



THE SYRACUSE STAGE production of August Wilson's "Two Trains Running," features (from left) G. Valmont Thomas (as Memphis), Abdul Salaam El Razzac (seated, as Holloway), Godfrey L. Simmons Jr. (as Hambone), Erika LaVonn (as Risa) and Robert Manning Jr. (as Sterling). Photos by Michael Davis / Courtesy of Syracuse Stage

A Lifelong Journey Toward Understanding

Actors in August Wilson's 'Two Trains Running' have worked for years to grasp the meaning of his characters, dialogue

By Melinda Johnson
Arts editor

Abdul Salaam El Razzac and G. Valmont Thomas are steeped in the words of playwright August Wilson. The actors have appeared in different productions of several of Wilson's 20th-century cycle of 10 plays centered on life in Pittsburgh's black enclave, the Hill District. They will repeat stories of meetings with Wilson, who died in 2005.

El Razzac and Thomas bring that Wilson portfolio of experience to their roles in Syracuse Stage's production of the playwright's "Two Trains Running." The drama opens Friday for a

three-week run. The play drops into a snug, homey restaurant in Pittsburgh in 1969 and visits with its owner, waitress and customers, among them a numbers runner, a funeral parlor owner and an ex-con. Life, death, religion, joblessness, racial injustice, urban renewal and property rights fan the stories. Humorous exchanges are layered throughout "Two Trains."

For the second time in almost three years, El Razzac plays Holloway, an older gentleman who accepts life's inequities because of his belief in the supernatural.

It has taken a full life for El Razzac to appreciate Holloway and understand his circumstances

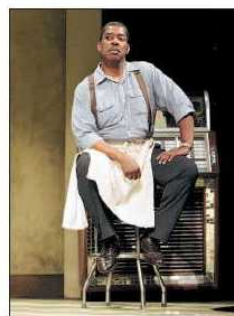


living in the confines of a city. Holloway is far removed from the actor's experience. He marks the differences while sitting against the glass wall of Stage's Sutton Pavilion before a noontime rehearsal Friday. The actor is swathed in layers of sweaters, a hoodie, shawl and knit cap.

He explains he returned from military service in Korea in the late '60s, around the play's timeline. The discipline of military life was in stark contrast to the social and political upheaval in this country at that time.

"It's strange to me, like an

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G. VALMONT THOMAS, who plays restaurant owner Memphis, says after he performed in another August Wilson play, "The Piano Lesson," the playwright thanked him for making him see a character "like I'd never seen him before."

The details

What: "Two Trains Running," by August Wilson, a Syracuse Stage production directed by Timothy Bond.

Where: Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

When: 7:30 p.m. preview today. 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Feb. 8, 9, 15 and 16; 3 p.m. Saturday and Feb. 9 and 16. 2 p.m. Sunday, Wednesday, Feb. 10 and 17. 7 p.m. Feb. 10. 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 7 and 12 to 14.

Also:

■ Panel discussion on "August Wilson's Women: Mothers, Wives & Children of Incarcerated Black Men" after 2 p.m. performance on Sunday. ■ "Images of the 15th Ward in Syracuse," a seven-panel exhibit from the Onondaga Historical Association, in the theater's lobby.

■ "Images of Freedom," paintings by students in the Creative Arts Academy at Community Folk Art Center, in the theater's lobby.

Actor knows how it feels to deviate from Wilson script

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alien just landed on this planet," the actor says of his re-entry then.

El Razzac describes Holloway's resignation to the realities of black life in the 1960s. "You can beat your head against the wall for so long before you just have to accept that things are the way they are and that change is inevitable and that some things aren't ever going to change, even though there's a facade of change," says the actor.

Pointedly, he mentions the "post-racial epoch," referring to the pronouncements usually attached to the election of the first African-American president. El Razzac and his character are of one mind on this. "Holloway don't believe that, and I don't believe that."

He allows change may occur. "But does that mean things have changed for better or they've found a different way to do it?"

When El Razzac is asked about Wilson, he proudly announces he knew the playwright before he became the

legend. The two moved in the same theater circles in St. Paul, Minn., in the early 1970s, as Wilson was beginning to write plays. El Razzac says he reminds everyone of the importance of the cycle of plays. "Because, after all, he's an American playwright who happens to have black ancestry," says the actor. He calls Wilson, the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, "our American Shakespeare" and points out Wilson is the only African-American to have a theater on Broadway named after him.

El Razzac recalls the occasions he would find Wilson writing his plays on napkins at restaurants and coffee shops and asking for his reaction to dialogue.

When he speaks Wilson's words onstage, El Razzac says he often feels the personal connection with the playwright. He presses his long, slender fingers against his eyelids, saying he fights against the emotion of those recollections when performing.

The actor learned the consequences of deviating from

Wilson's dialogue after the playwright visited him in his dressing room one time. He remembers the playwright praised his performance while at the same time wondering who wrote the words El Razzac delivered. Then Wilson recited for the actor the dialogue as he had written it.

"He didn't forget his words," says El Razzac.

Wilson's complete command of his words was clear to G. Valmont Thomas, who plays restaurant owner Memphis in "Two Trains." Thomas met Wilson on three occasions — a chance encounter at a coffee shop and a disastrous audition where the playwright called him back for another run-through of his lines.

Thomas says Wilson congratulated his second reading with an exclamation of "That's what I'm talking about."

The most memorable meeting for Thomas was when the playwright approached him at a party during the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Thomas was prepared for a rebuke because he had inverted two



Michael Davis / Courtesy of Syracuse Stage

"TWO TRAINS RUNNING" at Syracuse Stage features (from left) Robert Manning Jr. (as Sterling), G. Valmont Thomas (as Memphis) and Abdul Salaam El Razzac (as Holloway). Timothy Bond directs the work, which opens Friday.

lines in the second act of "The Piano Lesson." While Wilson acknowledged the flub, he was intent on making another point — about Thomas' portrayal of Boy Willie in the play.

The actor says Wilson told him, "I just wanted to thank you. You made me see Boy

Willie like I'd never seen him before. I think I felt a pain from Boy Willie that I hadn't felt before."

For Thomas, "Two Trains" marks his return to Syracuse Stage for another Wilson play. He appeared as Roosevelt in "Radio Golf" at Stage in

2011.

No doubt, Thomas and El Razzac will be precise in the delivery of their lines for "Two Trains," remembering how Wilson touched their lives.

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