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Disney could unlock 'Song of the South'

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Walt Disney Co.'s 1946 film "Song of the South" was historic. It was Disney's first big live-action picture and produced one of the company's most famous songs -- the Oscar-winning "Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah." It also provided the inspiration for the Splash Mountain rides at Disney's theme parks.

But the movie remains hidden in the Disney archives -- never released on video in the United States and criticized as racist for its depiction of Southern plantation blacks. The film's 60th anniversary passed last year without a whisper of official rerelease, which is unusual for Disney, but President and CEO Bob Iger recently said the company was reconsidering.

The film's reissue would surely spark debate, but it could also sell big. Nearly 115,000 people have signed an online petition urging Disney to make the movie available, and out-of-print international copies routinely sell online for \$50 to \$90, some even more than \$100.

Iger was answering a shareholder's inquiry about the movie for the second straight year at Disney's annual meeting in New Orleans. This month the Disney chief made a rerelease sound more possible.

"The question of 'Song of the South' comes up periodically, in fact it was raised at last year's annual meeting," Iger said. "And since that time, we've decided to take a look at it again because we've had numerous requests about bringing it out. Our concern was that a film that was made so many decades ago being brought out today perhaps could be either misinterpreted or that it would be somewhat challenging in terms of providing the appropriate context."

"Song of the South" was re-shown in theaters in 1956, 1972, 1980 and 1986. Both animated and live-action, it tells the story of a young white boy, Johnny, who goes to live on his grandparents' Georgia plantation when his parents split up. Johnny is charmed by Uncle Remus -- a popular black servant -- and his fables of Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear and Brer Fox, which are actual black folk tales. (An honorary Oscar to James Baskett for his portrayal of Uncle Remus.)

Remus' stories include "The Tar Baby," a phrase Republican presidential hopefuls John McCain and Mitt Romney have been criticized for using to describe difficult situations. In "Song of the South," it was a trick Brer Fox and Brer Bear used to catch the rabbit -- dressing a lump of hot tar as a person to ensnare their prey. To

some, it's now a derogatory term for blacks, regardless of context.

The movie doesn't reveal whether it takes place before or after the Civil War, and never refers to blacks on the plantation as slaves. It makes clear they work for the family, living down dirt roads in wood shacks while the white characters stay in a mansion. Remus and other black characters' dialogue is full of "ain't nevers," "ain't nobodys," "you tells," and "dem dayeses."

"In today's environment, 'Song of the South' probably doesn't have a lot of meaning, especially to the younger audiences," said James Pappas, associate professor of African-American Studies at the University of New York at Buffalo. "Older audiences probably would have more of a connection with the stereotypes, which were considered harmless at the time."

Pappas said it's not clear that the movie is intentionally racist, but it inappropriately projects Remus as a happy, laughing storyteller even though he's a plantation worker.

However, Pappas said he thinks the movie should be rereleased because of its historical significance. He said it should be prefaced, and closed, with present-day statements.

"I think it's important that these images are shown today so that especially young people can understand this historical context for some of the blatant stereotyping that's done today," Pappas said.

From a financial standpoint, Iger acknowledged last year that Disney stood to gain from rereleasing "Song." The company's movies are popular with collectors, and Disney has kept sales strong by tightly controlling when they're available.

Christian Willis, a 26-year-old IT administrator in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., started a "Song of the South" fan site in 1999 to showcase memorabilia. He soon expanded it into a clearinghouse for information on the movie that now averages more than 800 hits a day and manages the online petition.

Willis said he doesn't think the movie is racist, just from a different time.

"Stereotypes did exist on the screen," he said. "But if you look at other films of that time period, I think 'Song of the South' was really quite tame in that regard. I think Disney did make an effort to show African-Americans in a more positive light."

Though Willis is hopeful, there's still no telling when -- or if -- the movie could come out (beyond its copyright lapsing decades from now).

In a statement to The Associated Press, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, Disney's distribution arm, said: " 'Song of the South' is one of a handful of titles that has not seen a home distribution window. To this point, we have not discounted nor committed to any distribution window concerning this title."

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