

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

Cross Check

Funnyman **Tyler Perry** leaves comedy and costumes behind with a tensely dramatic role that casts him as a leading man in the CIA thriller **"Alex Cross."**



T Tyler Perry, the man behind the movie matron known as Madea, has long made us laugh, usually dressed in drag. But can he hold us in suspense? Track down a homicidal maniac? Woo us with his calm, cool, collected control of a criminal mind, all while

wielding a weapon? In his new film, "Alex Cross," Tyler sheds the comedic one-liners (and the padding) that rocketed him to fame. While his female alter ego still lives—Tyler released "Madea's Witness Protection" earlier this year—the mega-successful writer, director, producer, studio head and performer (who's famed for wearing all five hats simultaneously for his projects, on both the big and small screens) tells *Washington Flyer* he enjoyed letting someone else take charge for a change.

"I showed up for the first time just as an actor," he says of his "Alex Cross" experience. "It wasn't at all tough. The hardest part for me was the down time. I'm not a person who's used to having hours and hours of down time, waiting for this and waiting for that.

An understatement, to be sure. Often referred to as the busiest man in Hollywood—even if he lives and works mainly in Atlanta, Ga.—Tyler is the definition of prolific. In addition to "Madea's Witness Protection," in 2012 he also released the film "Good Deeds," starring Gabrielle Union and Thandie Newton, while wrapping production on "The Marriage Counselor" and "Aunt Bam's Place." He's also the creative force behind TBS sitcoms "For Better or Worse,"

"Meet the Browns" and "House of Payne."

But Alex Cross is Tyler's newest persona. The character is based on über-author James Patterson's hero of the best-selling *Cross* series, the same literary figure seen in earlier film adaptations starring Morgan Freeman ("Kiss the Girls," "Along Came a Spider"). This is Tyler's first foray assuming the psyche of the famous psychologist-turned-detective-turned-FBI profiler. The script's dark material was almost too much for the funnyman.

"I wanted to do something different. Honestly, had I known when I accepted it how deep I'd have to go"—Tyler refers to his character's tracking of a sadistic killer, played by "Lost's" Matthew Fox—"I'm not sure I would have done it." He makes this admission now from the peace and quiet of his Atlanta compound, where he's enjoying the second week of a first-in-a-lifetime eight-week hiatus. "But once I commit to something, I give it 100 percent. To play this character convincingly I had to go to

some dark places. I spent a lot of time with homicide investigators, talked with real FBI profilers. It was just so far away from who I am and what I do that halfway through my prep and training—gun fighting, and all that—I asked myself: "What the heck are you doing?" But I'd committed, so I gave it everything I had."

Ultimately, he's glad he did. "As an actor you never know how it's all going to turn out. You do your best and you wait to see. But this movie," he quickly states, lest there be any doubt about his reaction to the final product, "really holds up. I'm very pleased."

Washington, with its influence and power, has long been on this media mogul's radar. Especially when it comes to the worthy causes he holds dear.

"For me, it's about what's close to me at the time," he tells *Flyer*. "When the earthquake happened in Haiti, I was able to do something there. I was grateful to work with the Red Cross. I have no one particular cause; I pick them up as I go. It's about what moves and inspires me." Tyler's eponymous charitable foundation also provided shelter to Katrina victims and calls attention to little-known civil rights cases such as that of Terrance Williams, who disappeared in 2004 after entering a Florida policeman's squad car, never to be seen or heard from again.

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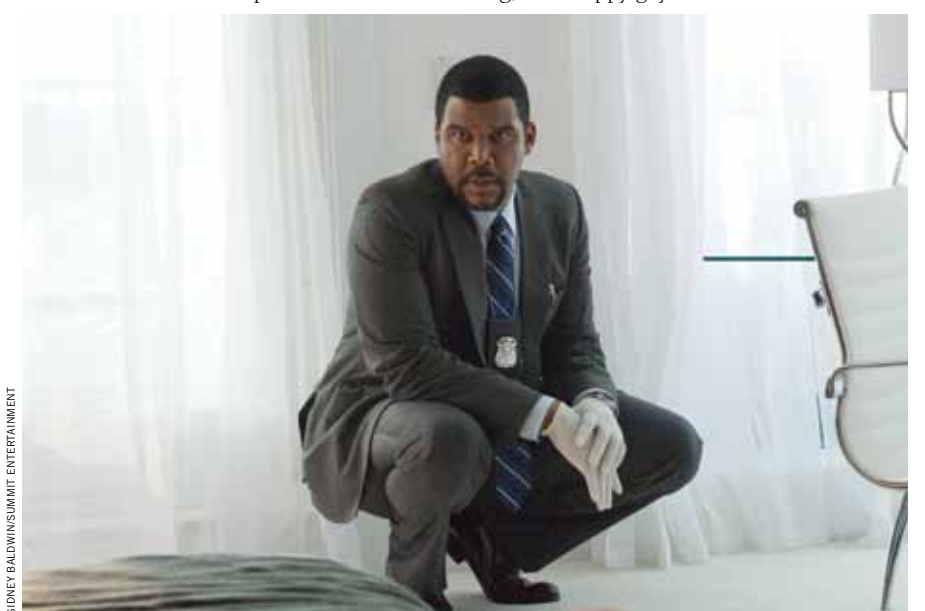
While Tyler has a legion of fervent fans, he has his detractors, too; some rant that his work cultivates harmful African-American stereotypes. How does Tyler respond to his critics, which include film director Spike Lee?

With perspective, it seems. "Early on in my career I had two reviewers come to my play," he recalls. (Before Madea was ever a movie, the character appeared in countless plays that Tyler wrote and staged on what is known as the "Chitlin Circuit," a string of venues in the eastern and southern U.S. that welcomed African-American entertainers and audiences.) "They sat in the same row," he continues, "on two different ends, and saw the exact same show. One guy wrote this amazing review about how much he loved it. The other guy wrote about how awful it was, and how it was the worst thing he'd ever seen. That's when I learned the value of my critics. It's all about the experience. It's all about

what they can relate to or understand. So what I choose to do is focus on the millions of devoted people who have been with me since day one and not focus on the negative."

He pauses to reflect for a moment, then adds, "I'm always looking for truth in critique. If it's vitriolic, I won't take it in at all. But if there is some truth inside of it, I think, 'Oh, that's interesting.' My stories are simple; the writing is simple. My audience loves this type of storytelling. My fan base is from 2 to 80 years old. The greatest part of my success is that it crosses so many generations, so many races. It's truly about the simplicity of the story that engages everybody. I'm talking to the housekeeper who has a ninth grade education. And to the doctors and lawyers in the audience. I'm very aware of the spectrum. And I don't want to alienate one group or the other."

As for Mr. Lee? "I wish him well," says Tyler graciously. "I 100 percent understand his frustration in this business. What I refuse to be... is angry. What I refuse to be is a person who is so broken about it."



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