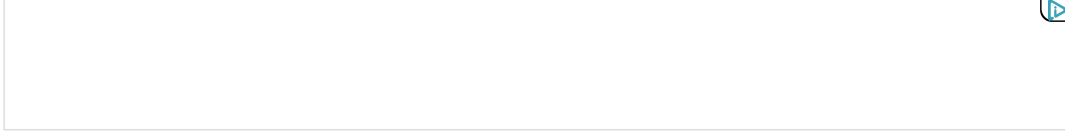


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'Belle' is diverse, female-led on and off camera

By [JESSICA HERNDON](#)

— May. 2, 2014 1:22 PM EDT

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In this Saturday, April 26, 2014 photo, director Amma Asante, left, and British actress Gugu Mbatah-Raw pose for a portrait in promotion of their upcoming film, "Belle," in New York. Asante knows how hard it is to get a costume drama off the ground, especially when it stars a black female and is directed by one like her. For period piece "Belle," Asante fought for diversity and the feminine eye in front of and behind the camera. (Photo by Taylor Jewell/Invision/AP)

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — British director Amma Asante knows how hard it is to get a costume drama off the ground — especially when it stars a black female newcomer and is directed by a black female with only one previous film to her credit.

But for the 18th century-set "Belle," Asante fought for diversity and the feminine eye in front of and behind the camera. "We need a variety of lenses in which to tell these stories," she says. "Being in a strong position where you can make the decisions ... I have a responsibility to open up those opportunities."

Now, for its next hurdle: "Belle" opens in limited release on Friday, up against no other than "The Amazing Spider-Man 2," the summer's first blockbuster. But [more](#) on that later.

Based on real events, "Belle" tells the story of a mixed-race woman, Dido Elizabeth Belle, who was raised in British aristocracy at a time when such a thing was unheard of. It not only stars English newbie Gugu Mbatha-Raw in the title role, but it was penned by black British writer Misan Sagay ("Their Eyes Were Watching God"), scored by Rachel Portman ("Chocolat"), the costumes were conceived by a woman and it was edited by women.

Asante points out that for women and minorities, landing quality jobs is difficult in the U.K., just as it is in America, since most producers envision a director that "doesn't come in my shape or color," she says. Having only one film under her belt didn't help her cause, either. (Her directorial debut, the BAFTA award-winning "A Way of Life," was released in 2004.)

"But I've at least arrived at an age group that appears appropriate," laughs the 44-year-old in a recent phone interview from New York. Now, Asante is determined to get other ladies in the door. "My stories are about women so why not have women help make them?"

That's not to say that a man or somebody not of color couldn't have done a great job on "Belle," says Mbatha-Raw over coffee in Los Angeles. "But the nuances Amma is interested in exploring come out from that perspective," she says. "She is very feminine and glamorous. She brings that quality and beauty out in 'Belle.'"

Intrigued by a double portrait he saw of Dido and her white cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, "Belle" producer Damian Jones ("The Iron Lady") knew he wanted to bring Dido's story to the screen — and that Asante should direct it. But, he says, "I was told, 'a black director with a black lead, good luck.' The project was a tough sale."

According to Asante, development of a "Belle" script for HBO began, and then fell through. But with the help of the British Film Institute, production on a theatrical feature version of "Belle" began in 2012.

Still, the script went through a number of revisions before production began. "It had been a fight all the way because it was a different way of approaching the story," said Sagay.

"Belle" weaves in the historical 1781 Zong Massacre, in which 142 enslaved Africans were drowned in the Caribbean by the crew of the British slave ship Zong. The slave owners made an insurance claim for the loss of the slaves, which was challenged by the insurers and wound up in the British courts.

The chief justice ultimately deciding the case was Lord Mansfield (Tom Wilkinson), Dido's great uncle with whom she lived after her Royal Navy admiral father sets sail for the Indies. Mansfield ruled in favor of the insurers and his verdict led to the end of the British slave trade in 1807.

In the film, Dido influences Lord Mansfield's decision.

"Lord Mansfield left huge footprints — journals, judgments — all kinds of things that we could have written about," says Sagay. "And we've chosen to write about the person who has the fewest footprints."

Sagay recalled past race-themed projects where producers asked for one script revision after another until eventually "you discover you are back to writing about the white male character."

That's why having a black screenwriter is critical, Sagay explains. "It's terribly important that they are at the table at the beginning of the process to talk about who and what (a film) is going to be about. Being there sets the tone," she says.

Brought up watching classic British TV shows such as "Pride and Prejudice," Mbatha-Raw never saw characters that looked like her. "But it is exciting to think that maybe little girls now can grow up with 'Belle' and know that they are rooted in history," she says.

Acquired by Fox Searchlight in June of last year, "Belle" opens in limited release on Friday and will expand to more theaters in coming weeks.

But even in limited, opening opposite Spidey seems ill-advised. Yet Fox Searchlight president Nancy Utley says the female-focused "Belle" offers the perfect counterprogramming for a testosterone-fueled superhero blockbuster.

"We released 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel' in this same time period and had great success," she says of the comedy that was pit against "The Avengers" in 2012 and went on to earn \$136 million worldwide.

"I think this is the little film that can," says Sagay. "It will surprise people where it will go."

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