



Tiana historic, but for whom?

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This photo released by East New York Preparatory Charter School shows Tykeisha Crockrell. "When I heard that Tiana was going to be an African American princess that made me more proud to be black," said Crockrell. (AP Photo/East New York Preparatory Charter School)



This product image released by Disney shows The Princess and The Frog Princess Tiana doll. (AP Photo/Disney)



This product image released by Disney shows a Princess Tiana blanket. (AP Photo/Disney)

NEW YORK — Holly Price Alford is over the moon about Disney's first black princess. Her 8-year-old daughter is, too, but not because the princess is black.

"She understands that this is a princess who is African American," said Alford, who is black and lives in Meadowbrook, Va. "But do I think it's a big deal to her? No."

Princess Tiana debuts in "The Princess and the Frog" in New York and Los Angeles on Nov. 25 and nationwide Dec. 11, and grown-ups have certainly been buzzing. But for many little black girls growing up with Malia and Sasha Obama in the White House, the historic nature of Tiana's debut in Disney's mostly white princess lineup doesn't quite seem to register.

Girls of all races have already caught princess fever, and young black girls embrace the white stars of "Hannah Montana," the Jonas Brothers and "High School Musical" without worrying about race.

But some of their moms are making sure their daughters understand the significance of the princess with her brown doe eyes, fuller lips and elegant tiara.

Erica Branch-Ridley, of West Orange, N.J., said her 7- and 11-year-old daughters were excited about a new princess, but the younger one didn't really understand the importance.

"She sees Obama, the first girls, she's like, 'that's nice,'" said Branch-Ridley, broadband supervising producer for the TV program "The Electric Company."

Branch-Ridley showed the girls pictures, and her younger daughter now wants to dress up as Tiana for Halloween next year.

"I want them to understand how important it is, not only from the perspective of a new Disney movie and a new princess, but how historical it is that we have this," she said.

The movie has not been without controversy — it's been criticized because the prince is not black and because Tiana is a frog for much of the movie, among other things.

But little girls are simply excited about the story, said Alford.

"She's another princess," she said. "In the end, if she gets to kiss the prince, that's all that matters."

Disney has expanded its princess lineup in recent years to include multicultural princesses Mulan, Pocahontas and Jasmine, but Tiana is the first black princess — and the first princess of any color in more than 10 years.

In "The Princess and the Frog," which is set in 1920s New Orleans, Tiana is a waitress and chef who dreams of owning a restaurant. She is persuaded to kiss a frog who is really a prince and becomes a frog herself.

Tiana has already sparked a merchandising frenzy — beauty products, dolls, a cookbook, a cooking set. There is even a new Tiana wedding dress as part of the "Kirstie Kelly for Disney Fairy Tale Weddings" line.

The Halloween costumes sold out quickly in some cities, according to Disney Consumer Products, and the "Just One Kiss" doll was named one of the "Hot Dozen" toys for the holiday season in FunFare Magazine, a toy industry publication. On Oct. 1, all 5,000 Tiana-themed Magical Beauty Collection Gift Sets were sold on carolsdaughter.com before noon, the first day the products were available.

Little girls don't see color distinctions as much as older girls, said Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist and author of "The Power of Your Child's Imagination."

But she said Tiana will register on some level with little black girls and boost their sense of themselves even if it's subtle.

"That warm feeling of 'just like me' and feeling like 'home' can bring a deep smile (inside and out) to all those little black girls that will watch the movie," Reznick said in an e-mail.

Some black moms, while praising Disney for its efforts, think its influence is overblown.

"There is far too much invested in the idea that Disney has somehow affirmed black women and girls with this production," said Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting, who teaches African American and Diaspora Studies at Vanderbilt.

Sharpley-Whiting said her 7-year-old already sees herself as a princess, and has watched the live-action version of "Cinderella" that starred Brandy and Whitney Houston.

Still, others said Tiana has made them feel more comfortable letting their daughters embrace princesses.

Dee-Dee Jackson, national president of Mocha Moms Inc., is planning to outfit her 8-year-old daughter's room with Tiana gear. Disney consulted Mocha Moms on the film.

Her daughter has princess costumes, movies and dolls, but she has been reluctant to let her put up images that don't look like her.

"I wanted her to understand that princesses come in all colors," said Jackson, a mom of five in Snellville, Ga.

Tiana has already made an impression on Tykeisha Crockrell, 8, of Brooklyn, N.Y. She loves princesses — she was Belle from "Beauty and the Beast" for Halloween.

"When I heard that Tiana was going to be an African-American princess that made me more proud to be black," she said. "Tiana is my role model. I want to be like her."

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