

# When the casting is color-blind

*At Cheltenham High and elsewhere, it is the play that matters, not the race of the performers.*

By Margie Fishman  
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

CHELtenham — Inside Cheltenham High School's Stretton Hall auditorium, a black Cain and a white Abel can be brothers; an East Indian Noah can spawn four white children; and the Bible's first couple can begin an interracial romance without question.

As in years past, last year's spring musical, *Children of Eden*, showcased a diverse district's commitment to color-blind casting. Of the district's 5,100 students, 35 percent are black, 10 percent are Asian, and 1 percent are Latino.

Despite a district-wide push to promote greater cross-cultural understanding across all areas, students at the high school admit that they continue to cluster by race in the hallways and the lunchroom.

But on stage, students of different backgrounds can become best friends.

To Molly Appel, a senior who has been involved in school theater for eight years, the stage offers a glimpse into an ideal society where race is an afterthought.

"There's always going to be some unease out there," she said. "Here, it's all torn away."

Beginning in elementary school, Cheltenham encourages minority participation in a performing-arts program that is recognized as one of the state's finest.

At Elkins Park Elementary School, for instance, minority students account for nearly half of the 150-member school choir, which learns gospel, Motown, and Asian folk music. Before- and after-school busing is provided to students who would

not be able to attend rehearsal otherwise.

At the high school, where productions are run on professional standards, classics such as *Oklahoma!*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *My Fair Lady* have been replaced by more contemporary shows that call for an ethnic cast, such as *Fame* or the Haitian folk tale *Once on This Island*.

In this year's production of *Pippin*, which opens May 9, one-quarter of the 42-member cast are minority students, a higher percentage than in the last performance nearly a decade ago. That includes two African American students in lead roles.

Senior Hank Rawlerson, an African American who previously was cast as Daddy Warbucks in a middle-school production of *Annie*, is now playing Pippin's father, King Charlemagne.

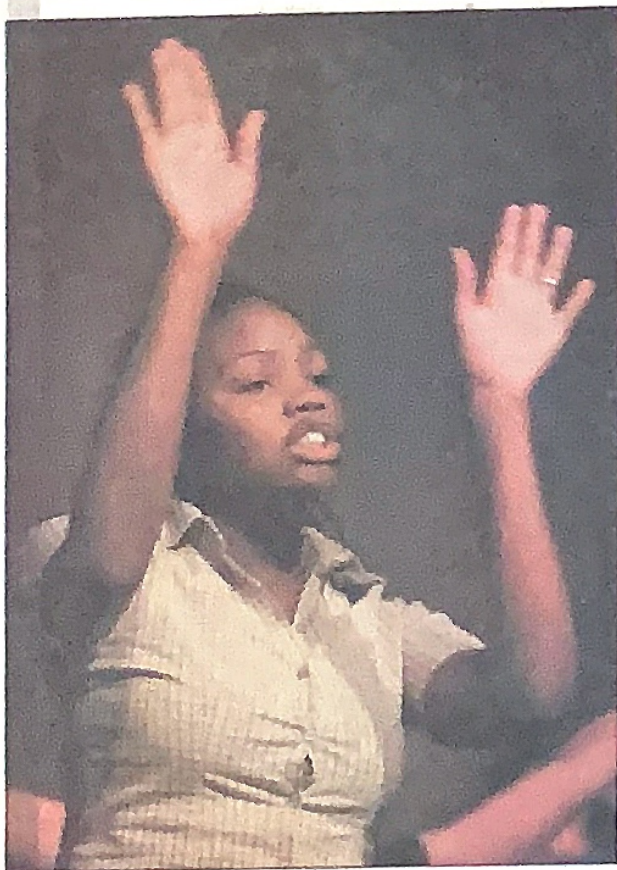
"[Hank] doesn't see the world as black and white," said Rawlerson's mother, Diane, who attended a segregated grade school in Southwest Philadelphia in the 1950s.

Minorities historically have been reluctant to enter the theater community as a result of cultural stigmas and a perceived Eurocentric slant to productions, according to Willie Boston of the Actors Equity Association, which represents stage actors and managers.

Of the New York-based union's 44,000 members last year, 13 percent identified themselves as people of color. That represents an increase of 3 percentage points since 1992.

Nontraditional casting — the filling of roles by actors who don't share the same ethnicity, gender, or

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Cheltenham student Michelle Tolbert rehearses her part in the play. Cheltenham encourages minority participation in its performing-arts program.