

Article

# Tyler Perry and the Rhetoric of Madea: Contrasting Performances of Perry's Leading Lady as She Appears on Stage and Screen

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**Abstract:** In this essay, we will explore the variances in Madea's character and presence on stage and on screen in both productions of Tyler Perry's *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play* and *Madea Goes to Jail*. Specifically, we examine the multiple and varying ways in which the character of Madea performs for different audiences by examining how the roles of violence, religion and wisdom operate on stage and screen. Exploring the subtle—and at times, not-so-subtle—ways in which Madea's performances differ from stage to screen, we suggest that Madea also performs as a text that Perry then uses to impart different messages to audiences of both stage and screen.

**Keywords:** Tyler Perry; rhetoric; media; film; theater; black studies; popular culture

## 1. Introduction

Industry leaders recognize Tyler Perry as one of the most successful Black entertainers of all time.<sup>1</sup> As the first African American to own a major film studio, Perry has also realized success as an actor, playwright, filmmaker and producer. Even those who have never seen a Tyler Perry production will likely recognize his name as synonymous with that of his signature character, Madea. Though Perry has expanded his focus in recent years to include an increasing number of film projects reaching beyond the scope of Madea's world, his characterization of the folksy, foul mouth Madea remains one of the most prominent, oft-recurring and often debated characters in Perry's oeuvre.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, Nicole Hodges Persley sees the Madea character as “inspiring black women to translate their salient struggles against classism, sexism, and racism into feminist acts of resistance in ways that make sense to working-class black women.” She argues that “Madea provokes her audience to address contradictions inherent in the heteronormative black family structure. She pokes holes in the moral compass of the black church while using comedy as a balm to help women address polemical topics such as incest, sexual and physical abuse, intimacy, and other closeted topics in mainstream black theater, television, and film” (Persley 2012, p. 225).

However, Tamika Carey writes that “despite the positive messages” in Perry's films, primarily conveyed through the character of Madea, Perry does not “contribute to black women's liberation but rather points to a moment where black women's pain is a commodity and where cultural productions

<sup>1</sup> For more on Tyler Perry and his success in the entertainment industry, see (Bell and Jackson 2014; Hira 2007; Lee 2015; Manigault-Bryant et al. 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Perry announced in 2018 that he was retiring Madea after 2019. See (Butler 2018).

about their instructive journeys to wellness are exploited sites where writers can carry out their own agendas" (Carey 2014, p. 1002).

In this essay, we will compare and contrast Madea's character and presence on stage and screen in Tyler Perry's *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play* (2006) and the feature film *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009). Specifically, we examine the multiple and varying ways in which the character of Madea performs for different audiences by examining how the roles of violence, religion and wisdom operate on stage and screen. Exploring the subtle—and at times, not-so-subtle—ways in which Madea's performances differ from stage to screen, we suggest that Madea also performs as a text that Perry then uses to impart different messages to audiences of both stage and screen.

## 2. Perry's Audiences of Stage and Screen

Initially, an audience member who has viewed both works may wonder why two productions bearing the same name tell two such drastically different stories. The characters, plot, dialogue and even tone of the ending are radically different from one version to the next, and while Madea is the main character in the stage version, her storyline within the film functions as one of several subplots. Examining the bigger picture, one might question if changes in Perry's films reflect a necessary adaptation to meet the expectations and dimensional limitations of the big screen, or if something is lost outside of the intimacy afforded within the theatre setting.

Georgetown University professor Robert Patterson offers some profound insight into the theoretically intended audience by exploring the function of demographics within the Chitlin' Circuit—the network of theatres that served as the launching pad for Perry's career. Patterson asserts that part of the driving force behind Perry's success was that "the homogeneous black audiences not only understood the cultural referents central to the gospel play's form, but they embraced them as comedic and 'realistic' aspects of black culture, without necessarily interrogating how those 'cultural realisms' produced un-wellness" (Patterson 2014, p. 221). Essentially, Perry's audience members both "got" Perry's plays and appreciated them so much in their entirety that specific stereotypical or incongruent nuances could be overlooked and/or forgiven. Patterson cites Henry Louis Gates's observations of the circuit. He argues that the "fact that the audience is entirely black creates an essential dynamic," not merely because black audiences view those stereotypes that Gates claims inundate these plays without the presence of a white judgmental gaze, but also because the audience's identification with the play's themes is a necessary prerequisite for a production to succeed (Patterson 2014, p. 221).

Perry also has come under great critical scrutiny for the presence and function of violence in several of his films, particularly for the portrayal of domestic violence against women. Yolande Tomlinson, the national education coordinator at the U.S. Human Rights Network, notes that "although Perry equally employs violence against men and women in his films, the reality is that women are often the victims of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships, not men" (Tomlinson 2014, p. 97). As Tomlinson explains, this idea of "justifiable violence" has the potential to be particularly dangerous for women who may not be able to successfully negotiate Perry's on-screen depictions of their own desires and lived experiences. Often in Perry's films, the fairy-tale life for women comes with the price tag of domestic violence. Whether the on-screen victim is escaping or enduring such violence, female viewers run the risk of concluding that to live a "good" and financially secure life, one must be prepared, quite literally, to take it on the chin along the way.

Interestingly, however, Perry's plays seem far less concerned with portraying said fairy-tale life. His stage works appear to focus more on creating a meaningful, and often spiritually moving, experience for theatergoers than on tying up character stories with a neat, tidy ending. As such, the manifestations of violence in *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play* appear to serve a far more instructive, protective purpose than do their counterparts in the film adaptation.

While domestic abuse between romantic partners appears to be the most oft-recurring form of violence in Perry's works, Madea—who proudly, and often conspicuously, bears arms—frequently engages in acts of violence as well. In *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play*, four depictions of violence at

Madea's hands are particularly noteworthy: the suggestion of violence toward law enforcement, the beating of a fellow prison inmate, the disciplining of a willful teenager, and the assault with a deadly weapon against a man posing a danger to Madea's family. We then contrast these depictions with their counterpart scenes in *Madea Goes to Jail*, the film.

### 3. Rhetorical Criticism: Reading Perry Closely

While scholars have used different methodological approaches to analyze Perry's works, we approach our task by engaging in *rhetorical criticism*. Sonya K. Foss defines rhetorical criticism as a "qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (Foss 2018, p. 6). While there are numerous approaches to the art of rhetorical analysis,<sup>3</sup> we engage in what rhetoric scholars call *textual criticism* or *close reading*.

Rhetoric critic Barry Brummett defines close reading as the "mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to a deeper understanding of its meanings" (Brummett 2019, p. 2). As a method, it is an "interpretive analysis that primarily examines texts in light of the contexts in which they are given." Within the field of rhetoric, however, critics using the close reading approach are concerned with the "rhetorical dynamics of particular discourses" (Johnson 2012, p. 5). For textual critics, theory arises from an "understanding of the particular;" abstract or theoretical principles are only relevant within the "texture of an actual discourse" (Leff 1986, p. 378). In short, textual criticism privileges texts and demonstrates how texts function rhetorically.

Engaging the texts in this way allows the work to stand alone for our interpretative analysis, conducting a comparison and contrast examination of the two. While we could have examined any of Perry's works—plays, films, or even television shows—we selected both the play and film *Madea Goes to Jail* because we argue these texts best highlight the rhetorical performance and nuance that Perry offers to his audiences of stage and screen, respectively.

### 4. Rhetorical Analysis of *Madea Goes to Jail* (Stage and Screen)

#### 4.1. *She Fought the Law . . . and She Won*

Amber L. Johnson observes that in typical Perry works "what the audience learns about Madea is usually through a punchline or comment by a supporting actor . . . *Madea Goes to Jail* presents the first full narrative of Madea" (Johnson 2014, p. 227). As such, in the stage version, Madea's absence at home is quickly remarked upon by her nephew, Sonny; Sonny's wife, Vanessa; and Ella, Madea's friend and neighbor. The audience soon learns through the eyes of Sonny, a guard at the jail, that Madea has landed herself among the population of female inmates. When Sonny speaks to Madea about the reason for her imprisonment, she shares with him that she accidentally overfilled her gas tank and, not wanting to pay the \$87 charge, became angry and drove away. At one point, Madea reveals that she was driving at a speed of 110 miles per hour. When Sonny chastises her for speeding, Madea states that she was trying to get from Conyers—a small, suburban town 24 miles east of Atlanta—to DeKalb County, "where I know somebody." The audience, presumably based in Atlanta, laughs uproariously at this comment, which functions both as a geographical joke and as a sort of cautionary statement regarding the potential dangers for a black person undergoing an arrest in a town where she has no connections. When in pursuit from the law for a minor infraction, Madea demonstrates the need to "run like hell"—a poignant message given the ongoing narrative of police brutality and excessive use of lethal force against black citizens.

Though Madea explains that she took the police on a long chase, Perry places minimal emphasis on her physical interaction with the arresting officers. Madea views her arrest as very matter-of-fact,

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<sup>3</sup> (Paynton and Hahn 2018).

telling Sonny that the “judge said he’ll make an example out of me, so he put me in here with some real criminals,” and sends Sonny home to recover \$900 in bail money from her mattress. While Leo, Sonny’s friend and fellow prison guard, is afraid of Madea and tells Sonny, “This big one . . . she’s been fighting since she got here,” his fear seems to stem more from Madea’s size and demeanor than from any real threat of violence to his person. Madea appears to operate relatively peacefully with the guards and fellow inmates—though she does say to Sonny of Leo, “If he tries to rape me, I’m gonna bust him in his face.”

Conversely, as the opening credits roll for the film version of *Madea Goes to Jail*, the audience is treated to a montage of newspaper headlines and clippings showcasing a long history of Madea’s run-ins with the law. Perry quickly establishes violence as one of Madea’s primary forms of interpersonal interaction through headlines such as “Super-Size Stripper Smacks a Spectator” and “Crazy Fan Tackles Wrestling Champ” (Johnson 2014, p. 227). This stands in sharp contrast to the initial image painted of Madea in the stage version, whom Perry describes as a no-nonsense caretaker who cooks, cleans and looks after Sonny and his 6-month-old while Vanessa is fully engrossed in graduate school. In the film, Madea’s family watches televised footage of her instigating a full-scale police chase, and Madea’s brother, Joe, jokes to her son, Brian, “Your mama always running from the police. I’m sorry to tell you; your mama is a po-po ho.” More notably, when Madea is in the courtroom facing the judge, her arresting officers are present and all show signs of having been severely beaten. As Brian argues for Madea’s release because the officers failed to read her the Miranda rights, the officers reveal that it was Madea who beat them, telling the judge that they forgot to Mirandize her because “we were fighting for our lives . . . that old woman got the strength of any man.” The on-screen message Madea conveys regarding law enforcement seems to be less a notion of “run like hell” and more an assertion to “fight for your life.” If one believes that Perry intentionally crafts different messages for his theatre and cinema audiences, one could argue that the almost exclusively black theatre audience is advised not to resist law enforcement to the extent of risking personal harm. For the more racially diverse cinema audience, Perry sends a message that Black people will stand up and fight for their lives. Indeed, despite fighting back, Madea avoids jail time due to the officers’ lapse in arrest protocol. She is not jailed in the film until she violates her probation by destroying a white woman’s sports car after the woman steals her parking space and behaves disrespectfully during an altercation in a shopping center parking lot. An exaggerated version of a similar scene from the 1991 film *Fried Green Tomatoes*, on-screen Madea’s actions once again underscore the sense that sometimes, a woman must take matters into her own hands.

Within the play, Perry portrays jail as a reasonably happy, casual place. The inmates and staff seem familiar and mostly friendly with one another, and even Madea’s attire—an orange housecoat adorned with lace trimming—evokes sentiments of home. At one point, the inmates begin singing a big-house ballad titled “Down on My Luck” and Leo, the guard, joins in. The scene seems almost to hearken back to another era, reminiscent of spirituals sung by field workers to comfort the soul and distract the mind from the bleak circumstances at hand. Suddenly, however, it is lights out, and as Madea prepares to retire to her cell, Leo informs her that she will be bunking with her “new friend,” Chico. Chico, a darker-skinned and somewhat masculine black woman, refers to Madea as “fresh meat” when she first arrives at the jail and appears to pose the only source of threat to Madea. In a genuinely sinister delivery, Leo chuckles as he locks the two women in a cell together and then says—presumably to Chico—“I thought you might like that . . . don’t say I never gave you nothin’.” Although Perry fans likely know that Leo’s character is setting the stage for Madea to assert her authority over Chico, the scene nevertheless clearly portrays black women being deliberately placed in harm’s way by a black man who has been entrusted with their safety. As the viewers are primed to expect, Madea provokes Chico by taking her bunk, insults her by referring to her in masculine language—calling her “young man” and “sir” repeatedly—and then administers a sound beating to establish dominance before delivering Perry’s classic and oft-referenced line from *The Color Purple*, “I loves Harpo, God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead ‘fo I let him beat me.” Though Madea is the instigator of violence in this

instance, the Harpo reference suggests that violence is justified when it is employed to prevent one from becoming a victim.

In the film, Perry portrays jail as serious business, with clear distance established between the inmates and the guards. Madea faces a similar adversary upon arriving in prison—this time in the form of a broad, masculine white woman named Big Sal. Big Sal also refers to Madea as fresh meat, and Madea responds in kind with insults about Big Sal's masculinity, again referring to the woman posing a threat as "young man", "sir" and "Big Papa", to name a few. The mutual threats of violence escalate on screen, and when Big Sal makes an advance at Candy—Madea's friend and fellow inmate—in the laundry room, Madea engages in a physical altercation and traps Big Sal in the industrial-sized steamer, presumably burning her repeatedly. As in the play, the fight stops when a figure of authority enters the scene, and in both instances, Madea claims that she was becoming better acquainted with her colleague. In the film, Madea even asserts that she was in the process of witnessing to Big Sal, stating, "I'm just telling her how good God is." Though the violence takes place on a heightened scale in the film, it retains a cartoonish nature—particularly as Big Sal seems unscathed despite her run-in with the steamer—and, once again, violence is employed to prevent the victimization of another individual. Viewers can easily interpret the reference to God's goodness as a joke in light of Madea's actual behavior, but the scene also allows for an interpretation about the goodness and righteousness of God as one who acts on behalf of the oppressed and the endangered. While Madea verbally spars with Big Sal on numerous occasions, the exchange only becomes physical when Madea senses that another person's agency over her own body (Candy, in this case) is at risk. As with Chico, Big Sal seems to have little trouble acknowledging Madea as "top dog" in the jail after their sole physical altercation.

#### 4.2. *Home Is Where the Hurt Is*

Shifting from prison violence to the at-home variety, one might examine the scene in the play when Madea and her friend, Ella, decide to coach 16-year-old Toni—the belligerent, willful daughter of a fellow inmate temporarily placed in Madea's care—about good manners. When Toni walks into the room where Madea and Ella are chatting and completely ignores both women, the ladies admonish her that she ought to say "good afternoon. You don't walk in here like you own the place." Toni responds with an acidic retort, and Madea quickly "jokes" that she will beat Toni if she doesn't exhibit good manners. In response, Toni declares, "If you touch me, I'm gonna call 9-1-1." Madea gets the last word with the revelation that "my daughter tried that . . . I hit her so hard she dialed 9-1-9." Not one to make an idle threat, Madea retrieves a bag full of belts from the pantry, and she and Ella proceed to take turns striking Toni with the belt. Although Toni shrieks and cries during the process, the scene is mostly comical. Perry employs the familiar childhood imagery of Double Dutch jump rope—with Madea and Ella tagging one another in and passing the belt back and forth—as a device to underscore the innocence inherent within this "beating." Toni has been scared and stunned. The scene results in her fearful obedience, but she has not experienced any lasting bodily harm. Her feelings and pride are hurt; her physical form is not. Madea allows the audience to fully absorb the instructive nature and effects of the beating before declaring, "That belt still got the power if you use it."

The style and import of this type of parenting—child discipline as opposed to child abuse—is a message Perry seems intent on driving home to viewers in both audiences. Though a similar scene of child discipline does not exist in *Madea Goes to Jail* the film, the exchange between Madea and Toni almost perfectly mirrors an interaction between Madea and another willful teenage girl, Nikki, in the movie *Madea's Family Reunion*. In this scene, Madea takes a break from doing laundry to spank Nikki, her foster ward, for skipping school. Brittney Cooper notes that as Madea disciplines Nikki, "the famous abuse scene from *Good Times*, where Penny's mother burns her with an iron, plays in the background. This intertextual allusion to a now-classic black cultural text is meant to provide a meaningful contrast. Unlike bad black mothers who abuse their children, Madea knows the difference between loving discipline and abuse" (Cooper 2014, p. 241). Ironically, the *Good Times* scene is evocative of the prison laundry room scene when Madea burns Big Sal with the steamer, which leads one to

wonder if Perry—by way of Madea—is condoning a higher degree of violence for those who pose a threat to another human being.

Indeed, violence in defense of one's self or one's family does not give Madea a moment's pause. In the stage version of *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea assumes the stance and mannerisms of a boxer entering the ring as her nephew, Sonny, slowly concludes that his wife, Vanessa, is having an affair with his boss and friend, Nate. Sonny is reticent to believe this could be true until a visiting representative from Child Protective Services reveals that, based on his blood type, there is no way Sonny could be the father of the baby he and Vanessa are raising. Upon learning that the child he is fathering is not his biological son, Sonny becomes enraged and lunges at Vanessa. At this, Madea deftly inserts herself between them and declares to her nephew, "Sonny! You can't hit that woman." Madea may not like Vanessa—she has stated as much—but she will not condone violence toward her. A fight between the two men seems imminent, but then Nate decides he is ready to leave and commands Vanessa to wait for him outside. Madea remains an innocent bystander through much of this exchange, resorting to physical violence *only* when Nate makes a move toward her after sending Vanessa out. Madea's home and physical presence have now been threatened, and she pulls a gun from her purse, firing warning shots as she chases Nate out of the house. Despite the use of gunplay, the audience continues to laugh, for at no point does Nate's (or anyone else's) life appear to be in any real danger. Madea is merely doing what she does so very well—asserting the exact right amount of muscle to defend herself and her loved ones in a threatening situation. Such is also the case near the play's conclusion when Madea fires warning shots at Toni's father, an abusive pimp, to chase him out of her home. Interestingly, Madea also uses this exchange as an instructive moment for Toni, training her to pick up the empty shells from the floor to hide any evidence that Madea has exercised the use of a deadly weapon. Once again, Perry uses Madea not only to champion for the validity of self-defense in the face of domestic violence but also as a spokesperson for women to be smart—or cunning, in the womanist sense of the word—about how they protect themselves.<sup>4</sup>

In stark contrast, gun violence plays a much more substantial—and much less "necessary"—role in the screen version of *Madea Goes to Jail*. After returning home from court, Madea is angered to find that her brother, Joe, has thrown a raging house party in her absence. Madea's displeasure is evident to her son, Brian, and daughter, Cora; her children encourage her to stay calm, but soon, the camera cuts to an exterior shot of the home, and the audience members hear the sound of rapid, repetitive gunfire from inside. Immediately, party guests run outside the house, screaming, "She's got a gun!" and "I don't wanna die!" Despite its brevity and presumed intended comedic function, this pure-gangster version of Madea wields an automatic weapon and uses it to chase off guests who have overstayed their welcome in her home — a far cry from the Madea of Perry's stage plays and earlier film works. In those plays and movies, Perry avoids violence except as safely administered discipline for children and as a necessary response to posed domestic threats. This Madea, as a more exaggerated incarnation of her earlier self, functions almost like a caricature of the heroic, no-nonsense Madea whose purpose is mostly to protect and instruct. Perry's choice to employ senseless and extreme gun violence at Madea's hands suggests a character evolution that marks the most evident divide between Madea's three-dimensional, sternly matriarchal and nurturing presence on the stage and the two-dimensional, slapstick and rightly-feared version of her presented to the silver screen's broader audience. We suggest that one can observe this dichotomy between the two Madeas through Perry's treatment of religious motifs within both mediums.

#### 4.3. *Here Is the Church, Here Is the Steeple, Open the Door ... Where Is Madea?*

Faith and religion are potent undercurrents in almost every single Tyler Perry work, regardless of the medium. Primarily comprised of African American church-going women, Perry's fan base and

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Womanist theory, see (Phillips 2006).

critics regard him as an artist whose works fall under the umbrella of Christian productions. While Perry seldom makes explicit biblical references in his works, Nyasha Junior notes that “even without chapter and verse citations, familiar words and fragments serve as triggers that many people will associate with the Bible. Furthermore, they tend to associate these texts with particular biblical value even if they are not explicitly identified in the biblical text” (Junior 2014, p. 30). A clear example of this in the film version of *Madea Goes to Jail* is when one character comments to Brian that the Lord “is so good, He delivered your mama out of the belly of that jail.” Even individuals only loosely familiar with biblical texts may readily identify Perry’s allusion to God’s deliverance of Jonah out of the belly of a whale, despite the absence of any clear or precise biblical citation.

Similarly, in the play Madea delivers a humorous monologue to Toni—nearly identical to that which she shares with Jennifer in Perry’s film *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*—that is overflowing with misstated and stitched-together narratives from the Bible. Both works readily conjure up biblical associations that lead the viewer to assume the text is operating within a Christian framework. Lisa Allen-McLaurin further observes that the frequent inclusion of gospel songs in both Perry’s stage plays and films “helps identify Perry’s works and characters as Christian” (Allen-McLaurin 2014, p. 59).

In an interesting twist, then, Madea—though she is both the main character in many of Perry works and performed by Perry, a devout Christian—shows no interest in the trappings of organized religion, even though the church is vital to her immediate family members. Described by Amber L. Johnson as a “Christian who does not go to church,” Perry frames Madea as someone who “does not know how to pray, and does not quote the bible correctly but is valued as the no-nonsense matriarch of the family” (Johnson 2014, p. 227). Although neither version of Madea—stage *nor* screen—is a proponent of attending church, a clear divide again emerges between the values eschewed by the Madea on screen and those extolled by the Madea on stage.

During the film’s courtroom scene, Madea prays to God that if he gets her through her situation, she will go by the church. After the judge overturns her arrest, Cora chats in the car about Madea’s upcoming trip to church on Sunday. Cora is appalled when Madea declares that she will *not* be joining the family at church. In an almost Tom Sawyer-esque maneuver, Madea states that she promised the Lord that if he helped her through she “would go by the church” and while driving, the family has just passed by one. Although she adopts a devout persona in front of figures of authority—such as the judge in the courtroom and the guards in prison—Madea clearly and happily distances herself from institutions of faith. She makes occasional references to God in the film and dishes out sanctimonious insults, as when she tells her neighbor, Mr. Brown, “God don’t like you, he grew you in a petri dish.”

At first blush, the stage version of Madea seems to keep an equal distance from the church. After Ella inquires as to Madea’s whereabouts after church one day, Sonny replies, “It’s Sunday. You know Madea’s at the casinos.” Ella responds, “That is her church, isn’t it.” But this Madea displays a softer side than her on-screen counterpart. When Toni is uncertain about how she ought to pray, Madea coaches her: “Real prayer—true prayer—is you sitting and having a conversation with God. Anybody can pray. Just say, ‘In the name of Jesus . . . ’ That’s your stamp to get it up there to his ear.”

Admittedly, Madea delivers these same lines during one of her on-screen performances, when she counsels teenage Jennifer in *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*. However, Perry takes Madea’s spiritual instruction a step further in *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play*. Madea imparts powerful, spiritually-rooted words of wisdom to Toni, saying, “When you wake up every morning, and you look in the mirror and God is pleased with your life, that’s all that matters. When God is pleased, everything you touch is blessed. And that ain’t Madea talking, either . . . I *know* it.” Here, Perry takes a step beyond the fourth wall, both acknowledging his presence operating inside the Madea character and taking the opportunity to make clear that this piece of wisdom—bordering on prosperity gospel—stems directly from his testimony. Toni has her powerful spiritual encounter just minutes after this conversation, though Jeremy, the prison chaplain and Madea’s probation officer, shepherds her through this experience rather than Madea herself. Though Madea primes the pump for Toni’s transformation, she quickly

distances herself from the salvific process and tells Jeremy, “I think I might’ve just sent her halfway to hell; hopefully, you can catch her.”

Madea of the stage is no more a fan of the church than Madea of the screen. Upon closer inspection, however, one might surmise that on-stage Madea need not go to church because she has already arrived—the theatre *is* the church. Complete with dazzling performances of gospel numbers, a heightened emphasis on the importance of salvation and plenty of Madea’s sermon-esque wisdom, the call-and-response rapport established between the cast and the audience is not unlike the call-and-response dynamic characteristic of the pastor, choir and congregation in the black church. Despite the transference of some of these aspects—such as the incorporation of gospel music—to the film adaptations, the overall sense of community and even worship is lost in translation from the stage to the screen. Perhaps the two-way communication enabled by the theatre setting is necessary to breathe life into Madea as a fully well-rounded and dialogical character. When she transitions to the big screen, Madea becomes, quite literally, two-dimensional—a caricature of her more instructive self. This difference between these two Madeas is evidenced in the way she administers advice within each medium.

#### 4.4. *The Gospel According to Madea*

Solicited or otherwise, Madea never seems to run short on advice. Regardless of the medium, those in Madea’s life—and even those who cross paths with her—can count on Madea’s willingness to dispense her maternal words of wisdom. Nowhere is Madea’s wisdom more evident in *Madea Goes to Jail: The Play* than in the extended monologue she delivers to her nephew, Sonny, on how to recover from his broken heart and let Vanessa go. In this scene, Madea delivers a stirring speech to her nephew about the importance and power of identifying those moments in life when one must let go, get up, and move on with life. Though her monologue does not assume the exact form of a sermon, she imbues her message and demeanor with a pastoral quality that allows Madea’s words to take on the characteristic of folk wisdom delivered from many African American pulpits.

Although Madea is the spokesperson for this message, Perry’s voice is evident, both in the speech’s undertones of forgiveness and learning to love oneself and, more literally, when he breaks character on the cusp of revealing trade secrets about how to spot cheating behavior in a man. Tyler Perry masterfully walks the gender line in this scene, simultaneously playing the role of an aunt comforting her nephew *and* functioning as a male figure dispensing invaluable “father/son” advice—all the while offering advice on relationships and fidelity to audience members across genders. Perry’s drag in this instance nearly functions as queer, for as Timothy Lyle explains, “if a drag act is truly subversive, it has the potential to make any attempt at identity categorization permanently problematic” (Lyle 2011, p. 946). While it is tempting to argue that Perry comes close to a male feminist perspective in this monologue, his insistence upon serving as the only individual to perform the role of Madea interrupts that assertion. “Despite Perry’s sincerity, one problematic implication of his performance is that an actual woman would be incapable of dispensing Madea’s womanist wisdom and discipline” (Dawkins and Ryder 2014, p. 261). Nevertheless, Perry as Madea exhibits all of the nurturing elements of a loving matriarch in this scene while also playing the part of “brother’s keeper” to a wounded Sonny, whose paternal role models appear to be in short supply. The wisdom narrative s/he delivers to the theatre audience is a delicate balance of love and realism.

Conversely, the wisdom narrative Madea delivers in the film adaptation of *Madea Goes to Jail* is terse, unsympathetic, and conveyed at the expense of the listeners’ agency. Madea does not offer counsel to a family member in the movie; instead, she finds herself attending a faith-based prison support group to shave time off her sentence. One of her fellow inmates begins to speak about her struggle to forgive her father for abusing her. Madea interrupts the woman’s “melodrama” and sharply admonishes her: “Honey, you in jail ‘cause of what *you* did. Learn how to take some responsibility for yourself. It’s up to you to make somethin’ out of (your life). Suck it up and shut the hell up.” Madea’s notion of personal accountability is not an inherently bad message. Variations of this message continue

to be part of the Black rhetorical and performative tradition. However, Perry's choice for its delivery is both patronizing and oppressive, as Madea's advice comes at the cost of other women sharing their own stories.

When the woman meekly protests, "But you don't know what he did . . . ," Big Sal—now Madea's partner-in-crime—abruptly silences her, instructing her to let Madea speak. The character has not only been silenced within her group, but Perry has primarily created this woman for the sole purpose of *suppressing her story*. As Lyle so aptly observes, "Because there is a long history of male domination, males who participate in feminist thought and politics must be aware of this history and how men tend to silence, oppress, and possess" (Lyle 2011, p. 949). Perry seems oblivious to how Madea—as either a man or a woman—silences and subsequently owns the experiences of her fellow inmates. Even Madea is indifferent. At the end of her short monologue, she declares to the group's facilitator, "I don't preach that stuff. I will leave that to you. I don't even wanna be here." If the women in the support group are meant to function as surrogates for the at-home audience (just as Sonny's presence allows Madea to address the theatergoers), then the viewer's wisdom narrative experience is an abrupt and unforgiving one.

## 5. Conclusions

It is ultimately unclear whether Perry truly intends for works in his varied mediums to converse with one another—to engage in a form of dialogue, responding to and revising what the other says and does—or if the differences between his stage and film adaptations merely reflect the stylistic constraints afforded to each medium. Perry has readily acknowledged that he wants to make his films easily accessible to viewers of all racial backgrounds, and, as such, it stands to reason that he might employ certain modifications to structure and storyline when adapting his stage plays for the screen.

However, we do know this—the work that Perry does is significant. As Bell and Jackson remind us, "popular media carries with them portable pedagogies" (Bell and Jackson 2014, p. 7). These pedagogies, they argue, "teach us fundamental details about people's lives" (Bell and Jackson 2014, p. 7). What seems clear is that the adages, life lessons and insights into African American faith, race and gender taken away by a member of Perry's audience will vary considerably depending on the member's location in the theatre or at the movies. Anyone desirous of some laughs, a song or two and a handful of Madea's trademark pearls of no-holds-barred wisdom will likely be satisfied with the majority of Perry's Madea films. But those seeking to engage with the matriarch in dialogue—to access her ad-libbed wisdom, to experience the inclusive call-and-response nature of the gospel play and to uncover the truths spoken by Madea from the pulpit of her "church"—must position themselves in the theatre in order to discern the messages Perry reveals only to this most intimate audience.

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