

# ESSENCE

## TYLER PERRY

Talks Black Women, Success & Being Generous

HOW TO SAVE & BANK SOME HOLIDAY CASH

1<sup>ST</sup> GRANDMOTHER

## MARIAN ROBINSON

On Barack, Michelle, Sasha & Malia

THE SECRET OF GIVING START WITH YOURSELF

**HOT HAIR SPECIAL**  
Tips To Transition To Natural & More

## 21 Sexy, Single Black Men!

ON WHAT THEY LOVE ABOUT YOU  
+ HOT PICS INSIDE

VISIT ESSENCE.COM  
NOVEMBER 2012

# WALKING TALKING

Beloved as *Madea* and respected as a writer, director and mogul, **TYLER PERRY** is now moving into uncharted territory: action hero. We go along for the ride

BY SUSAN FALES-HILL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KWAKU ALSTON | STYLING BY QUEENSYLVIA AKUCHIE

I love that moment when you break through the clouds. I love it," says Tyler Perry, speaking of his newfound passion for flying his own plane, a Cirrus four-seater. The actor, director and newly minted action hero could easily be describing his ascent of the last two years—rising past the carping of critics and the desolation of losing his beloved mother, Maxine. Now 43, Perry has only just begun to soar.

His 6-foot, 6-inch frame is 30 pounds leaner and more chiseled, thanks to a high-protein, low-fat, no-fat diet and punishing twice-daily workouts. Over sodas at The Peninsula in Beverly Hills, Perry radiates mellow self-possession as he discusses his latest starring role in the action thriller *Alex Cross*. The character, a police detective created by novelist James Patterson and made famous on-screen by Oscar winner Morgan Freeman, could transform Perry into an international brand. Though many in the industry, including the film's financiers, doubted he could handle the part, director Rob Cohen had his back. "People were very hesitant," says Cohen, who directed *The Fast and the Furious* in 2001. "They'd say, 'The guy in the dress?' Even when I was editing the film, people asked, 'How was Tyler?' and I'd say to them, 'He was f---ing brilliant.' Tyler's a genius. Comedy is hard."

It's one reason the man behind the \$1 billion-plus *Madea* franchise is doing something unprecedented: "I'm taking eight weeks off to check in with myself." Though his on-the-cusp serenity suits him as comfortably as his tailored checkered cotton shirt, Gucci loafers and jeans, it is, like everything else in his life, hard won.

The day we meet also happens to be the late Whitney Houston's birthday, and Perry admits to feeling slightly off-kilter. The man

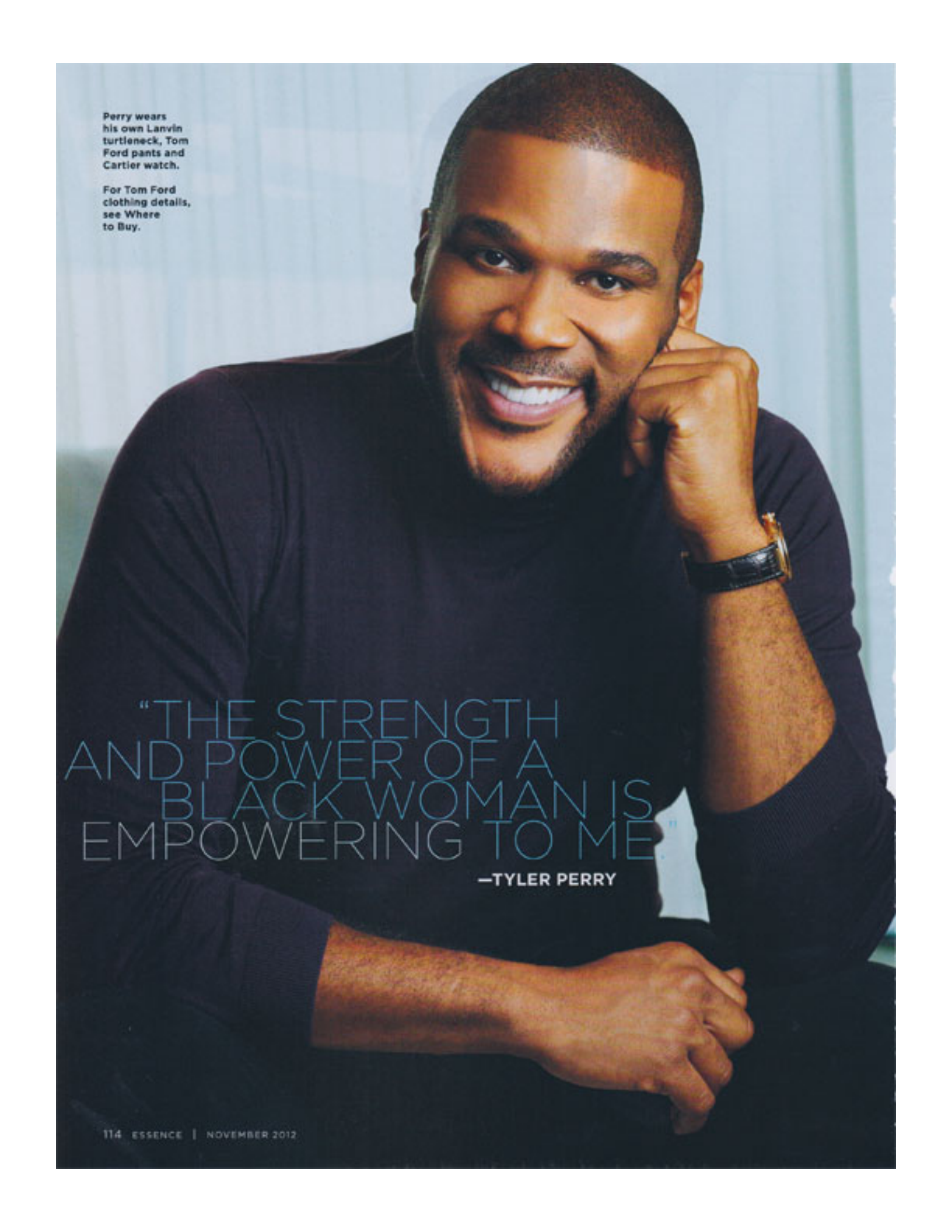
who has dedicated his career to celebrating Black women in films ranging from *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* to *For Colored Girls* still smarts at his inability to save two of the women he loved so much. "Everything had faded to black," he says of late 2009, when he lost his mother to diabetes. "I didn't want to work. If I hadn't had about 20 or 30 obligations that carried me through those two years, I don't know what I would have done, because my entire life's motivation was gone."

The tireless entrepreneur first found the drive at the age of 7. Perry was riding in a car with his mother, who kept him at her side at all times to spare him the wrath of his abusive father. Maxine admired a passing Jaguar and expressed her wish to own one someday. Then and there, Perry promised to fulfill that dream. "My greatest fear was never being successful and never being able to take care of her," he says now. He needn't have worried. By the time he was 29, Perry had parlayed the success of producing live musicals for largely Black audiences into a multimedia empire that has since turned out 12 highly profitable films and three syndicated TV sitcoms, and built a movie studio in Atlanta. His inspiration had been to give his mother the life she didn't have. Once she was gone, his usual recourses, prayer and faith, were seemingly powerless against his grief. He began having a drink at night just to fall asleep.

"I was never an alcoholic but I could not slow my mind down," he says. "This is why I loved Whitney so much; that's why I was trying so desperately to help her because I understood her more than ever when my mother died." Long before Whitney passed away, he had fretted over her substance abuse and tried to reach out, to no avail. Leaning back in his armchair, he recounts his >



On Perry: His own  
Armani Collezioni  
suit, Tom Ford  
shirt, tie and  
pocket square and  
Rolex watch.

A portrait of Tyler Perry, a Black man with a short haircut and a goatee, smiling warmly. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved turtleneck sweater and a black leather watch on his left wrist. He is resting his chin on his left hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

Perry wears  
his own Lanvin  
turtleneck, Tom  
Ford pants and  
Cartier watch.

For Tom Ford  
clothing details,  
see *Where  
to Buy*.

"THE STRENGTH  
AND POWER OF A  
BLACK WOMAN IS  
EMPOWERING TO ME."

—TYLER PERRY

conversation with Houston the night Michael Jackson died in 2009. Concerned that she could one day suffer the same tragic fate, he phoned her. For 20 minutes Perry begged her to let him come over to comfort her. Houston finally put an end to his entreaties with these words, "I am a mother, I have a daughter and I want to be clear: Ain't no man coming over in the middle of the night." Perry laughs at the memory of the diva putting him in his place. That was one of the last times they spoke. Although he wasn't able to help his friend, Perry is determined to remain close to her daughter, Bobbi Kristina. He cast her in *For Better or Worse*, and he praises the 19-year-old as a "brilliant, smart and gifted" actress.

Paying it forward, Perry says, is his way of honoring the Black women who have supported him. Soon after his mother's funeral in December 2009, Steve Harvey's wife, Marjorie, sent him an amaryllis flower. Its fuchsia hue reminded him that color would one day return to his world. Ten months later his revelation of childhood sexual abuse by nonfamily members in a now famous Oprah Winfrey interview brought him "overwhelming support... for the little boy inside of me" from Black female fans. "When Black women are down with you and in your corner, you have an ally that will move heaven and earth," says Perry. "When they love you, they will forgive you. I think about my mother; she loved from the purest place in her heart. The strength and power of a Black woman is empowering to me." Perry praises his coterie of close female friends, including Winfrey, Gayle King, Bernice Davis and Cassi Davis (who are not related), for their constancy and brutal honesty. Perry says he can always count on them to "pray for me and cuss me out at the same time." "In Jesus name," Cassi adds playfully over the phone. She's especially thankful for Perry, who she says changed her life after he saw her perform for only ten minutes. She's now a regular on his sitcom *House of Payne*. "He means a lot to regular people and I'm one of those people," she says.

Cassi is just one example of Perry's spontaneous acts of generosity. He bought a home for a grandmother of seven whose house had burned down, and helped buy one for an organization that provides artificial limbs to child victims of war to use as a haven for the kids. "This is why I can't watch television, 'cause I would give away every dime I have," he admits only half jokingly.

Last March he extended his philanthropy to politics, staging an Obama fund-raiser at his studio. That day his instinct to locate the facility in an economically challenged area of Atlanta was validated when he saw all the people lining up to get a glimpse of the President. "I saw the little Black children with their flags waiting for the President of the United States to come through their 'hood," he says. "That made me almost weep, because I know in 10, 15 years one of those children could walk up to me and say, 'I'm in Congress because I saw the President on my street that day.'"

After the fund-raiser, Perry rode in the official motorcade back to his home, a mansion once owned by an arch segregationist, and

he recalls, "That's when it hit me. I thought, *You have been in all of this sadness and all of this grief, but your life is still going. You are just where God wants you to be. Live, son, live.*" That day he was reminded of a calling even higher than fulfilling his mother's dream of a better life: leading through hopeful example. "I want people to look at me and say, 'I can do that,' and then do it in their own way," he says. It's why, despite his success, Perry refuses to cloister himself from his community. He says his connection to people is what continues to guide his creative output. He reads his own message boards and never ceases to be moved by those who tell him his work helped them leave an abusive situation or forgive someone who hurt them.

Over the years Perry's melodramas have attracted a fair bit of criticism, but he's clear that his mission is to tell simple, uplifting stories. "I know my audience is 2 years old to 80," he says. "I know that they cross all classes and races." He chuckles when asked about the outcry over his casting of Kim Kardashian in his next film, *The Marriage Counselor*, in theaters next March. "My hand to God, I didn't know who she was," he insists, explaining that one of his producers recommended her because of her huge following. Perry says Kardashian did a good job, adding that he takes a philosophical approach to his detractors. He's learned to tell the difference between criticism and vitriol, and has adopted the mantra, "Life is not getting any easier, I'm just getting better."

Perry knows his turn as James Patterson's legendary criminal psychologist, father and husband, Alex Cross, could catapult him to a new position, opening the as-yet-untapped international market for his own films. He also relished the challenge as an actor. "Anything that intimidates me, I go, *You need to look into this,*" he says. "What intimidated me most was Morgan Freeman had done the role, and that's Morgan frickin' Freeman." Still he found it liberating to step out of the Madea costume to play opposite Cicely Tyson, his mother in the film. "He's going to surprise people," says Tyson of Perry's portrayal of Cross. "This wasn't Madea; this was the man himself, in a role no one could have anticipated." Director Cohen had Perry dive into the film's high-octane sequences. "I had him jump onto the police car, even if the stunt guy could do it," says Cohen. "I wanted him to have the full action-film experience."

Perry's only complaint while filming was the endless hours of waiting on set. As is to be expected of an unrepentant overachiever, he used those moments to write a script and contemplate his future dreams, including creating his own network, visiting the well-digging projects he's funding in Africa and Cambodia, and fatherhood, even though he admits he's hesitant to take on "the obligation of marriage." Having written about it so eloquently in his films, he's keenly aware of its pitfalls. For now he looks forward to mastering his flying technique until he can pilot his Cirrus alone. "This is a great metaphor for life," he says. "If you're flying

along and it's really rough, you change the altitude; you just go higher. The higher you go, the smoother the air gets." □

**Susan Fales-Hill** (@susanfaleshill) is the author of *Imperfect Bliss* (Atria).

## SET SCOOP

### DURING THE FIRST WEEK

of filming *Alex Cross*, Perry had "the crew crying" after an emotional scene with his on-set daughter, says director Rob Cohen.

