

Perry's talent shines in comedic family spoof

Kimberly Elise, Shemar Moore add Hollywood legitimacy to revenge dramedy

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

On their 18th wedding anniversary, Helen McCarter (Kimberly Elise) is reminded by her attorney husband, Charles (Steve Harris), of the ironclad pre-nuptial agreement he'd had her sign eons ago. Thereupon, he unceremoniously ushers her out of their sprawling, suburban Atlanta mansion, though not before introducing her to his long-hidden mistress, Brenda (Lisa Marcos).

The heartless philanderer even has the nerve to rub more salt in his childless wife's fresh wounds by callously boasting about the two kids he's already secretly fathered with his pretty paramour.

Reeling from all the revelations, Helen staggers out of the house, feeling fortunate to find a ready shoulder to lean on in Orlando (Shemar Moore), an unusually sensitive, handsome, moving man with a heart of gold and the patience of Job.

Suddenly homeless and cut off without a penny, she ventures back across the tracks to the inner-city neighborhood where she grew up. There, the humbled socialite is taken in by her pistol packing, trash-talking grandmother, Madea (Tyler Perry),



Tyler Perry follows in the multiple-role playing footsteps of Martin Lawrence and Eddie Murphy

and her equally-embarrassing, great-uncle, Joe (also played by Tyler Perry), a mumbling, Viagra-crazed, marijuana-addicted old coot.

Incensed by the blow-by-blow of Helen's humiliating ordeal, the family matriarch decides that her refined granddaughter had gone a little too quietly into the night. So, bent on vigilante vengeance, Madea drives her right back to the estate to confront her ex and his floozy, and, more importantly, to vent her simmering inner rage.

This is the set-up of "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," an impossible-to-pigeonhole production that never decides whether it wants to be a romance drama, a revenge com-



edy or a morality play. As a result, we're left with a jarringly confusing dramedy which floats freely, back and forth, from mean-spirited slapstick, to sappy love scenes, to spoon-fed Bible lessons.

Imagine a cross of Martin Lawrence's "Big Momma's House" and Eddie Murphy's "The Klumps," but a flick unabashedly adorned with heavy-handed Christian and

Cinderella themes.

The film's faith-based underpinnings emanate from the fact that it was adapted from a play originally commissioned by televangelist Reverend T.D. Jakes.

Both the stage and screen versions were written by the very versatile Tyler Perry who appears, here, as three different characters, cross-dressing as the scene-steal-

Madea's boorish, bull in the china closet act. It is reminiscent of the sassy Black woman stereotype popularized by Sanford and Son's Aunt Esther. Loud and ignorant, Madea tends to trivialize every scene, her absence even overshadowing those she's not in.

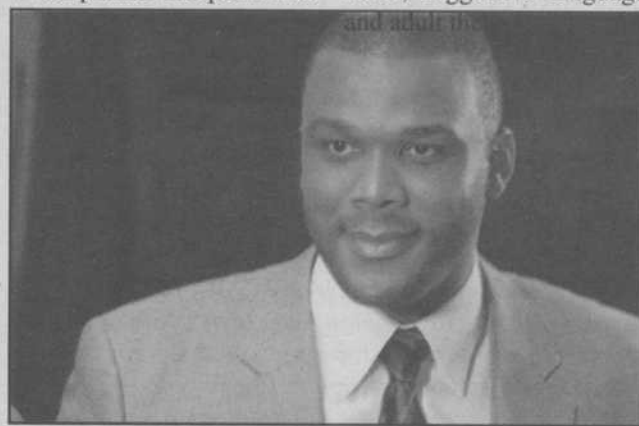
For example, it turns out to be impossible to take Helen's budding new relationship elation with a good Christian man seriously, when you've just witnessed Grandma gleefully slicing a couch in half with a chainsaw, and you sense something more outrageous is about to come next. So, the efforts of accomplished thespians like

Kimberly Elise and Cicely Tyson end up squandered in service of a Tyler Perry vehicle.

Recommended only for the Born Again/gross-out jokes crowd, if that exists, a group which must be willing to get its bodily function jokes with healthy doses of Jesus on the side.

Fans of this irreverent brand of humor should make sure to remain in the theater through the entire roll of the closing credits, as it features a selection of silly outtakes, but only after a gospel song.

Fair (1 star). Rating: PG-13 for sex, slurs, expletives, drug use, crude humor, violence, suggestive language



'Mad Black Woman' tops U.S. weekend box office

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Diary of a Mad Black Woman" got its revenge against mixed critics' reviews by earning \$22.7 million and taking first place at the weekend box office.

The drama-comedy is based on a script by Tyler Perry from his play of the same name and also features him cross-dressed as a gun-toting grandmother and in two other supporting roles. The film's strong debut pushed Will Smith's romantic comedy "Hitch" to the second spot with a weekend haul of \$21 million, according to studio estimates Sunday.

Films contending for top honors at the Academy Awards also continued to draw healthy audiences with best picture nominees "Million Dollar Baby," "The Aviator" and "Sideways" ranked among the top 11 films.

Final figures were to be released Monday.

"Diary of a Mad Black Woman" follows Kimberly Elise's character, Helen, who is kicked out of her house by her husband on their 18th wedding anniversary so his long-time mistress can move in. Helen recovers from heartbreak by reconnecting with her cantankerous grandmother Madea, played by Perry, and by relying on her faith.

The film received some poor reviews, with The Associated Press giving it a single star in its four-star rating system and National

Public Radio describing it as "half inspired and half really, really terrible."

Showing in 1,483 theaters, "Diary of a Mad Black Woman" averaged a healthy \$15,307 a cinema.

Perry, who has gained a strong following among Blacks with his plays, should be given credit for the film's success, said Tom Ortenberg, president of Lions Gate Films Releasing. "The performance of the film is really a testament to Tyler Perry," Ortenberg said. "He's a cultural phenomenon that is taking America by storm. In the next few weeks, those unfamiliar with Tyler will become familiar with Tyler."

Audiences in exit polls gave the film an A-plus rating, and the vast majority said they would recommend the PG-13 rated film to others, Ortenberg said.

"Every once in a while there is a film that comes out of nowhere and grabs the No. 1 spot and certainly 'Diary of a Mad Black Woman' has done that," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of box-office tracker Exhibitor Relations. "It shows the power that the urban audience wields at the box office."

"Hitch," another PG-13 rated film, played widely in 3,571 theaters and its \$122 million over three weeks made it the first film in 2005 to crack the \$100 million mark.



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