

Motivation

Your guide to maximizing your most valuable asset—yourself

GUTS & GLORY

From the streets to the stage

Playwright Tyler Perry turned his life around in the spotlight

Lorraine Hansberry. Andrew Lloyd Webber. August Wilson. Neil Simon. These are just a few of the country's, if not the world's, most renowned playwrights. Tyler Perry's name is not on that list of literary legends, but he has used his life story as the basis of some modern stage productions. With his two hit plays, *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*, and *I Know I've Been Changed*, Perry has recently helped revive the urban, or gospel, theater industry.

Perry, 31, has lived a rags-to-riches story that surpasses some of the saddest hard-luck plots Hollywood's best screenwriters have dreamed up. His first lessons in character development were painfully self-taught. "I started out writing myself letters to start dealing with the pain I've experienced as an adult," says Perry, who endured years of abuse as a child in New Orleans.

He discovered he had an innate ability to articulate his emotions through the written word, and wanted to share his life experiences with others. Those first journal entries led to what would become his first play, *I Know I've Been Changed*. In 1992, he decided to launch a stage production of the work. Perry soon learned that the business side of putting together a play—which included assembling the right cast, renting a theater, and marketing and promoting it—wasn't

as simple as he had hoped. It would become another lesson for Perry to learn in the school of hard knocks.

He moved to Atlanta, determined to make his words a living, breathing real-



JOHN ANDRIS

Tyler Perry is looking to re-write the image of gospel theater.

ity. He invested his life savings, \$12,000, in the production, which premiered in 1993. However, it turned out to be a bust: Only 30 people showed up for the play's first weekend run. Refusing to give up, and with the help of "angel investors" along the way, the play toured small venues and theaters throughout Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina for five

years. But despite the new injection of funds, his show continued to fail. It was during this time that Perry lost his apartment and ended up living on the streets for three months.

He decided to put on one more show. In 1998, he opened at the House of Blues. The show sold out eight times over. Before long, Perry's plays—including *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (written in conjunction with mega-televangelist and author T.D. Jakes)—were being performed before standing-room-only crowds. On average, his plays are performed six times a week before audiences of between 16,000 and 25,000 people. Weekly grosses are between \$250,000 and \$300,000.

Through The Tyler Perry Co., Perry writes, produces, directs, and acts in gospel plays that have sold out in major cities, including New York, Chicago, and Miami.

Perry's plays have been reviewed in both local and national publications, such as *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Washington Post*. While the reviews haven't all been stellar, he's dedicated to improving the quality of his productions with every show. Currently, Perry's in the process of negotiating with various Hollywood executives a TV sitcom based on *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*.

The once-homeless dreamer is now designing his seven-acre dream home in Atlanta. "I went from homeless and dead broke to touring all over the country," says the bachelor. "I've got to enjoy the fruits of my labor somehow." Who says dreams don't come true?

—Kenneth Miles

B.E.'s SUCCESSPERT SPEAKS: "The hard road of adversity is designed to teach us lessons so we can serve a greater purpose and with that comes great rewards," says Pat Council, a motivational speaker based in Jacksonville, Florida (www.charlesthoroughbred.com). "By putting his unpleasant feelings into play form, Perry is helping others to heal and lead happier lives."

■ **The rewards may not come right away, but they will come.** Although Perry lost his life savings and became homeless, he never stopped believing in his dream.

■ **Always expect to win and you will.** Never lose sight of your desired prize and you will achieve your goals. Nothing can ever outdo faith and persistence.

