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THE  INTERVIEW

Oprah Talks to Tyler Perry

The director, playwright, and actor is the first black studio mogul in American history—but 14 years ago he was living in his car. Perry sits down with Oprah to talk about his journey from struggling artist to superstar.

Photographs by Rob Howard



THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR
Taking time for a hug on
Perry's tricked-out tour bus,
Washington, D.C., September.

It doesn't surprise me that Tyler Perry and I have become close friends in recent years.



From left: PERRY DONS A FAT SUIT, WIG, AND DRESS TO PLAY THE TITLE CHARACTER IN HIS SECOND FILM, *MADEA'S FAMILY REUNION*, 2006; CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IN NEW ORLEANS AT

There's a similarity in our paths: Each of us has been on a journey that can only be called a miracle.

Tyler, 41, grew up in New Orleans, in a physically abusive home. Outside the home he was also sexually abused, as he recently revealed on my show. The trauma left him confused and angry—one especially “nasty” outburst got him kicked out of high school—but he found an outlet in writing about his life.

In 1992 Tyler moved to Atlanta with the dream of staging his first play. When that effort failed (and failed, and failed, six times over), he was left homeless, disheartened, and broke—but not broken. He kept on pursuing his dream, and in 1998 it finally took flight, when hundreds of mostly African-American fans lined up to buy tickets for the seventh staging of the show he'd devoted his life to, *I Know I've Been Changed*.

Since then millions of people have turned out to see Tyler's work. His first movie was 2005's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, adapted from his 2001 play and featuring his most famous character, the outspoken, gun-toting, 6'6" grandmother, Madea. After his second film, *Madea's Family Reunion*, he opened Tyler Perry Studios, in Atlanta, and went on to direct and produce seven other movies and create two successful TBS shows, *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* and *Meet the Browns*. Now he's pushing his self-honed directorial talents to a new high with a drama that debuted in early November: *For Colored Girls*, based on Ntozake Shange's 1975 play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. When I visited him on the set last year, he was in his element, and I loved watching him. It made me so proud to see the respect everyone had for him—there was a lot of “Mr. Perry, sir” going on.

I sat down with Tyler on a rainy Sunday morning last September. He was in Washington, D.C., to perform in *Madea's Big Happy Family*, and we met up in a parking lot, in his favorite place to unwind on the road: a double-wide mahogany-paneled bus, complete with kitchen, sitting room, two bathrooms, and bedroom. "This is my home away from home," he told me. "I love having this bed. And now I don't have to worry about getting bedbugs when I travel, 'cause I have my own mattress!"

The fact that Tyler's work began with a play he scribbled in a notebook—and that he has grown it into such a powerful bond with so many millions—still blows me away. When I'm near him, I have the same experience I had back when I first went to one of his stage productions: I leave feeling more connected to others, like I just came from church.

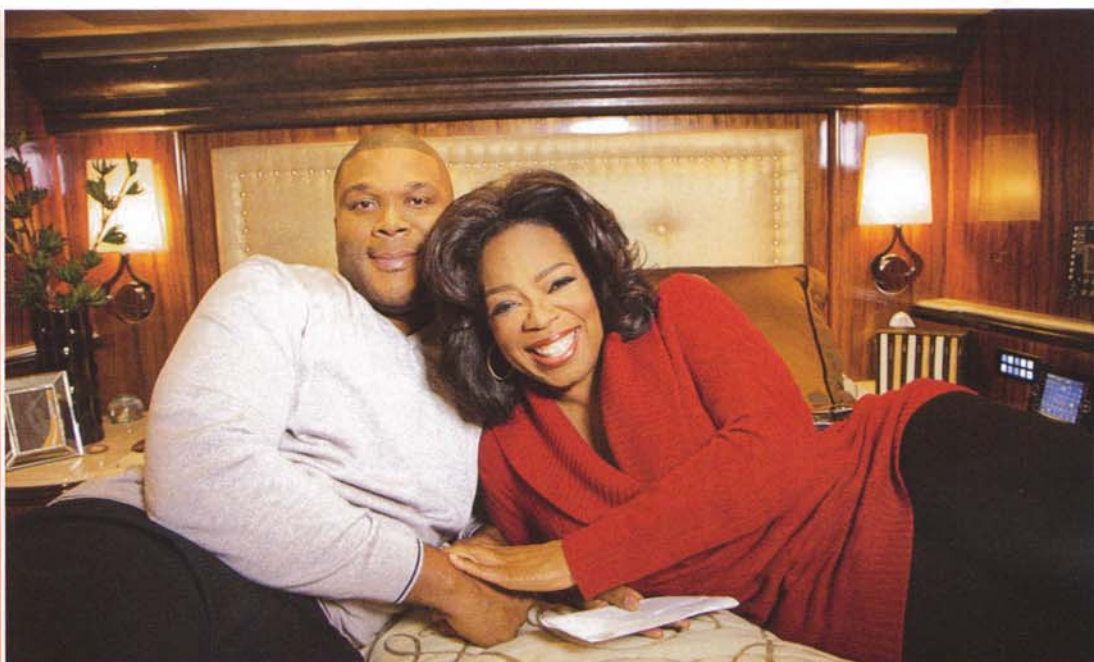
about your extensive abuse as a child. What made you do that?

TP: My intention was to free myself. My mother was very ill at the time. I was told she had only a month or so to live, which turned out to be true. And I'd just turned 40. I was frustrated with so much in my life. I had been carrying so much heaviness for so long and trying to smile my way through it. It was cathartic to write things down. That's what I do when I need freedom from something. Because it's hard to keep smiling. Even when my mother was well, it was hard to go home and sit with my father and try to smile. It didn't matter that I was 40; I still felt so much fear around him.

O: *What was life like for you with your father?*

TP: My father was a man who didn't know his parents. When he was 2 years old, he was found in a drainage canal by a white man and brought to a 14-year-old black girl called May to be raised. This girl's

"I think about the child I was, the tremendous debt I owe him. There wasn't anybody there to protect him, but he made it through."



AGE 6, 1975; DIRECTING JANET JACKSON ON THE SET OF HIS NEW MOVIE, *FOR COLORED GIRLS*, IN JUNE; LAUGHING—AND LOUNGING—IT UP IN THE TOUR BUS'S LUXURIOUS BEDROOM.

OPRAH: *This issue of the magazine is dedicated to miracles. I love the idea because I think my whole life is a miracle, and I wonder if you think yours is also.*

TYLER PERRY: I know it is. There are a lot of people who have dreams, goals, and hopes, but there aren't a lot who get to see them realized.

O: *What's your definition of a miracle?*

TP: A prayer answered. I remember being a kid and praying in the hell of my house to have somebody love me and somebody that I could love.

O: *Did you ever feel loved, growing up?*

TP: I knew that love was around. I truly believe my mother loved me. But feeling it all the time? I didn't.

O: *Last year you caused quite a stir when you wrote on your Web site*

parents only knew to beat her, so what she knew was to beat my father. Beat, humiliate, ridicule, all his life. So this is what I was born into. I didn't understand it for a very long time—why so much disdain and hatred. It wasn't until I got older and my mother and I had some conversations that I started to get where his anger came from. And that it was his issue, that I didn't own any of it.

O: *When you're a little boy, you don't know that.*

TP: You don't know it. I think about the child I was, the tremendous debt I owe him now. There wasn't anybody there to protect him or make sure he was okay, but he made it through. He died to give birth to me.

O: *Oh, that makes me want to cry!*

TP: And me, too, when I say it, but it's so true. I feel like he had to endure so much so that I could be here. (continued on page 273)

OPRAH TALKS TO TYLER PERRY

(continued from page 231)

O: *What would your father do to you?*

TP: Well, I hated the food that was in the house with a passion. Maybe it was just disgusting to me because I didn't like seeing dead animals lying on the table—raccoons and squirrels.

O: *And possums. That was in my grandmother's house, too. We were country folk.*

TP: Those eyeballs looking at you. I wouldn't eat that food. Which meant that I was always hungry. But my father knew I loved cookies, so he would buy them and put them on top of the refrigerator and wait for me to go get them. And then he would beat me.

O: *What's the worst thing he did to you?*

TP: I don't think I allowed myself to single out one moment. He would scream at me, "You're a dumb motherfucker, you got book sense but you don't have no street sense!" 'Cause he hated the fact that I would read and draw and get straight A's in school. But even though he would humiliate me to my face, I would sometimes hear him talking to the neighbor, telling him what a great kid I was. How smart I was. It confused me to no end. That was one of the most agonizing things, because I didn't understand it.

O: *I read that he once hit you with an electrical cord.*

TP: Yeah. He cornered me in a room one night and I still to this day don't know why. I've racked my brain to figure out, what did I do? He came in drunk. That was his thing. Friday about 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening, we'd be waiting for him to get home. He'd come in, give us our allowance, and then leave to go get drunk. And as it got closer to 10, 11 o'clock, we all became very quiet.

O: *Because you knew he was going to come home and raise hell?*

TP: He would walk in the door raising complete hell. Sometimes he would come home in such a rage that he was a totally different person. Then he'd get on his knees, pray, and go to sleep. The vacuum cleaner cord—that was one of those nights. He beat me till the skin was coming off. He was much bigger than me, so I couldn't get away. When he finally went in and did his prayer and lay down, I ran out of the house to my aunt who lived around the corner.

O: *That's a slave whipping. I had a couple of those, too, growing up....*

TP: Mm-hmm. So I went to my aunt, who is one of those strong black women. She got her gun and came around to the house and put it up to his head. Her husband had to come take the pistol from her. And she told my mother then, "Wherever you go, you take this boy with you. Don't you leave him with that crazy motherfucker." That's when I started going to Lane Bryant and beauty salons and everywhere else with my mother.

O: *I know you had great, deep love and affection for your mother. But what was your feeling about her when you were a child? Because you want your mother to stand up for you.*

TP: Children love their mothers. Especially with a boy child and his mother, there's a bond that's unbreakable. I love my mother to this day. One of the most painful things I ever had to do was bury her, realizing that even though I was her hero, I couldn't help her with this last thing. I couldn't help her get better. All I wanted was to give her everything she wanted. Everything my father didn't give her, everything she never had.

O: *You were never angry with her?*

TP: Not as a child. I would never say this if she were alive, but there was a time when I was older when I was angry with her, yeah, sure. But my love would override that.

O: *All right. But now, in the midst of all the physical abuse, you were also sexually abused. Was this by a neighbor, a friend of the family, somebody you knew? ▶*

OPRAH TALKS TO TYLER PERRY

(continued from page 273)

TP: Neighbor, friend of the family, all of that. The first time, I was 6 or 7; it was a guy across the street. We built a birdhouse together and suddenly he's got a hand in my pants.

O: *Did you tell anybody?*

TP: Didn't tell a soul. But felt completely guilty about it. Felt betrayed.

O: *Mm-hmm. Did it happen more than once?*

TP: Yes.

O: *Did it happen regularly?*

TP: No.

O: *But you were molested by other people, too?*

TP: Yes. One was a woman who lived in the apartment complex two doors down, when I was about 10 or 11. And there was a guy in church.

O: *That must have been a lot for you to carry. A lot of hurt and anger and betrayal and confusion and shame. So how did all of this—all your experiences growing up—prepare you for the life you're now living? First of all, the aunt who came with the gun—the moment you said that, I thought, Here comes Madea!*

TP: Yeah. The Bible says that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose. I believe that. Because I've seen it all work. I know for a fact if I had not been born to this mother, this father, this family, if I had not been born into this situation, then I wouldn't be here using my voice and my gifts to speak to millions of people.

O: *When you left home, did you have this dream to become who you are right now?*

TP: I had watched your show. This is another thing that could just make me cry, you sitting here now. I watched your show and you were speaking to me. There was nobody around me that told me I could fly. Nobody at school, no teacher, nobody who said, "You're special." But I saw you on television and your skin was like mine. And you said, "If you write things down, it's cathartic." So I started writing. And it changed my life.

O: *You weren't writing before then?*

TP: Never wrote.

O: *Wasn't I talking about journaling?*

TP: Yes. But I started writing my own things—using different characters' names because I didn't want anybody to know that I had been through this. A friend of mine found it and said, "Tyler, this is a really good play." And I thought, *Well, maybe it is.* So that's where it started.

O: *How old were you then?*

TP: Nineteen or 20.

O: *You were still living at home?*

TP: Still living at home.

O: *You didn't go to college.*

TP: No. Got kicked out of high school before graduation. But I went back for my GED.

O: *And what had you gotten kicked out for?*

TP: I was arguing with a counselor. I said some pretty nasty things. You know, after all the abuse, I was a pretty angry person.

O: *I was going to say, wouldn't that make you either angry or so introverted that you couldn't function?*

TP: It made me both. An angry introvert, which is dangerous.

O: *But then you started to write about your life. And somebody says, "This is pretty good." Now, lots of people think, There's something special about me, and they wait for something good to happen—and it doesn't. Why you?*

TP: Because I never stopped chasing it down. I don't think the dreams die—I think that people give up. I think it gets too hard. There were so many dark days when I wanted to lie there and die.

O: *You actually considered suicide?*

TP: Yes. When the rainbow wasn't enough.

O: *When was this?*

TP: Well, it was twice. Once when I was very young—I slit my wrists. And the other time—

O: *Whoa. You can't just say "I slit my wrists" and then move on. How old were you?*

TP: About 11 or 12.

O: *And you had to be taken to the hospital?*

TP: No, it wasn't that deep, wasn't that bad. I don't know if it was more a cry for help—

O: *Well, it was obviously a cry for help. And when was the second time?*

TP: Probably when I was around 22. It was winter and I was living in Atlanta, trying to get a play going. I was carrying a lot of frustration, I was homeless, and I had just scraped together enough money for this pay-by-the-week hotel that was full of crackheads. Every morning all the people who lived in the hotel—it was very cold that winter—would start their cars to warm them up. And the exhaust would fill my room. The cars would be out there warming up—at least ten, 15 cars—and I would get up and ask them to move. But I got to a point where that morning, I just lay there waiting.

O: *For the fumes to kill you?*

TP: Absolutely.

O: *What does that feel like, to want to die?*

TP: You feel there's nothing better for you.

O: *It's the end of hope.*

TP: It's the end of a lot of things.

O: *So this was after you had written the play I Know I've Been Changed and it failed.*

TP: Yes. Moved from New Orleans to Atlanta, wrote the show, had all my money tied up in it. I had worked selling used cars, I had worked at hotels, I had saved my tax return, I'd saved \$12,000 to put this play up, and I thought 1,200 people would see it over a weekend. Thirty people showed up. It was pretty devastating, because to do this, I had to leave the job I had.

O: *What was your job?*

TP: At the time I was a bill collector. But there are at least 40 companies in Atlanta with a record of me working there over a period of five or six years. I was a used car salesman, shoe-shine boy, bartender, waiter.... And listen, I use all those skills today—I can pour a mean drink!

O: *So you believed that after saving that \$12,000, now you're going to be on your way. But the play failed. The end of the dream as you knew it.*

TP: Not necessarily the end of the dream. I went back to work, started trying to do the show again. And then I got an opportunity to do it and went to my boss and said, "I need time off." They wouldn't give it to me, so I had to quit. I tried to do the show again the following year. It failed again. But there was something in me that said, *This is what you're supposed to do.*

O: *Even though it had failed twice.*

TP: Yes. I stayed the course. I tried it again the following year. Had a job. Lost the job.

O: *You failed a third time.*

TP: Yes. Then there's the rent, car payment, everything. So I'm out on the street.

O: *That's why you ended up in the pay-by-the-week hotel.*

TP: Yes—when I could afford it. Other than that, I was sleeping in my car. I'd get another job and fail again. This happened once a year, from 1992 until 1998.

O: *And when did the play finally hit?*

TP: March 1998. A few months before that, I had gotten into an argument on the phone with my father. He's yelling at me, cussing and screaming, and something happened in me. I started saying things I never thought I'd be able to—things I did not even know were in me. "How dare you? Who do you think you are? You are wrong." It was as if the little boy in me was screaming out everything he'd never been able to say. And my

father is silent on the phone because he has never heard this side of me. And at the end of it, I hear him say, "I love you," which at the age of 27, I had never heard before. I hung up the phone and I knew something had changed. My entire source of energy had been ripped from me. From the time I'd left my father's house until that moment, I had been plugged into negativity. I was plugged into anger to keep moving, to do the play, to work, to get up every day. It was based on "Fuck you; I'm gonna prove you wrong." But that day, when I finally said those things, I had to find a new source of energy.

O: Before that, you'd been coming from anger.

TP: And wanting to be around negativity. I enjoyed being a bill collector because I could make people miserable. That's why I made so much money—I got to pass on the hurt.

O: But after you hung up the phone with your father...

TP: It was like a car that runs on diesel fuel and now suddenly diesel doesn't work.

O: Because you had released all the energy you'd been carrying. Big, big, big.

TP: That took me back to the times when my mother would bring me to church, which took me back to God, which took me back to my faith. And prayer.

O: So you felt peace?

TP: Instantly. And I think the reason a lot of people don't want to have that kind of confrontation is that once that anger is gone, you're faced with, *Do I continue to thrive on the negativity? Or do I make the shift into what is going to work for me now?* I had to make that conscious choice.

O: Well, that was a miracle. That was a holy moment for you. What is your relationship with your father now?

TP: It's very respectful. I helped him retire a few years ago. But we still can't have a conversation, because all I get are tears. Tears and shrugging his shoulders. That's about as much emotion as he can give.

O: So you've tried to talk?

TP: I've tried to get as much information as I can, because I don't know him.

O: I believe in being respectful because that's what the Bible says you're supposed to do: Honor thy father and thy mother. But do you hold any resentment toward him?

TP: I can't walk up to him and throw my arms around him and say, "I love you, let's go fishing." Honoring him is doing what he did for me. He took care of me. He made sure we ate, we had shelter. So I give him the

things he gave me.

O: Yes. And then after that phone conversation, after you released all that negativity—the next time you did the play, it succeeded.

TP: The very next time. March 12, 1998. I had made the choice to do this last show. And this time there was a line of people around the corner trying to get in the place. From that moment on, the houses have been sold out everywhere.

O: What's the most people you've played to in a weekend?

TP: About 55,000.

O: When you first realized that people were showing up, did you think that was it—you'd made it?

TP: No, because then I was afraid every day that it was going to end tomorrow. You know the feeling.

O: Yeah, I used to think that same thing every time someone else came out with a new talk show. But let's get to *Madea*. I heard that you originally weren't even going to play her, that it happened by accident. Is that true?

TP: No. I was going to do *Madea*. The accident was that it was supposed to be a very quick five-minute scene, but when the lead actress didn't show up, *Madea* ended up on-stage the entire time.

O: Do you love her?

TP: What she does for people gives me great joy. What she's done for me, yes. But as far as, you know, actually doing it every night, it's pretty much a pain, wearing the fat suit and talking in that high voice for hours.

O: Let's talk about how she came to be. She's a combination of your aunt who came to the house with the gun, and your mother.

TP: Yes. The softer, more sympathetic side is my mother. 'Cause I would often say, "She will beat the hell out of you, then turn around and offer you some pie and a Band-Aid or a ride to the hospital."

O: How was *Madea* created?

TP: I have to thank Eddie Murphy, 'cause after I saw him do the Klumps [in *Nutty Professor II*], I said, "I'm going to try my hand at a female character." It was the brilliance of Eddie Murphy. I need to write him a check. Say thank you.

O: Do you remember the exact moment she came to be?

TP: Absolutely. There was a sold-out house at the Regal Theater in Chicago, and five minutes before the show, I put on the costume and stood at the mirror for the first time. I'm saying, *Damn, are you really going to do*

this? Then the show started and I had no choice—they pushed me out onstage. *Madea* had a cane and she didn't talk very loud and her voice was much deeper and she sat in one spot the whole time. But after a while, I finally had to move. And when I moved there was laughter. And then I said a joke, and it was funny. I wish I had that first night on tape. It was pretty damn scary. But at the end, man, there was a standing ovation.

O: For her?

TP: For the show, for her, for me.

O: But she got the loudest applause?

TP: Yeah. And I was blown away. I'm 6'6" and a man. I'm thinking, *Who knew?*

O: Who decided that *Madea* should become a movie?

TP: I did.

O: You weren't scared to make a movie?

TP: No, because I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I just saw all those people coming out to the plays.

O: By the time you did that first movie, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, you'd been doing the plays how long?

TP: Eight years on the road.

O: And for your new movie you've taken on an iconic book and play and story, *For Colored Girls*. Were you scared to do that?

TP: Sure. But I enjoy a challenge.

O: During the process of filming this movie, I think that something happened to you. The difference between doing a serious drama and having done *Madea*—

TP: It elevated my thinking of what film is. It made me understand that there is an art and a style to it. But here's the thing: Steven Spielberg got to start messing around with a camera as a kid, and Jason Reitman got his father to help. Me, it took nine films to be ready.

O: You just sort of taught yourself how to be a director. How did you do that?

TP: I learned in progress. My first time directing was *Madea's Family Reunion*, which I cannot watch.

O: Why not?

TP: Because I didn't know that the cameras should actually move! The camera is the eye of the audience. But it's all a part of learning, and I'm grateful for the journey, and I'm proud of the work—every bit of it. In every film I learned something to propel me to the next level. I don't know what else will come in the future, but *For Colored Girls* is the absolute best that I can do at this time.

O: I was talking to somebody the other ▶

OPRAH TALKS TO TYLER PERRY

(continued from page 275)

day who was saying that you are a performer's director.

TP: Well, first of all, the caliber of acting in this movie is just top-notch. I don't think it gets any better. You cannot have Phylicia Rashad, Kimberly Elise, Thandie Newton—

O: Anika Noni Rose...

TP: You cannot have them in a scene together and not expect there to be sparks.

O: *The film is a big risk. The audience that has supported you is used to being able to laugh every time they go to your movies.*

TP: It will be interesting to see what happens.

O: *Okay. Shifting gears now: Are you comfortable with your wealth?*

TP: I'm comfortable with the wealth. It took me a minute. 'Cause the first year I gave every dime away. There was something in me that felt like I didn't deserve it.

O: *And are you over that now?*

TP: You're sitting on my tricked-out bus! I'm over that.

O: *What about the attention your wealth brings?*

TP: That I don't like. I don't like the *Forbes* list. I also don't need to be in the biggest hotel

and walking through the lobby and shopping and everybody looking at me. I'd rather just do the show and go live my life privately.

O: *Do you think you're shy?*

TP: Until you put me onstage and put me in a situation where I'm supposed to perform, yes. I'm not good at all in small crowds.

O: *You may be reserved, but I wouldn't call you shy. You'd just rather be at home by yourself—*

TP: With the dogs—

O: *—than out at a big glamorous party.*

TP: Not going to do that. I hate it with a passion.

O: *All right. So why aren't you with someone? I cannot figure that out.*

TP: I love being by myself too much.

O: *Maybe you haven't met the right person.*

Do you think it's that?

TP: I keep hearing that.

O: *Have you been in love?*

TP: I was, a few years ago, with the wrong woman. And it was really bad for me and hurtful. Maybe I'm still dealing with that. 'Cause I never cried in a relationship before.

O: *You cried in that relationship?*

TP: Yeah.

O: *You didn't tell me that. I didn't know you*

were in love. I thought it was just that thing in the beginning where it's intense, and you can't even call it love yet 'cause you haven't been through enough for it to be love. Are you open now?

TP: I'm open to whatever God has for me. I really am. However it comes.

O: *So as we sit here now with you looking at how far you've come and where you still have to go, what is it you know for sure?*

TP: What I know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that God is with me. I know that. I know that He's always been with me. It is evident in everything I have endured—and the fact that I made it through with some sanity.

O: *Can you see the future for yourself?*

TP: After my mother died, I realized that one of the reasons I was always running so hard was that I'd made some promises to her as a child that I was trying to keep. All those years of working and working—a lot of it was for her. Now that she's gone, I've had to reevaluate. So when you ask what's next, it makes me take a step back and go, *What do I want to do? What's going to make me happy? And do I want to continue working this hard?* At this point, I'm still looking for the answers. **O**