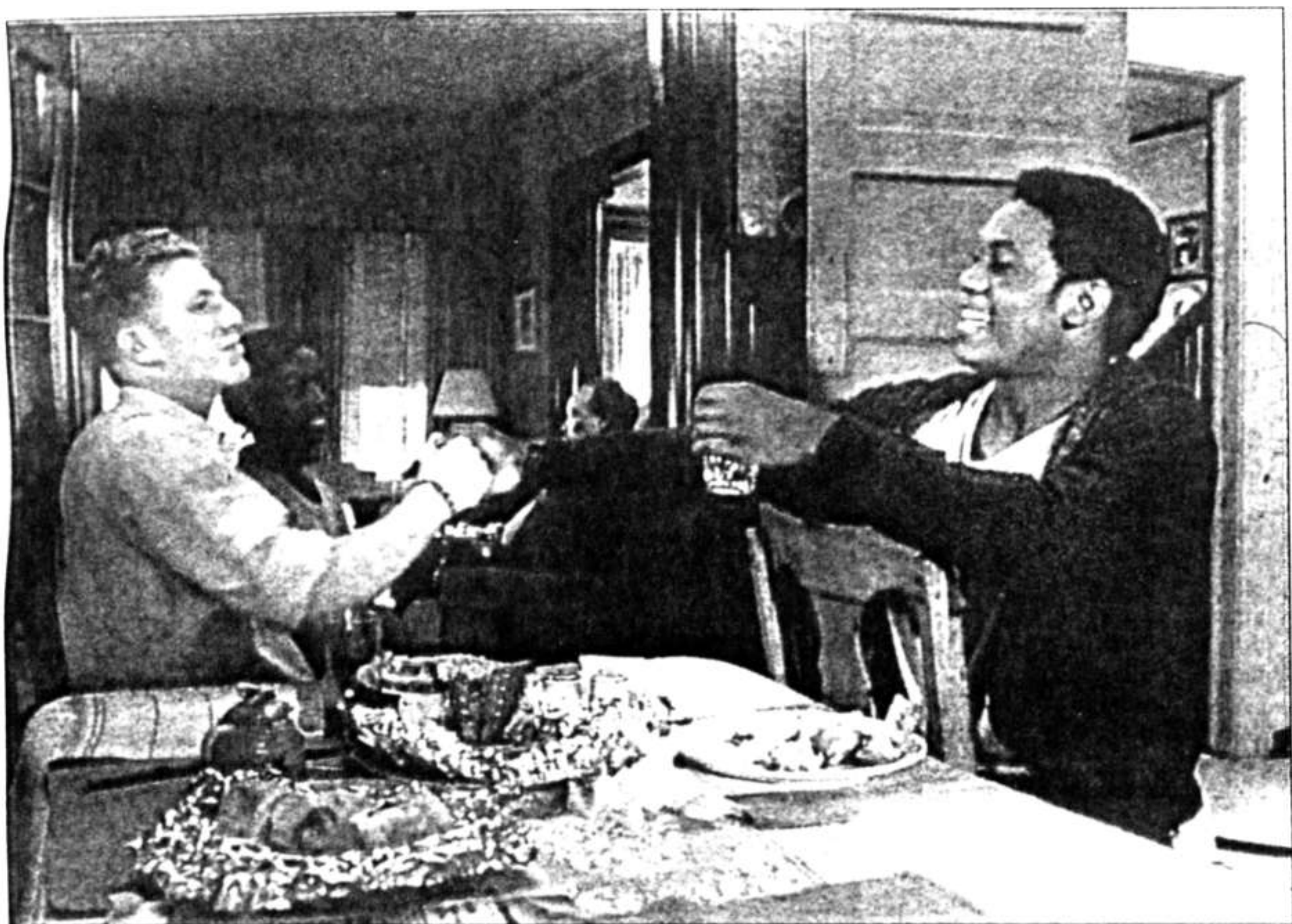


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Triumph

**MICHAEL RAPAPORT**, a Brooklyn-born actor, plays Zack in Anthony Drazan's "Zebrahead." DeShonn Castle, with no previous acting experience, plays his best friend Dee.

# Film bigwigs fans of 'Zebrahead'

## Novices portray teen race tension

By **Bernard Weinraub**  
New York Times

**HOLLYWOOD** — This town thrives on Cinderella stories, and there's probably not a better one this year than that of "Zebrahead."

The film, which opens today, cost only \$2 million and has a first-time director and writer and a cast of largely unknown, even untrained, performers.

But it has been gathering momentum for months. It won a top prize at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, is an entry in the New York Film Festival, as well as those in Deauville, France, and in Toronto, and has been promoted by filmmakers as diverse as Peter Guber, the chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Oliver Stone, who hardly needs an introduction.

Anthony Drazan, the 37-year-old screenwriter and director, said the early interest in his movie, which has autobiographical overtones, had left him stunned. "To be recognized this way is fantastic," he said. Drazan recently met with Steven Spielberg, another "Zebrahead" fan, and signed a two-picture contract with Amblin Entertainment, Spielberg's company.

### Bi-racial theme

The bespectacled, aggressively confident Drazan shuttles between small apartments in Greenwich Village and Venice, California. Though the story is more or less based on some of his high school experiences on Long Island, Drazan has set his film on the fringes of Detroit, just because he liked the looks of the area.

## Profile

The drama focuses on a white teen-ager named Zack, who attends a racially and economically mixed high school and whose best friend is a black youth named Dee. The fragile racial boundaries that define the friendship are shaken when Zack has an affair with a black girl related to Dee.

The name "Zebrahead" is a racial reference to black-and-white couples, or to mulattoes.

Those who have seen "Zebrahead" praise the performances by a largely unknown cast of young performers and the street culture details, the fragmented music and the high school cafeteria dialogue that rings true.

"The last thing I wanted was a slick look with teen-age stars," said Drazan, seated in a Beverly Hills hotel lounge and sipping the requisite mineral water. "After all the time I spent on the research in high school hallways, knowing what I did when I was growing up, I knew that although I was making this movie from a white, middle-class point of view, it had to be faithful and truthful to this community, and this required finding original talent."

### From obscurity to fame

Drazan, who received a master's degree in 1985 from New York University's film school, originally wrote the movie for a workshop at the Sundance Institute in 1987. The script floundered and was eventually optioned by the producers Jeff Dowd, Charles Mitchell and William F. Willett. But it was only when Oliver Stone read it and lent his name as one of the executive producers that "Zebrahead" achieved instant

cachet.

"It's not an Oliver Stone picture," said Drazan. "It takes a totally different sensibility. I'm proud to say Oliver likes the film as much as he does."

Perhaps the most significant supporter of the movie was Larry Estes, the senior vice president for acquisitions of Columbia-Tri-Star home video, which financed such independent films as "sex, lies and videotape" and "The Waterdance."

The cast of "Zebrahead" includes Michael Rapaport, a Brooklyn-born actor, as Zack; DeShonn Castle, a graduate of Yonkers High School with no previous acting experience, as Dee; and N'Bushe Wright, as Nikki, who has an affair with Zack. Wright grew up in Brooklyn in Bedford-Stuyvesant and is a dancer who studied with the Alvin Ailey and Martha Graham troupes. The only known actors in the cast are Ray Sharkey, who plays Zack's philandering father, and Helen Shaver, in a bit part as one of Sharkey's girlfriends.

Like Zack, who grows up without a mother, Drazan lived through turbulent teen-age years. His mother, Carol Klein, died of an embolism at the age of 37, when he was 11 years old and the eldest of three boys. The family lived on Long Island, in Cedarhurst, and Rockville Centre.

Drazan said of the film: "I was a version of that kid in the film, circa 1973. ... We lived in an integrated area of Cedarhurst. I started getting into the music, like the kid in the film, and made friends with the black kids. Some of the things in 'Zebrahead' came out of that experience. What I tried to create ... was a kind of mosaic, a fabric of life, that brought together different points of view, different worlds."