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As we sit inside a trendy downtown Cleveland restaurant, Abdul Salaam Razzac (El Ra) offers a

firm handshake and broad smile. His immediate conversation leaves no room for misunderstanding, that yes, he has returned to his home town with a timely story to tell, as he prepares for the opening day of the stage play "Radio Golf," August Wilson's final work of a ten-play cycle, to be performed at the Allan Theater February 10 – March 4.

When first meeting Razzac, his presence and distinct voice, offers the presence of power, knowledge and a life story worth adhering to. With a list of acting credits spanning from theater to the big screen, 'El Ra' as he is also known, is not shy in sharing with us part of his journey as an actor and allowing us insight into some of his personal philosophies pertaining to life and his perception of a Cleveland he once knew.

"My character Ol' Joe shows the audience that everything in life is not as it appears," El Ra states as he explains the theme of "Radio Golf" and its intentions.

"'Radio Golf' is about urban redevelopment, and should encourage audiences to rethink the question, 'is change always good?'"

With that question leading our conversation, El Ra reminisces about the city of Cleveland and how he remembers it. "As a boy I sold the Call and Post in the projects on 40th and Scovill and as a student I attended East Technical high school," he said proudly, "I started acting after being hired as a janitor at Karamu Theater and I guess you could say that my honesty got me started, because as I was cleaning, I would also critique what I was seeing in the theater, and one day somebody listened to me." From that moment on, El Ra began to develop his talents and acting resume, as he is now a recipient of two NAACP Image Awards and has made numerous appearances on nationally syndicated television shows such as "Martin," "Frank's Place," "General Hospital" and "Frasier," and eventually offering his acting style to the big screen appearing in feature film's "Glory," "8 Mile," "Pretty Woman" and "Malcolm X."

Having experienced such a wide array of acting opportunities, when asked if he preferred theater performances or movie roles, he simply says, "They both have their advantages, but I really enjoy the instant gratification of the stage. With film, the editor makes the movie, and depending on what he or she chooses to show the audience, that will determine how well the story line can be followed, but with the stage, I get instant feedback and I know how the performance was received."

Having performed in over twenty stage plays including "Jitney," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and "Of Mice and Men," El Ra unapologetically prides himself on his work with August Wilson as he has performed in all but two of Wilson's cannons. "Interpret his work?, no, I do his work," El Ra said as he thinks of his previous performances and the relevance of Wilson's writings, "Some of us did not sit at the feet of the master, we sat at the table with him."

When listening to the rich history of El Ra's journey into acting and his anecdotes of a Cleveland he once knew, it becomes very obvious that things are not as they use to be. "This city has changed so much," he said sneaking a glance out of the bay window onto the quite Saturday streets of downtown Cleveland, "I don't care who you are or where you are from, you need to see this show because it is so relevant to the deterioration of what I see going on here in this city, and cities across the country."

In having only a minimal understanding of just what Cleveland "use to be," as I continued to listen to El Ra speak of a time very different from now, "Radio Golf" became more and more relevant to the conditions of our city. Set in 1997, "Radio Golf" offers a direct confrontation of history and the present, with part of August Wilson's thought provoking message to the audience remaining to be, is it possible for Black culture and heritage to be preserved when it is integrated into mainstream white society? Are our cities and efforts worth saving, or is it really time for a change, and at what cost are we willing to change?

Irrelevant to how we each see the outcome, we should all understand, "Radio Golf" is simply asking its audience to renew its commitment to dealing with these complicated issues, and with an actor like El Ra prepared to give his take on the situation in an open forum after selected performances during an audience discussion, we won't be listening to just any Ol' Joe.

"…today is quicker than tomorrow…" -- El Ra