

Hollywood Is Using Affirmative Action in Casting

15

34

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A view of the audience during "A Gentleman in Moscow" premiere event in NYC at Museum of Modern Art in New York on March 12, 2024. (Roy Rochlin/Getty Images for Paramount+ with SHOWTIME)



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Commentary

It's hard to find a good streaming series to watch. They tend to start very slow, forcing you to watch at least a few episodes before determining whether you like it. But it can be very rewarding when you finally find a good one, eagerly anticipating the release of each new episode. (I put the two "White Lotus" seasons in that category.)

After one episode of the "A Gentleman in Moscow" series, I thought I had found a good one. It's a big new streaming series based upon the 2016 novel for Showtime and Paramount+, starring Ewan McGregor as a count from the tsar era in the period following the Russian Revolution.

I had heard great things about the book and have always been fascinated by the Russian Revolution. The first episode was well done and set up what seemed would be a very intriguing story. The count was confined to house arrest in a hotel, with his very survival at stake as the Bolsheviks debated what to do with him and the future of the country.

In one of the first scenes a tall black man with braided hair is shown. I found it a bit odd, wondering why they kept showing him and whether it was possible there were many black people in Moscow in 1918. In the second episode, it became clear this black actor was playing the very prominent role of the former college friend of the count with whom he had a falling out over a woman. In addition, at least two other characters were introduced, also played by a black man and a black woman.

It made the watch very confusing. Were these black actors playing the roles of white Muscovites, or would it be revealed in a later episode how they came to be in Moscow?

I did some research and learned there was no black population to speak of in Moscow at the time, and in the book there are no black characters. So they are simply black actors playing white characters.

The next question is whether this is an artistic choice. In the Broadway Musical "Hamilton" about America's founding, writer, producer, and lead actor Lin-Manuel Miranda intentionally cast minority actors in lead roles. Aaron Burr was played by a black man, while Mr. Miranda, a Puerto Rican, played the role of Hamilton. Mr.

Miranda made a bold creative choice of having minorities play key figures in America's founding, who also happened to be rappers. "This is the story of America then, told by America now," Mr. Miranda explained in interviews.

I saw the show and had no problem with the casting at the time, because I understood the rationale. It also helped that it was done nine years ago when the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) movement was not near what it is today, making me less inclined to see it as destructive affirmative action.

If there is an artistic reason behind the casting in "Gentleman," it's lost on me and has not been articulated. Russia has an estimated .05 percent black population, according to a [2018 report](#) by the BBC, so producers would be unlikely to claim this is the story of Russia then told by Russia now.

The unexpected casting choices were featured in the Rotten Tomato [audience reviews](#). While the series gets 90 percent "fresh" from critics, it scores 73 percent with the audience. One reviewer stated, "Another DEI production that makes the setting feel awkward." Another wrote, "The final elephant in the room are the completely out of place DEI hires in a high society period Russian drama which is no different to someone using an iPhone during the show."

The best explanation for what's going on comes from ChatGPT. I asked it whether the producers have explained their casting decision. It replied: "While specific public statements from the producers detailing their reasons for these casting choices weren't found, the industry trend has been towards a more inclusive representation ... as part of a broader effort to challenge traditional casting norms and to open up historically constrained roles to actors of all backgrounds." In other words, DEI or "affirmative action."

In implementing DEI, Hollywood no longer makes films or TV series with just white people. So, in order for this one to be made, producers would have to create new black characters to add to the story. Rather than re-writing the book, some executive no doubt came up with an easy solution: Simply cast black actors to play the white Muscovites portrayed in the book. Problem solved, series produced.

Does this mean the producers of “Gentleman” are discriminating against non-black actors? Interestingly, while Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based upon race, there is an exception if race is a “bona fide occupational qualification” for the job. The classic example of this taught in law school is an actor playing a part. But the left has turned this exception on its head. Rather than using the exception to cast someone of the appropriate race, it ignores it in order to intentionally hire someone of a different race.

If this were a creative choice, as with “Hamilton,” I would be more understanding. But we know it is DEI. And we know by now that “diversity” does not mean diversity of opinions or perspectives, but rather is exclusively about the color of one’s skin, gender, or sexual orientation. “Inclusion” does not mean mirroring society, it means having as many minority, female, or LGBT people as possible, while decreasing the number of white, male, and straight people.

We have also learned that “equity” is different from “equality.” While equality means treating everyone the same, equity means treating people differently based upon their minority status. We know the left would never tolerate white actors taking roles from black actors in historical films about black people.

The plan for implementing DEI on the screen was finalized when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ new “representation and inclusion standards” for Oscars eligibility went into effect. According to the Academy, “The standards are designed to encourage equitable representation on and off screen in order to better reflect the diversity of the movie-going audience.”

There are four categories of diversity requirements, two of which must be met. The first requires that “at least one of the lead actors or significant supporting actors is from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group,” or “at least 30 percent of all actors in secondary and more minor roles are from ... underrepresented groups,” or “the main storyline(s), theme or narrative of the film is centered on an underrepresented group(s).” Failure to meet these standards means your creative work is not deemed worthy of recognition.

In the opening scene of “Schindler’s List,” Germans force Jews to line up and register and wear an arm patch. We all know what happened

next. It's one of the greatest films of all time. Hollywood showed the world the danger of treating people differently based upon their ethnicity, as DEI now demands. It is not clear whether Hollywood is capable of making such a movie again, but perhaps it's not too late for the industry to learn from it.

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