

# 'The Artist of the 21st Century'

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A bold gesture, perhaps, to bestow someone with the title "The Artist of the 21st Century," long before that century arrives and only shortly into the artist's career. Bold, yes, but in the case of Ralfie, the artisan so dubbed, eerily fitting.

His is not your typical story of talent, perseverance and opportunity culminating in hard-fought-for success, but rather, the bitersweet experience of a doubly gifted youngster whose present success was the result of having to accept life's Plan B.

At an early age, Ralfie displayed a remarkable talent for art which earned him an eight-year scholarship to the Detroit Waldorf School, an institution designed to develop a child's imagination in thought and expression.

"A real artist is born for the only purpose — to create, to paint and they usually wind up being a major contribution to the world," says Ralfie. "I feel like I am one of those people and Waldorf just enhanced what was already given to me — that I would live in the world of color."

Though taught to apply art to paper, the youngster made better use of his musical abilities and grew into an extraordinary violinist who learned to play by ear — memorizing melodies and repeating them with virtuoso perfection.

He went on to attend Southfield Christian High School and earned a scholarship for four years of violin study at the Indiana University School of Music. It was at IU Ralfie came to the realization that a career as a concert violinist simply could not be. Ralfie could not read and knew his inability to comprehend written music would stifle his professional growth.

He admits that expectations of a classical career came primarily from others and says "at the time it didn't seem so bad. And I'd met a lot of friends, a lot of the finest teachers of this time. But at the same time there was a lot of frustration. I was basically pursuing my music, living out my father's fantasy."

He decided to change his career path and met a great deal of resistance and disappointment from those who expected otherwise from him.

Down, but hardly out, a recalcitrant Ralfie set his sights on the visual medium in which his work as a child had originally focused. In fact, all he knew of color and conceptualization he had learned many years before as a young student at Waldorf. It had been 15 years since he'd touched a brush or done anything with color. Undaunted, he walked into a local art store one day and said, "I'd like to have this color, that color, this color and I just knew it was time. And I knew what to do with those colors."

All were not against him. He received a great deal of support from Rostislav Dubinsky of the Borodin String Quartet who encouraged him to develop his own theory of interrelating music and art: That the physics of sound can be visualized through the artist's imagination. He depends on a black mirror to guide his hand as he works. Ralfie cultivated the idea by playing different types of music and watching how they affected his imagination. It is Dubinsky who remarked, "It is possible that Ralfie could be the Artist of the 21st Century." And Dubinsky could be right.

Six years after his dubious beginning, Ralfie's works are housed in the collections of Bill Cosby, Prince (a specially commissioned work), violinist Isaac Stern, Mikhail Gorbachev, Coleman Young, Pope John Paul II, Oprah Winfrey, former president Ronald Reagan and others. The latest gem in his crown comes by way of the Cosby show. His "Garage Sale" has been selected by the show's powers-that-be to don the Huxtables' newly-remodeled kitchen.

Sadly enough, the twist of fate that opened the doors to his new-found success — his inability to read — was discovered just a few years ago to be dyslexia. Despite being educated in several prestigious institutions, the disorder was not detected until well into his adulthood. With a shrug he says "perhaps it was because I was not supposed to be anything but artistic."

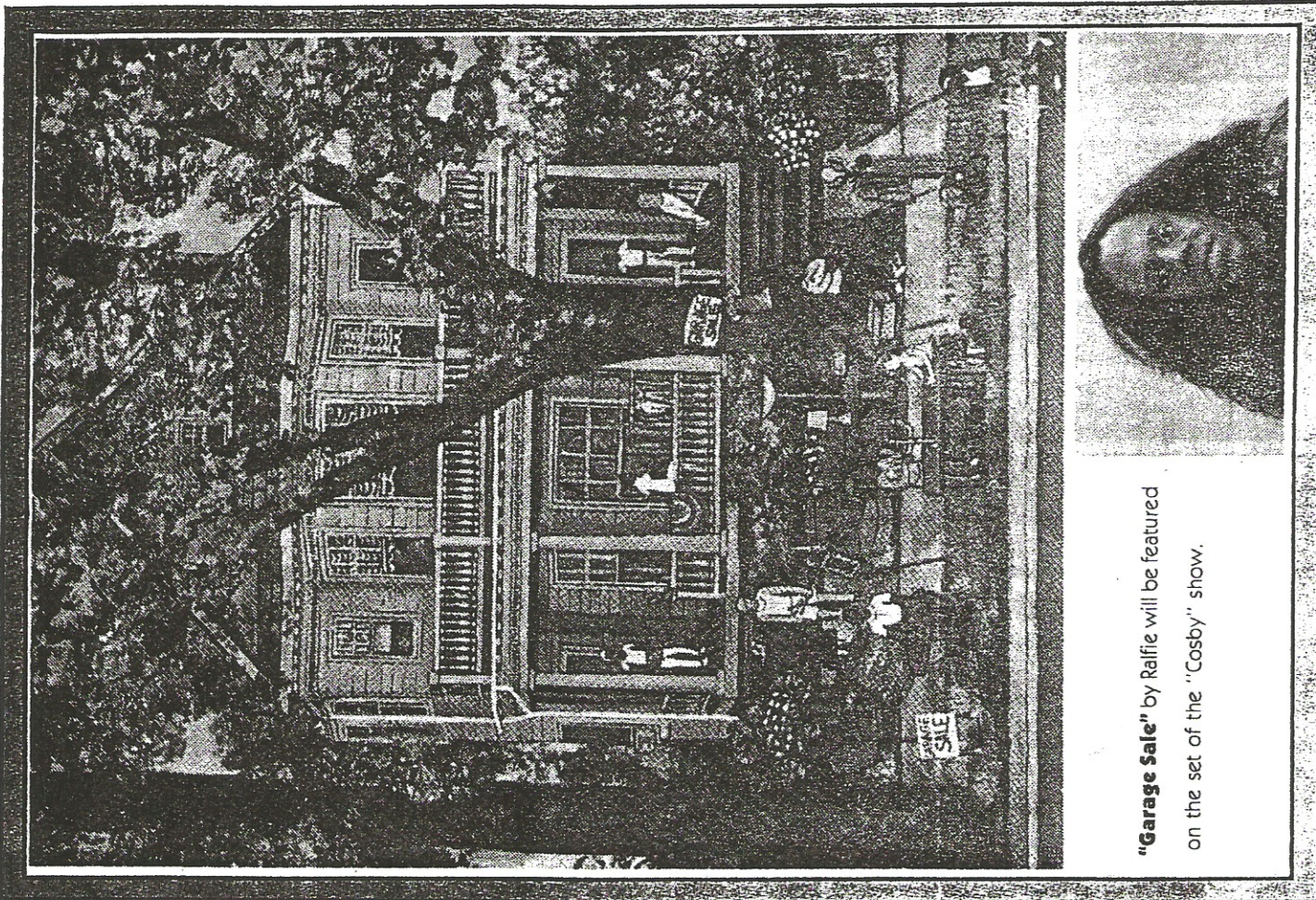
The same determination that got him where he is will take him over the hurdle of learning to read, opening the doors of the literary world to him for the first time.

He's reached a turning point in his artistic career but says music will never be far from him. "I still listen to the music of the great European masters. I also listen to African chants," says Ralfie. "Sound has been a part of my life since I was a baby. Now I can listen to it in its perfection by having someone else do it. And I can live in my perfection, which is my art."

He is guided by a great spirituality which allows him to see beyond personal goals and determine what effect his work has on the community in which it is displayed. He says he is successful at his craft because this is what he was meant to do — that it was just a matter of actually doing it.

"I have just begun to prove my purpose which is to lead our people out of artistic bondage. To get ourselves recognized in this field and to be respected financially with our paintings selling for five, six or \$7 million," he says.

"Until Black art has the same recognition as my European colleagues, then my job isn't done. Bill Cosby was a great honor, but until we are seen in the Metropolitan Museum, I have to keep going."



"Garage Sale" by Ralfie will be featured on the set of the "Cosby" show.