

Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-4; S/N-4

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

Matthew 18:21-22

Tyler Perry, who plays three Diary of a Mad Black Woman characters, as well as writing and producing the film, provides us the second of two films in which the characters relate naturally to God. Far more outrageous than Winn-Dixie, it is a curious blend of melodrama and nightclub style comedy. Kimberly Elise provides the melodrama as Helen McCarter, the dutiful wife who glows when, at a testimonial dinner where he is being honored as the "Attorney of the Year," husband Charles McCarter (Steve Harris) pays tribute to her by declaring that he could not have made it without her. That this was sham Helen soon learns when they return to their palatial mansion and, on the night of their 18th wedding anniversary, the cad announces that he is replacing her with a more desirable

(meaning lighter skinned) wife. When the replacement appears at the door, and Helen refuses to leave, Charles literally drags her screaming and kicking out the door.

The distraught wife refuses the offer of help from the driver of the U-Haul truck loaded with her possessions, instead ordering him out of the truck, even though this will leave him stranded out in the country. Not a good move, as the guy turns up the family reunion: he is a former in-law named Orlando (Shemar Moore), destined to become Helen's "knight in shining armor. She drives herself to her grandmother's house in an Atlantan black neighborhood that she had forsaken years earlier.

Aptly named Madea, the gun-wielding granny reluctantly lets Helen stay for the night, despite the protestation of dear ole Uncle Joe (both parts played by Perry). The foul-mouthed granny takes Helen back to her former home, admonishing her to get even, if due to the pre-nuptial agreement she had signed, she cannot claim any money. What Helen does to the designer label clothing of her replacement and Granny does to the living room furniture with a chain saw maybe should be kept from the eyes of the young because of the ideas for vengeance this could engender. (Just kidding.)

The film changes from revenge to love and forgiveness when Helen visits her mother Myrtle (Cicely Tyson), whom Charles had persuaded her to send to a retirement home rather than allow her to live with them in their mansion. Practicing what she preaches, Myrtle provides the wise counsel Helen needs. When the jilted daughter cries that Charles had been "my everything," her mother comes back fiercely, "God is your everything!" Helen returns to church, and over time imbibes the message of forgiveness. As Myrtle tells her in one scene, if she holds on to her rage and desire for getting even with

Charles, he still controls her.

There is also a subplot in which Brian (Perry's third role), whom I believe is either a brother or cousin, has his own problems. His drug addicted wife is living in a group home, and he is worried that his daughter is too much like her—thus he refuses to let the girl sing in the church choir, out of fear that she might follow in her footsteps of the mother, who had set out to become a singer and then became involved with the drug scene. In one heart-rending scene, Brian refuses to take back his wife because she had broken so many past promises to reform.

The mixture of drama and raunchy comedy does not always come off, the script lacking subtlety in the comic scene—the film at times reminded me of those over-size carvings made with a chainsaw, recognizable, but far from the exquisite artistry of a carving on display in a cathedral. However, church groups ought to support this film to encourage filmmakers to make more in which God is more than a cuss word. (Also it is good to see the talented Kimberly Elise, who was so good in last year's *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, in another starring role.) The family issues, especially of forgiveness, will provide a good opportunity for reflection and discussion.

For reflection/discussion (Contains spoilers!)

1) What kind of a life do you think Helen really have during her 18 years of marriage to Charles? Was she really a free person? How, in a way, was the ending of her marriage a good thing for her? As you look back on your own life, can you say this of some of the bad things that happened to you?

2) What kind of persons are Madea and Uncle Joe? Which of them are really “there” for Helen? How, despite her many flaws, is Madea an agent of grace for Helen.

3) Compare Madea's and Myrtle's philosophies in regard to the way Helen should relate to Charles' treatment of her. What

would Madea's eventually lead to? What do you think of Helen's mother's response to her lament, "God is your everything!"? How is this a good exposition of the Great Commandment?

4) Myrtle tells her daughter at one point to "wake up and thank God." Compare this to the great hymn attributed to St. Patrick "I Sing as I Arise Today." (It is No. 83 in the UCC's The New Century Hymnal.)

5) Were you surprised to hear a black version of the song used as the theme song for TV's "Joan of Arcadia," "What if God Were One of Us"? How does it apply to the church scene in the film?

6) How does what we see and hear in her church converge with the message that Helen's mother keeps imparting to her daughter? How does Helen backslide for a while? Do you think Madea's comparison to the film Misery an apt one?

7) How does Brian and his wife Debra's story parallel that of Helen's? How does she need "tough love"? But has Brian given up on her? How does he need to hear the message of such a hymn as "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go"?

8) How is this film like a Christian fairy tale than a slice of life film? And yet, what do fairy tales share in common with the gospel story?