Tyler Perry, once homeless, at the top of his game

by Joey_Berlin

There was a three-month period in Tyler Perry's life, several years ago, when he was penniless and homeless. Now at 38, he is a top African-American playwright and the driving force behind a surprise box-office bonanza.

TYLER PERRY - At 38, Tyler Perry is a top playwright and the driving force behind several box-office bonanzas. He's seen here as Madea in the movie 'Diary of a Mad Black Woman.' CNS Photo courtesy of Alfeo Dixon. "Meet the Browns" is the fourth film adaptation of one of Perry's plays, after the successes "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," "Why Did I Get Married?" and "Madea's Family Reunion." Perry not only wrote, directed and produced "Meet the Browns," he also gets some of the film's biggest laughs, in drag, as the sassy scene-stealing grandmother Madea.

But Madea plays only a small role in the film. The story centers on a single mother, played by Angela Bassett, who struggles to make ends meet in Chicago. She attends her father's funeral in Georgia where she meets Mr. Brown and his fun-loving and crass family. Perry's potent blend of hammy farce and heartfelt emotion also translates well to the small screen, where his TV show "Tyler Perry's House of Payne" is a hit.

His next film will be "Madea Goes to Jail," but he is equally excited about his role as the head of Starfleet Academy in the upcoming "Star Trek" prequel.

Q: Why did you decide to make "Meet the Browns" your next movie?

A: If there's any character that's as popular as Madea it's Brown, and after being on the road with them for quite some time I said, "You know, I've got to get this guy his own show." So it was just really, really great to do that, and I want to expose more people to him so I thought this was a great time to do "Meet the Browns," the movie.

Q: In adapting your play for the screen, you put the focus on a character called Brenda. How does she fit into the story?

A: When Brenda finds out that her father has died, she goes from the big-city life of the south side of Chicago down to the country, small town of Hickville, Ga., where she meets her long-lost relatives the Browns. And when she gets there she's in for some crazy times.

The Brown family is a typical country, crazy, American, out-of-control, black-people family. And they have issues just like everybody else. But they are hilarious and as people see them, from the first time they sit down to the dinner scene, well if you thought the dinner scene in "Why Did I Get Married?" was something, wait till you see this one.

Q: How did you cast the pivotal role of Brenda?

A: Brenda's character is played by the amazing Angela Bassett, who I can tell you did the most fantastic job in this thing. I've never worked with someone as intense and as committed and who gets so richly into her character. Maybe Kimberly Elise is right alongside her, and Cicely Tyson. But all three of them, they really draw you in.

And Brenda is a character that is really struggling, like a lot of women, single mothers, in America right now who just need a break and who are tired and who are just waiting for their chance. She gets it. It comes along, but not without some trials and hard times.

Q: Did you always have Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Rick Fox in mind for the role of Harry, Brenda's love interest?

A: The craziest thing about this is, I was writing this role of Harry and I had left my house - I was in L.A. - I got in the car and I was thinking about this role. I didn't know very much about basketball and I was trying to figure out, "Who can play this role? Who can play this role?" So I come down to the bottom of the hill, make a left - my hand to God this happened - I'm turning left and I almost run over Rick Fox in the crosswalk with his trainer. So I pulled over, we talked for a minute and I said, "This is so divine. You were supposed to play this role." So that's where Harry was born. After a few conversations with Rick Fox, Rick became Harry.

Q: You have also cast several actors who appeared in the stage production.

A: The crazy Brown is played by Mr. David Mann who has worked with me for about eight years now, he and his wife Tam, who plays Cora. As soon as you see him you will know him from all of the Madea shows, and the "Meet the Browns" play, so I think a lot of people are excited for him to get this opportunity.

And Tamela Mann, about eight years ago when she first came on stage with me she said, "You know, I'm not an actor, but I will sing for you. I don't mind singing." And to watch her grow from telling me she's not an actor to being in a movie and saying lines, is huge. It's a huge miracle and I'm really excited for her.

Q: What is the main thing that you want audiences to feel, as they leave the theater?

A: What I want people to walk away from this with is just a whole bunch of laughter. You're going to laugh, and throughout the laughter you'll be inspired. So that's what's more important to me than anything.

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