. The Native Americans on the team had other interests. Russell Means, the voice of Powhatan, likes the film, even though they were willing to take his advice about a detail such as the father referring to Pocahontas as Daughter instead of her name, but were unwilling to change important aspects of the image of the Indians as warlike, as established by the return from war at the beginning of the film. He says, "There are scenes where the English settlers admit to historical deceit . . . their animated settlers say they are here to rob, rape, pillage the land and kill Indians. This is the truth that Disney is entrusting with children while the rest of Hollywood won't trust that truth with adults."

As a mixedblood woman, I too am concerned with the truth of the colonization of America, but establishing another stereotype isn't the way to go about it. Even given that Disney's animated characters are by nature larger than life, the English in the film are extremely one-dimensional in their bum-bling greed. As Terry Russio, a screenwriter for Disney, said, "You can judge the sentiments of the country by who you can confidently make fun of. Nowadays the ultimate villain, I suppose, would be a fat, white male terrorist who ran a Fortune 500 company on the side." That fairly well describes the governor in Pocahontas, a description which renders the history of first contact literally cartoonish.

Disney also hired Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan, a Powhatan who travels through Virginia teaching the history and culture of her people, to work as consultant for the film. When she saw the early rushes, she said, "My heart sorrowed within me . . . Ten-year-old Pocahontas has become twenty-year-old Pocahontas. The movie was no longer historically accurate."

According to the film's producer, James Pentecost, all this talk about historical accuracy is somewhat irrelevant. He believes that "Nobody should go to an animated film hoping to get an accurate depiction of history." Okay, I'll buy that, as long as you're talking about The Lion King, but Pocahontas was real, and most people have heard her name even if they know nothing about her reality. Most of the adults who view this film, however, will not have the background to
judge whether it is accurate or not, and since the hype has been toward the 'political correctness' of the film, I would think they'd be more apt to trust it than not. And those are the adults. What about the children? As Linda Wool-verton, screenwriter for Beauty and the Beast and The Lion King said, "When you take on a Disney animated feature, you know you're going to be affecting entire generations of human minds." In this case, the effect is one more misconception advertised in the guise of authenticity and respect for Native American values.

As Custalow-McGowan said, "History is history. You're not honoring a nation of people when you change their history."