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The American Society of Magical Negroes

The American Society of Magical Negroes is a 2024 American comedy film starring [Justice Smith](#) as a young man who joins a clandestine group of magical African Americans committed to enhancing the lives of white individuals, satirizing the [Magical Negro](#) trope. It was written and directed by [Kobi Libii](#) in his directorial debut, and co-stars [David Alan Grier](#) and [An-Li Bogan](#).

It premiered at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) on January 19, 2024, and [Focus Features](#) released it in theaters in the United States on March 15, 2024. The film grossed \$2.5 million at the box office.^[2] It received mixed reviews from critics,^[3] who noted that while it presented an intriguing concept, it fell short of thoroughly exploring its most challenging notions.^[4]

Plot

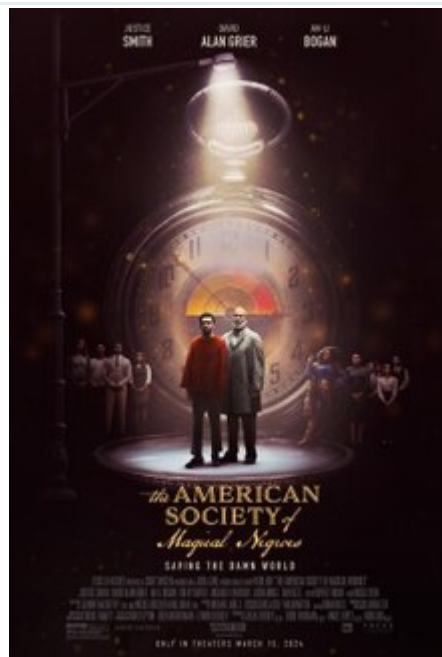
Aren, a young biracial African-American man, displays his yarn sculpture at an art gallery, facing rejection; no one buys his work. Advised by the white gallery owner to approach a specific patron, Aren is mistaken for a waiter and handed an empty glass. At the bar, African-American bartender Roger empathizes with Aren's experience.

Discouraged, Aren discards his sculpture and heads home. On the way, he encounters a drunk white woman struggling with an ATM. She asks him for help, but he's falsely accused of theft, leading to a physical confrontation with two white men. Roger intervenes, deftly defusing the situation with a barbecue-restaurant recommendation and prompting one of the men to say, "No hard feelings, okay?"

Roger introduces Aren to The American Society of Magical Negroes, a group aiming to safeguard African Americans by appeasing white individuals. Aren witnesses historical acts of reassurance by Black men towards whites, embodying the Society's mission. Under Roger's mentorship, Aren helps a shy white police officer gain confidence at a dance club.

A chance encounter with Lizzie, a woman with a multiethnic background, at a coffee shop leads Aren to develop feelings for her, even as he's called away for Society duties. The society

The American Society of Magical Negroes



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	Kobi Libii
Written by	Kobi Libii
Produced by	Julia Lebedev Eddie Vaisman Angel Lopez Kobi Libii
Starring	Justice Smith David Alan Grier An-Li Bogan
Cinematography	Doug Emmett
Edited by	Brian Olds
Music by	Michael Abels
Production companies	Sight Unseen Juba Lane
Distributed by	Focus Features (US) Universal Pictures (outside

arranges a job for him at Meetbox, a social media platform, where he's assigned to reassure Jason, a depressed white colleague. Aren discovers that they report to Lizzie, who also works there.

Amidst his growing friendship with Lizzie, Aren learns of Meetbox's racial recognition flaws, and the company's superficial response highlights systemic issues. Noting Aren's feelings for Lizzie—whom Jason also likes—Roger tells Aren he must focus on boosting Jason's career and love life, sacrificing his own happiness.

Meetbox prepares a global broadcast to its staff to outline its new diversity-embracing policies. Jason is appointed a co-presenter, and invites Aren to join him. However, as the presentation begins, Aren learns that he was invited so the company would appear more diversity-conscious. He interrupts the live presentation, challenging the company's woke façade, and asserting that he has the right to belong to society without apology or special treatment. His defiance shocks his colleagues and disrupts the Society's magic. Aren is transported back to Society headquarters, where its president, DeDe, tells him he is to be expelled and his memory of them erased.

Despite Roger's attempt to erase Aren's memories, the magic weakens, signaling a broader rebellion within the Society against their subservient roles. Aren reunites with Lizzie in Los Angeles, where they reconcile and happily walk off together—while Lizzie, apparently joking, tells him she belongs to a magical society of her own. In a coda, she enters a hair salon and access a secret entrance to the Society of Supportive Wives and Girlfriends (SOSWAG).

	US)
Release dates	January 19, 2024 (Sundance) March 15, 2024 (United States)
Running time	105 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Box office	\$2.5 million ^[2]

Cast

- [Justice Smith](#) as Aren
- [David Alan Grier](#) as Roger
- [An-Li Bogan](#) as Lizzie
- [Drew Tarver](#) as Jason
- [Michaela Watkins](#) as Masterson
- [Aisha Hinds](#) as Gabbard
- [Tim Baltz](#) as Officer Miller
- [Rupert Friend](#) as Mick
- [Nicole Byer](#) as DeDe

Production

The American Society of Magical Negroes is a satire of the [Magical Negro](#) trope.^{[5][6]} It was developed by [Kobi Libii](#) as part of the [Sundance's Screenwriters and Directors Lab](#).^[7] In March 2021, SFFILM confirmed that the film was awarded the 2021 [Dolby](#) Institute Fellowships, earning industry guidance and a cash grant enabling them to work with a sound designer at the screenwriting stage.^[6]

Cinematography

Doug Emmett served as cinematographer. Emmett, known for his work on *The Edge of Seventeen* and *Sorry to Bother You*, collaborated closely with director Kobi Libii to craft a visual style that blended elements of classic "Black savior" films with a modern aesthetic. The film's look was characterized by its distinctive lighting and photographic techniques, particularly in contrasting the vibrant, Afro-centric color palette of the secret society's scenes with the more conventional, subdued lighting of the MeetBox office.^[8]

Emmett's primary goal was to visually narrate the protagonist Aren's journey, using cinematography to reflect his emotional states. This approach drew inspiration from films like *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *The Green Mile*, incorporating nods to these classic "Magical Negro" films. Emmett's choice of the Sony Venice camera and Tribe7 Blackwing lenses allowed for dynamic range and creative flexibility on set.^[8]

One of the most challenging aspects of the production was filming in the Los Angeles Theater, a location three floors underground without elevators. Emmett's team utilized wireless, battery-operated lights to illuminate the expansive spaces. The most difficult scene to realize was the great hall of the society, which required intricate rigging of lights in a high, fragile ceiling. The crew faced significant technical challenges, including wireless interference, but successfully navigated these issues.^[8]

The film was shot in raw format, with significant color grading performed in the DI by Natasha Leonnet, who designed a show LUT that referenced 1970s Kodak Ektachrome. The final look incorporated Invizigrain technology to emulate film grain and halation, contributing to the film's unique visual texture.^[8]

Release

The film premiered at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2024.^{[9][10]} Focus Features released it in theaters in the United States and Canada on March 15, 2024.^[5] It was released alongside *Arthur the King* and the wide expansion of *Love Lies Bleeding*, and was projected to gross around \$3 million from 1,146 theaters in its opening weekend.^[11] It made \$520,000 on its first day and went on to debut to \$1.3 million, finishing ninth at the box office.^[12] The demographic breakdown of the opening-weekend audience was 50% male, 75% aged 25 years and older, and 52% African American, 31% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 4% Asian.^[13] Audiences polled by PostTrak gave the film a 70% overall positive score, with 51% saying they would definitely recommend it.^[12] By the end of its US theatrical run, it grossed \$2.5 million.^[2]

Universal Pictures released the film in theaters in the United Kingdom on April 26, 2024,^[1] where it grossed \$15,558 from 111 screens in one week.^[2] The film became available on the streaming service Peacock on May 3, 2024.^[14]

Critical reception

Film review website Metacritic surveyed 23 critics and assessed 16 reviews as mixed, 5 as positive, and 2 as negative. It gave an aggregate score of 50 out of 100, indicating "mixed or average" reviews.^[3] Website Rotten Tomatoes, which categorizes reviews as positive or negative, surveyed 72 critics and assessed 53 reviews as negative and 19 as positive, for a 26% approval rating. The average rating calculated was 4.8 out of 10.^[4] After 47 reviews, it summarized the critical consensus: "[It] has a promising premise, but is too timid to fully engage with its most provocative ideas."^[15]

The Washington Post's Michael O'Sullivan critiqued the film as a satire with a novel concept that ultimately fell short, turning a potentially sharp commentary on racial tropes into a mix of superhero and romantic comedy elements that lacked depth and failed to challenge audiences. He said that despite its creative premise, its execution was overly cautious and pandering, and that it missed the opportunity to make a more impactful statement on race and representation in cinema.^[16]

Entertainment Weekly's Devan Coggan expressed disappointment with the film, noting that while it introduced a compelling concept that challenged a long-standing cinematic stereotype, it ultimately struggled to maintain momentum, getting lost in a conventional romantic comedy subplot that diluted its satirical potential. She felt that by failing to deeply explore its own themes, or to fully develop its magical society's world, it neither satisfied as a critique of racial representation nor as a romantic comedy, leaving much of its promise unfulfilled.^[17]

Social commentary

When *The American Society of Magical Negroes* was first announced, *The Root* wrote that many anticipated the film to depict Black individuals performing magic and teleportation, similar to the style of Harry Potter.^[18] *Variety* reported that online discussions commenced with an educational phase where film enthusiasts clarified to general audiences that the film was not a Black version of Harry Potter but rather addressed a trope highlighted by Spike Lee in 2001, where Black characters are stereotypically portrayed to serve the narrative of white protagonists.^[19]

When Focus Features released the trailer, *Variety* reported that it "inflamed the Fox News crowd" for the line "white people are the most dangerous animal", referring to a scene in which a society member explains to a recruit, "White people feeling uncomfortable preambles a lot of bad stuff for us, which is why we fight white discomfort every day. The happier they are, the safer we are."^[19] *Mashable* observed that following the release of the trailer, opinions on X (formerly Twitter) diverged into three groups: those disappointed by the lack of a film about Black people performing magic devoid of trauma; those discontented with the film being a satirical romantic comedy that employs a problematic trope; and those acting in bad faith, attempting to frame the film as anti-white racism.^[20]

Before the film's release, *The Root*'s Stephanie Holland discouraged comparing *The American Society of Magical Negroes* to the 2023 film *American Fiction*, asserting that the comparison is unnecessary as both films offer unique approaches to addressing race. She highlighted the issue of limited space for Black narratives to present diverse perspectives on the same topic.^[21] After these films' releases, *The New York Times* arts and culture critic Maya Phillips said these films and the 2022 film *The Blackening* "have failed to represent Blackness with all its due complexity — as sometimes messy, sometimes contradictory. Instead, they flatten and simplify Blackness to serve a more singular, and thus digestible, form of satirical storytelling", compared to past Black satire films *Get Out* (2017) and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). Phillips wrote that *The American Society of Magical Negroes* "fails to offer a three-dimensional depiction of Blackness". She said, "The film's fantastical central idea, however, is more show than substance. For most of a film that's supposed to mock a racist character trope, it's ironic that we don't see much of these characters beyond their acting in this trope."^[22]

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External links

- [Official website](https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-american-society-of-magical-negroes) (<https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-american-society-of-magical-negroes>) 
 - *The American Society of Magical Negroes* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt30007864/>) at *IMDb*
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