



THE UNSTOPPABLE TYLER PERRY

What Tyler Perry wants, Tyler Perry gets. A hit sitcom? Check. A talk show? Check. A movie studio? Check. And when it comes to having a full life behind the camera, as writer **Denene Millner** discovers, he's determined to make room for that too

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEN PRINCE

For sure, Tyler Perry is no stranger to hard work. Consider the breakneck pace at which he was running back in late spring: The playwright turned wunderkind film director would arrive at his Atlanta production studio between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M., run through lines and direct the cast of his TV show, *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, and then, by 11:30 A.M., hop into his car and take a 15-minute drive to the set of his latest movie. There, he'd put his star Janet Jackson through her paces until well after the moon made its slow dance across the warm Georgia sky. Between all of that, he'd work the hell out of his cell phone, overseeing the production of his next TV show, *Meet the Browns*, supervising the finishing touches on his new 70,000-square-foot studio, and conducting endless interviews for his unprecedented 100-episode, multimillion-dollar deal with the TBS cable network. Does sleep figure into the equation? Not so much. Perry is his own army of one, doing more before noon than most people do all day.

"You're talking to a guy who does 330 shows in a year when he's on tour, so this is not really work for me," he says, while taking a break from filming to talk to *ESSENCE*. But as an outsider peeking into the House of Perry, you can't help but worry that the man just needs, well, a life—something other than TV and movie scripts to hold on to. Not like there aren't ladies willing to fill the void. Women pursue him backstage at his plays, slip notes into his praying hands at church, and tape scriptures and love letters to the gate of his posh manse in an upscale Atlanta suburb. Despite a 12-foot fence, one woman even managed to leave a love letter at his front door, while he was sleeping.

Perry, who gives a chuckle and an "Oh, God" reaction to the suggestion that somebody thinks—rather, a whole lot of somebodies think—he's hot and in a need of a girlfriend, does finally acknowledge that his fans can be, um, persistent, and, in the case of the fence scaler, a tad over the top (to this day, Perry hasn't been back to that mansion, and has since slapped a For Sale sign on it). Still, he insists, the kind of women who chase after him aren't your typical groupies. "I've got a friend in the NFL and another in the NBA, and when we go places, all the young, hot, aggressive women are all on them, while all my fans are

sweet, little old ladies, saying, 'You should meet my daughter!'" Perry says, laughing.

Well, little old ladies do tend to know a good man when they see one. Check out these stats: At just 38, Perry has produced, directed, and/or starred in 11 hugely successful urban plays, three big-screen box office hits, a hot prime-time cable TV show, and his fourth film, *Why Did I Get Married?*, takes a bow this November. He has also written *The New York Times* best-selling tome *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings* (Riverhead). And don't get us started on his wisecracking, pistol-packing matriarch, Madea, who has become an international sensation. In fact, according to his partner and coproducer, Reuben Cannon, Perry's production company's cultural and financial impact will be equal to other Atlanta brands like Coca-Cola, CNN and the Georgia Aquarium [the world's largest]. That Perry is 6 feet 6 inches tall with a muscular build and a megawatt smile certainly doesn't hurt his status with the ladies either.

But what's most special about him is his heart, says Tasha Smith, the actress who was featured as the ghetto-fabulous baby mama in Perry's *Daddy's Little Girls*. "He's so gracious, so giving, so open, so generous—he is a gift from God," Smith gushed recently on the set of *Married*, which examines three couples' struggles to stay together. Jill Scott also costars. "He fights for the underdog; he advocates for the one who looks like he's down," Smith adds. "He's walking by faith, and he's constantly trying to look for opportunities to be a blessing in somebody else's life."

Perry, ever humble, does acknowledge that he's become the beloved celebrity next door. "I'm just one of us," he says. "I come from a real place, and I come from the realness in my heart. People can connect to what they know, and I feel like people think they know me and I feel like I know them."

But when it comes to love, the heart can be a tricky thing. Take, for instance, Perry's experience with one of his first serious girlfriends, a woman he met in a club. He chased her for years. And he says he loved her so much that when he started making a little money, he bought her a brand-new car. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 154]

GROOMER, PATRICE COLEMAN; BARBER, CRAIG DAWSON; DRESSER, BARBARA VASQUEZ; SEAMSTRESS, GIGI MOORE; MADEA, ALFEO DIXON/LONSGATE FILMS

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“Afterward she called me up and asked me, ‘Would you drive this?’” Perry recalls, adding that was just the beginning of—and a teaser for—the relationship drama that made him bid adieu to his first love. “After dealing with that, I said, ‘I’m a be with my damn self!’” (He gave the car to his sister, who drove it happily for years and recently gave it to her son, who also climbs behind the wheel with a smile.)

Perry is still by his damn self, despite persistent rumors about his romantic life—everything from relationships with African-American starlets, including Tyra Banks, Tracee Ellis Ross and Oprah’s BFF, Gayle King, to the suggestion that he’s gay. Perry, who will neither confirm nor deny the Banks story, says that his “friend” King is a hang-out buddy, and that he did

go out on a date with Ross, “but if you go on one date, it’s not dating.” Beyond that, the notoriously private Perry refuses to say more. But he doesn’t hesitate to address the gay rumors, acknowledging, that climbing into a dress and wig and packing his face full of Maybelline could lead people to question for which side he’s hitting. “It used to bother me a whole lot in the beginning, it really, really did,” says Perry. “But what it’s done is give me firm seating in my manhood. And if some people can’t separate the character from the man that I am, then that’s their issue, not mine.”

In case you were wondering, this is the man Tyler Perry is: He loves chicken and never leaves home without his Amex, some cash and his mouth guard (he grinds his teeth when he’s stressed). The first thing he does in the morning? Pray. What makes him laugh the most, and worry the most too? “Black people,” he says. “Every time.” And as

for the note-writing church ladies and the fence-scaling pursuer, you should know that Perry can’t stand it when a woman chases him. “It’s a total turnoff for me,” he says simply. “I’m a go-getter, a fighter, a provider, and I feel like I need to chase.”

He does finally admit that he doesn’t really mean it when he says that he plans to be with just himself. He seems to be in love with the idea of being in love and living a fulfilled life as a husband and father. In fact, in the house he’s building to replace the Atlanta mansion where he no longer lives, Perry is including a Jack-and-Jill bedroom suite—“one for a boy, one for a girl.”

“I’m the kind of man who believes that you should see your future, see where you want to go, and prepare yourself,” he says. “I want two kids, a boy and a girl. But I don’t want to raise them without

a wife. I’m too busy to do it alone. I need to make sure I have a solid relationship, so I know we’ll be together to raise these kids, and they won’t be somewhere with another man. That would be my undoing.”

It’s possible Mr. Perry might already have a vision of the perfect partnership. “There is one I love to this very day and will always love,” Perry says quietly. “If there is a woman who is perfect for me, it’s her. If everything was in our favor, we would so be together. I’m a talker, a supporter; I’d challenge her, I’d try to make her better and stronger, because if I can do work that empowers millions of people, then in my family, it should be that way, too.”

See? Those little old ladies really do know how to pick ’em. □

Denene Millner is an ESSENCE contributing writer.



Tyler Perry may be looking for love, but his know-it-all alter ego, Madea, self-proclaimed expert on relationships, is happy by herself. Here, her thoughts on life with Tyler and her idea of a perfect date.

ESSENCE: Madea, what do you think of Tyler’s success?

MADEA: It’s all because of me, ‘cause I’m sexy, and peoples like me.

ESSENCE: Do you think Tyler is sexy?

M: He aight. Sexy in my day was better-looking than that.

ESSENCE: What’s it like to live with him?

M: It’s scary, because we look so much alike. Except I don’t have a beard. Sometimes. And he keeps trying to get me to put on a bra—just won’t leave me alone about it. I just tell him, “Go straight to hell.” These things? They were meant to be free. You didn’t ever hear about Eve puttin’ no figs over her breasts. No cross-yo-heart figs for Eve.

ESSENCE: Is there any woman good enough for Tyler?

M: Yes, there is one good enough for him, but she died many years ago after giving birth to Jesus.

ESSENCE: Do you have any love advice for Tyler?

M: Yes, I do. If his love for a woman is a mile long, make sure the pre-nup is five miles long. Can’t truss ‘em—hell naw. Hell to the naw, as Whitney would say.

ESSENCE: What about you, Madea, what’s your ideal date?

M: Some Doritos and a fresh pack of batteries.

—D.M.

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