



Tyler Perry, left, recruited an all-star cast for 'Madea,' including Blair Underwood (middle).

Brown does first-ever gig in mainland China

SHANGHAI, China (AP) - The city: Shanghai. The venue: a drafty People's Liberation Army acrobatics theater. The event: James Brown.

The 72-year-old Godfather of Soul made his mainland China debut last week, belting out classics such as "Get up Offa That Thing" before a capacity crowd.

"We are going to funk you up before we finish," Brown said three songs into his set, which he kicked off with "Make it Funky."

Dressed in a cherry red satin suit, he shimmed, shook and leapt — although not quite as high as he once did.

Behind him, the nine-piece Soul General, complete with gold epaulets on their suits, put on a virtuoso display of rhythm and horns.

His quartet of backup singers, the General Sweet, egged on the cheering, clapping

crowd that filled the Yunfeng Theater in the heart of Shanghai's once-thriving nightclub district.

Brown is little known in China, and Wednesday's audience was overwhelmingly European, American and Japanese — evidence of Shanghai's increasingly international, cosmopolitan complexion.

The singer has shown no signs of slowing down, with the Shanghai concert coming in the middle of an Asian tour that also included a swing through Australia.

In an interview with The Associated Press last year, Brown shrugged off talk of retirement and said his work is the root of much of today's music.

"Retire for what? What would I do? I made my name as a person that is helping. I'm like Moses in the music business," he said.

Perry back in drag as sassy senior citizen

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

When we last encountered Mabel "Madea" Simmons, the revenge-minded sister was pistol-whipping her granddaughter's philandering husband in the "Diary of a Mad Black Woman." This time out, the sassy senior citizen has toned-down her act to offset her trademark intensity with equal measures of inspirational advice.

As a result, Madea's Family Reunion is a far better film than the first in that it not only dishes out endless belly laughs, but also offers food for thought, opportunities for introspection and several uplifting messages. Perhaps just as importantly, the picture offers one of those rare cinematic experiences where we get to see a recognizable African-American community grappling with an array of real-life issues, as opposed to the typical urban-oriented comedy's superficial send-up of offensive, jive stereotypes interested in nothing deeper than insulting some artificial aspect of each other's supposed social status.

Here, Madea and Uncle Joe, both played by writer-director Tyler Perry, are the only characters allowed to indulge themselves in the sort of over-the-top nonsense which marked the original. Meanwhile, the rest of their relatives find themselves enmeshed in messy melodramas.

Lisa (Rochelle Aytes) is about to marry Carlos (Blair Underwood), a wealthy banker, but she's thinking of calling off the wedding because he's beaten her every day since they got engaged. Her half-sister, Vanessa (Lisa Arrindell Anderson) is a struggling single-mom who has remained celibate since being abandoned after her second child was born. Their mother (Lynn Whitfield) is a conniving shrew who favors one daughter over the other and who cares more about money than the spiritual realm.

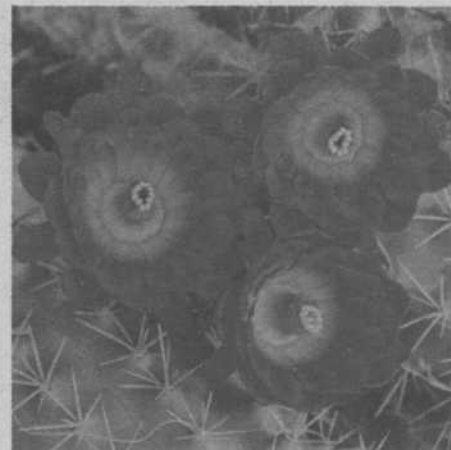
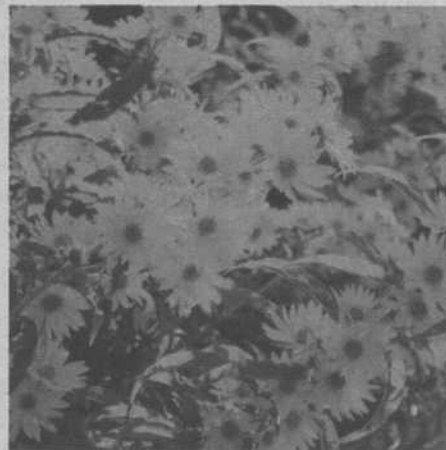
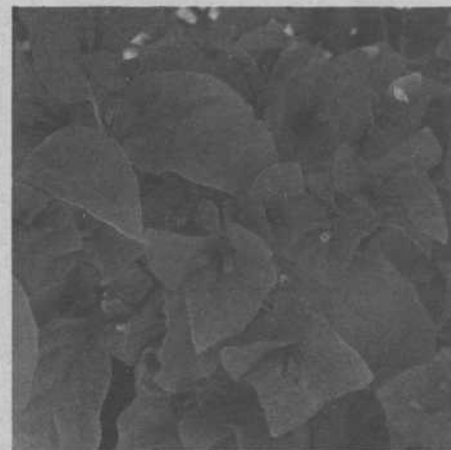
Lucky for skeptical Vanessa, her bus driver (Boris Kodjoe) is handsome, sensitive, available and patient, and just happens to have a crush on her. What's more, this knight in shining armor is a single-dad and shares her interest in the arts. As you might imagine, subplots abound in this multi-tentacle soap opera. But rather than spoil the fun, suffice it to say that while building up to an eventful climax — courtesy of the Simmons clan reunion — this moving morality play seemingly bites off more than it can chew, yet convincingly addresses a myriad of relevant themes — incest, faith, materialism, bullying, trust and domestic violence, all betwixt and between Madea and Joe's irreverent outbursts.

The film peaks with platitude-filled soliloquies delivered by Cicely Tyson and Maya Angelou at the big reunion which was shot on the site of an actual slave plantation now owned by Tyler Perry. The sobering significance of this chosen locale is not likely to be lost on those seriously contemplating the source of all the dysfunction just witnessed on the screen. The sweeping cinematography of the historic setting underscores the points made by the revered family matriarchs as they share their sage insights and tie-up all the loose-ends.

A Tyler Perry tour de force!

Excellent (4 stars) . PG-13 for sexuality, mature themes, domestic violence and drug references.

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