

A black-and-white 'Wiz'? Why?

A suburban Chicago theater has stirred up an apparently unintended controversy by integrating white actors into its production of the traditionally all-black musical, "The Wiz." It sounds like a case of integration working against the interests of minorities, as well as good taste.

That is the nature of a complaint a group of black actors filed with their union, Actors Equity, after they auditioned for the production at Marriott's Lincolnshire theater. After they were turned down, they reacted angrily when they found out white actors received two of the musical's seven principal roles [the star, "Dorothy," and "The Tin Man"] and five of its 10 chorus parts.

Two of the black actors who were turned down, Denise James and Wandachristine, are members of the Ethnic Minorities Committee of Actors Equity, the national union of stage performers. Another was Jeff Coopwood, who has performed in other professional versions of "The Wiz," including the movie. Actors Equity has since launched an investigation. The Justice Department, Operation PUSH, the Chicago Urban League and the NAACP also are looking into the matter. This is turning into a big deal.

My first reaction was to wonder why anyone would want to pay money to see an integrated version of "The Wiz." Anyone who has seen this satirical takeoff on "The Wizard of Oz" performed as it was originally intended, as I have, would have to suspect that mixing white actors into its lead parts would take away much of its special appeal. Would you pay good money to see "Porgy and Bess" performed by two Norwegians?

Then I remembered that this is what people in the industry call "dinner theater," which is to theater what a TV dinner is to dinner.

Some people defend the Marriott's "Wiz" casting as a subtle and noble statement of racial equality.

Paul Harvey, the conservative radio commentator, compared it to the colorblind casting by Chicago's Goodman Theater in its productions of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Well, Paul, it would be nice if the two were the same, but in the real world they are not, simply because job opportunities for black and white actors are not the same.

Unemployment is a significantly worse problem for black actors, even superstars, partly because producers and directors tend to avoid hiring minority actors except in roles designated specifically for minorities.

To fight this problem, unions are encouraging theatrical and movie producers to practice "nontraditional casting," which puts members of one race or gender into roles traditionally played by others, and the more wide-reaching "colorblind casting" in which actors are hired strictly on their merit.

"Colorblind casting" enabled Eddie Murphy to receive a starring role in "Beverly Hills Cop"—a role originally planned for Sylvester Stallone. It enabled Lou Gossett to receive the marine drill sergeant role in "An Officer and a Gentleman," for which he later won an Oscar. Nontraditional casting enabled Pearl Bailey to win the lead in stage versions of "Hello Dolly."

Such casting is nothing new for Marriott, according to marketing director Peter Grigsby. He listed four recent productions in which blacks were given traditionally white roles and several others in which blacks were cast in nontraditional chorus roles. The

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theater opened "Wiz" auditions to all, Grigsby said, and practiced "colorblind casting." The actors it hired were the best suited for the job, he said.

But the theater's production heads were naive if they thought an integrated production of "The Wiz" would not cause controversy. They apparently were unaware of the depth of feeling generated by black actors' struggles to find work and by black audiences' search to find themselves and their culture depicted on stage.

By choosing to produce "The Wiz," the theater opened opportunities to black performers, something that would have earned deserved praise had it not chosen to employ nontraditional casting, an ironic move that reduced the number of blacks who could be employed—just the opposite of the way nontraditional casting was intended to work.

And if the theater expects us to believe that in a market the size of Chicago it could not find enough qualified blacks to fill this production, it is showing its ignorance of where to find black talent.

The controversy reminds me of what I call "Pendleton's Nightmare."

Clarence Pendleton, President Reagan's Civil Rights Commission chairman, often uses the National Basketball Association as an example of an area in which blacks have achieved better than whites. His nightmare envisions a day when affirmative action quotas displace black players with less qualified whites.

Similarly, in the controversy over "The Wiz," blacks have been displaced by whites in the name of a liberal, progressive policy. That, as they say, is show biz.

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