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Sometimes Piety Isn't Squeaky Clean

By RUTH LA FERLA

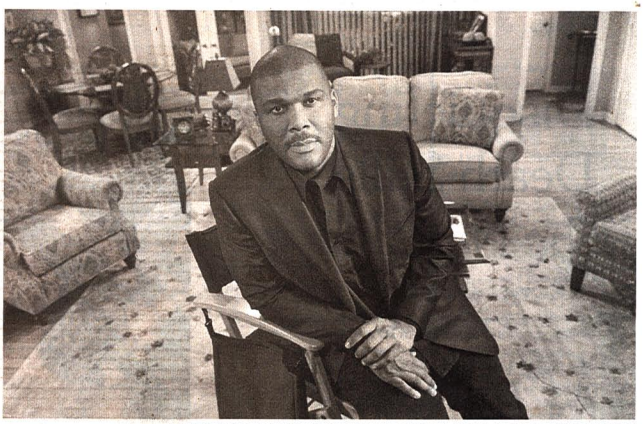
TO his upwardly mobile, largely black following, Tyler Perry is Madea, a pistol-packing, weed-puffing matriarch in a flowered housedress, the cantankerous mainstay of several top-grossing films written and produced by Mr. Perry, including "Diary of Mad Housewife" and "Madea's Family Reunion."

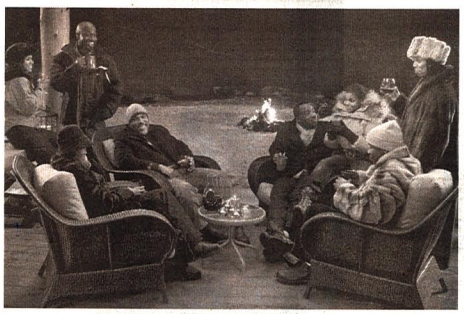
As Madea, whose melon-sized breasts flop energetically over her waist, Mr. Perry ladles out wit and indignation as potentially scathing as the grits on his stove. "A man likes a challenge," goes a typical Madea pronouncement. "If you're throwing it at him, sometimes he don't want to catch it."

Addressing a female usurper in her granddaughter's home, she declares: "You da ho. You ain't got no power."

They are the zingers that, out of costume, Mr. Perry, 38, is loath to speak.

"I hate all the makeup and the wigs that come with the character," he said last week at his studio office in Atlanta. "But the freedom to be able to say whatever I want, that's pretty cool."





PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK S. LESSER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES (ABOVE) AND BOB AKESTER/LIONSGATE.

SPIRITUAL MESSAGE Tyler Perry, above, on the set of his TV show in Atlanta and, seated second from left, in his film, "Why Did I Get Married?"

And what Mr. Perry wants to say, increasingly, has an unambiguously spiritual message. "I have this unbelievable pull to have people see these movies and be healed," he said. "So many people are in need of healing."

In the decade since he began his career, Mr. Perry's stage plays, DVDs, his TBS sitcom "House of Payne," his online talk show, and a book of Madea's commentaries have grossed hundreds of millions of dollars, partly by pushing a message of sin and redemption.

Mr. Perry's characters curse, swap insults, chase booty and smoke crack, but the faithful are rewarded and the wicked come to ruin. Beneath its bawdy humor, his work is candidly moralizing and in fact espouses the kind of values that he learned in the Baptist church he grew up in and still attends.

He is using his work as a "platform to do a kind of user-friendly and accessible black Christian ministry," said Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of black popular culture at Duke University. "He realized that there is a segment of the black community that would define itself as churchgoing, and that simply has no interest in what Hollywood, the stage, and, to a certain extent, the music industry was offering."

In "Diary of a Mad Housewife," a crack-addled woman abandons her family and her faith; by the film's end, though, she is marching triumphantly toward the altar of her church, belting God's praises. In "Madea's Family Reunion," a downtrodden protagonist tells the greedy mother who let her stepfather molest her: "I forgive you with all my might. I'm going to pray that God has mercy on your soul."

And Mr. Perry's latest film, "Why Did I Get Married?" which opened on Friday, elaborates on the Christian themes that pervade his work. His central character, an overweight woman whose husband leaves her for a slimmer friend, triumphs in the end, finding a handsome young suitor with whom to share her Christian values.

Despite their piety, the works have drawn fire from Christian conservatives.

"With Tyler Perry, you get a mixed bag," said Bob Waliszewski, a media specialist with Focus on the Family, the conservative Christian group. "You get some of the most positive messages of the screen today, contrasted with characters unsure how to operate, especially on sexual issues." Mr. Perry "has not given me worthwhile family entertainment," Mr. Waliszewski added. "I'm waiting for the squeaky clean movie that I can take my 10-year-old to see."

The fighting words seem not to rattle Mr. Perry. Barricaded behind a desk, in an office that is all bark-colored leather and wood, he maintains an intimidating, rocklike calm. "What I'm clear about," Mr. Perry said evenly, "is I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing" — that is, offering alternatives to Hollywood obsessions with sex and gore. "Apparently you don't need those things to sell them," Mr. Perry said.

Like his characters and his audience, Mr. Perry is no stranger to struggle and poverty. The filmmaker, who grew up in a lower-middle-class household in New Orleans, led an itinerant life in his youth, acting in gospel-themed plays on what is known as the "chitlin' circuit," and sleeping on park benches when he could not pay the rent.

> The filmmaker Tyler Perry says he has a message of healing; others say he glorifies racial stereotypes.

To some degree, Mr. Perry's flawed protagonists reflect reality, said Bishop Paul S. Morton, senior pastor of the Greater St. Stephen Ministry in New Orleans and Atlanta, the Baptist church in which Mr. Perry grew up and still attends. "Tyler talks about people who make mistakes," Bishop Morton said, "and some people in his audience may recognize themselves."

At the same time, those portrayals have lead to criticisms that Mr. Perry perpetuates racial stereotypes.

His films represent a "rebirth of the Stepin Fetchit" mentality, said Todd Boyd, a professor of race and popular culture at the University of Southern California. They are "the product of an increasingly visible right-wing evangelical Christian culture," he added. "Tyler Perry is the blackface version of that."

Though Mr. Perry has heard this kind of criticism before, he responded harshly when told of Dr. Boyd's remarks. People need to "look at the totality" of his message, he said, not just at the antics of a few errant souls. "As long as people walk away from my shows feeling better, as long as they're made whole," he said. "Whichever way I lure them to hear that message, so be it."

To those who say that Mr. Perry has created racist caricatures, he replied: "I mean, where do you live? In black society, there are crack dealers, there are alcoholics, there are fat people, just as much as there are architects and successful pediatricians."

The protagonists of "Why Did I Get Married?" — among them an award-winning architect, a beauty tycoon, a high-powered litigator, and a best-selling author — are unmistakably affluent, and vacation in a cabin strewn with pricey kilim carpets and show off entire wardrobes of designer furs.

NEVER mind that such worldly ambitions seem to fly in the face of the values Mr. Perry champions. "In my mind," he said, "going to a clothing rack in the pursuit of happiness is a total distraction. For me, it's disheartening. Black people, especially, have gotten so lost in it."

It is surprising, then, to hear Mr. Perry boast about his Rolls-Royce and his five houses, including one in the Hollywood Hills and three in Atlanta, as well as an apartment in Midtown Manhattan. ("Can you imagine being in my position and not having real estate in New York?" Mr. Perry said. "That would be an idiot move.") He is also building his dream house, a 30,000-square-foot French Provincial, in a prosperous Atlanta neighborhood.

Inspired by evangelists like T. D. Jakes, who preach that the devout shall prosper, Mr. Perry sees no conflict in advocating austerity but coveting fine things.

"There is a movement within the black church that teaches it's not a sin to have money," Dr. Neal said. "The thinking is that money is part of the blessings you receive because you have been a good Christian."

And Mr. Perry continues to accumulate material blessings: he has already outgrown the 75,000-square-foot studio he bought less than two years ago, and intends early next year to expand into the former world headquarters of Delta Air Lines in Atlanta, in a 30-acre campus. There he plans to continue filming new projects including "Meet the Browns," starring Angela Bassett as a woman who leaves the Chicago projects to move in with her family in the South.

And Mr. Perry dreams of creating a TV network with cartoons, news broadcasts, comedy shows and dramatic series that "will reinforce positive good messages."

And beyond all that? "Someday I'd like to own my own island," Mr. Perry said.