

New Wave of 'Gospel Theater'

Woman Thou Art Loosed! *sold out theaters nationwide*

There's a fresh wind blowing in the world of gospel theater, and a Spirit-filled playwright is at the helm, helping to reinvent a segment of African American theater often referred to as "the chitlin' circuit."

Known as much for its predictable story lines as its boisterous gospel music, gospel theater has long been a platform for writers to present Christian messages to mostly churchgoing audiences. But in recent years, the genre has been attracting mainstream attention with higher profile actors, more sophisticated plots and elaborate sets. Popular shows can gross \$300,000 to \$500,000 in a week's run.

The change may be due in part to a rare comedic talent named Tyler Perry, who co-wrote *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* and *Behind Closed Doors* with Bishop T.D. Jakes and has been selling out theaters nationwide with his own productions. His comedic portrayal of a gun-toting, 60-something menace to society named Madea earned him

a Helen Hayes Award nomination for best actor in a nonresident production—a first for a play in this genre.

"It was a very dynamic performance," said Linda Levy Grossman, executive director of the Helen Hayes Awards. "I certainly believe that [nomination] brings attention to the credibility and the legitimacy of the genre."

Yet despite their undeniably Christian bent, these shows are not overtly evangelistic, and Perry's work contains a variety

of racy elements that may make some Christians squirm. In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, Perry's character Madea uses mild profanity and smokes marijuana in her backyard (for its medicinal purposes, she said).

Perry said he receives little criticism. In fact, audiences are usually doubled over in laughter at his antics. Viewers frequently send him e-mails saying the shows—which tackle such issues as abuse, molestation and infidelity—changed their lives.

"I don't believe in beating people over the head," Perry said. "I don't believe that's how we learn. I always have a character bring the word, but they also have a level of realism. Anyone who is real with themselves can relate to these characters."

A victim of childhood abuse, Perry used his creative gift to resolve his own pain. A series of letters he wrote to himself evolved into his first play, *I Know I've Been Changed*, which told the story of an adult survivor of child abuse.

A native of New Orleans, Perry, 32, produced the show in Atlanta with \$12,000 he had saved. But it took six years for the show to take off, and he ended up broke and living in his car. During those three months of homelessness, Perry says, he learned to forgive his childhood abuser. Then things started to turn around.

The show that could hardly fill a theater started packing out, and today he has grossed more than \$20 million with his five plays. In April, he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to tell his story.

Now Perry has his sights set on television and film. Matt Crouch's Gener8xion Entertainment is adapting *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* into a movie. And Perry is currently working on a sitcom.

Yet he doesn't foresee a turn toward a more overt evangelistic message. "I'm not trying to reach Grandma Mable who has been in church all her life," Perry said. "I'm talking to the kids who were raised by crack-[addicted] mothers."

Christians may never agree on precisely what it takes to reach mainstream crowds, or what "reaching" actually involves. Los Angeles playwright David Talbert has featured mainstream actors such as Malik Yoba (*New York Undercover*) and Shemar Moore (*The Young and the Restless*) in his shows in a shameless attempt to attract secular crowds.

He says he wants to present "God-centered, moral entertainment" that offers subtle ministry. Evangelism is not his goal.

Dallas playwright Teresa Coleman-Wash, who co-wrote gospel artist Fred Hammond's play *Been There, Done That*, said the popularity of gospel plays is due in part to a desire for more positive messages in media. "People are looking for more positive things—hope and inspirational messages," Wash said. "The audiences as a whole are looking for things with more depth."

Whether "positivity" will lead to conversion is yet to be seen. But religion scholars are taking note of the viability of mixing entertainment with faith.

The University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture recently partnered with Cornerstone Theater Company to study the effectiveness of their three-year Faith-Based Theater Project designed to build bridges among various faith communities in Los Angeles.

Whatever the future holds, Perry believes there will be increased opportunities for him to “minister” in the way that comes naturally.

“I just want people to get to know God in some way,” Perry says. “If I can take them away from their reality for two ‘s more than I had when I was going through.”

-Adrienne S. Gaines