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## Filmmakers put their faith in the Gospel

**Producer Jeff Clanagan and 20th Century Fox are teaming up to make several movies for the Christian market.**

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Jeff Clanagan

Jeff Clanagan wants to ride Tyler Perry's coattails.

So does 20th Century Fox.

They are pairing up to make several Gospel-inspired films that are much like the ones that have made Perry a sensation. Perry, a 37-year-old producer, writer, director and star, has shown Hollywood the gold to be mined from Gospel-infused entertainment.

Fox and Clanagan are pinning their initial hopes on a movie version of the popular play "Mama I Want to Sing." Scheduled to come out in March, starring R&B singers Ciara and Patty LaBelle, "Mama" is the first of several films that Clanagan will make under a deal with Fox Home Entertainment division FoxFaith.

Clanagan's goal is to build a full-fledged studio that makes, markets and distributes theatrical movies for African American and Latino audiences. His company, Codeblack Entertainment, already has seen success by making an eclectic group of low-budget movies and distributing them on DVD, such as Steve Harvey's comedy series. He's made a couple of faith-based films on DVD, including "Preaching to the Choir."

"These movies are not really recognized by the Hollywood elite," Clanagan said. " 'Mama' takes it to another level."

After "Mama," Clanagan will release "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," which has grossed \$10 million as a stage play. Clanagan will begin production on several faith-inspired novels by ReShonda Tate Billingsley, such as "Let the Church Say Amen" and "Blessings in Disguise."

"Tyler was a pioneer in showing that gospel entertainment was more commercial than anyone had ever thought," Clanagan said. "Faith-based product will be our bread and butter."

Before Perry came along, few of the Hollywood majors dabbled in faith-based entertainment.

Two years ago, Fox passed up the opportunity to release Perry's film "Diary of a Mad Black Woman." "Diary," which cost about \$20 million to make and market, went on to gross \$50 million at the domestic box office alone. Lions Gate, the studio that snatched up Perry, estimates that over a five-year period, he will deliver gross revenue of \$500 million to \$600 million.

20th Century Fox created FoxFaith after Mel Gibson's success with "The Passion of the Christ." The studio was looking to capitalize on the Christian market by making lower-budget films with limited theatrical release.

The division has distributed several Christian films including the DVD of "Woman Thou Art Loosed," a film based on the popular novel by the Rev. T.D. Jakes. It envisions releasing one or two faith-based films a year.

"I would say that Jeff is more of a supplier of gospel product than a creator, as Tyler Perry is," said David Bixler, senior vice president of acquisitions for 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment. "He is able to bring us product that fits very well into our current strategy of acquiring high-profile, high-concept gospel films."

"Mama" is a contemporary version of the original stage play that was inspired by the life of Doris Troy, the singer discovered by James Brown who wrote and performed the 1963 hit "Just One Look." The play, which has traveled to Japan, Germany, Switzerland and Austria, has grossed about \$25 million in ticket sales.

Clanagan got his start in the film business through an unglamorous back route: video distribution. In the late 1990s, he co-founded Urbanworks Entertainment and in his biggest coup landed video distribution rights to such classics as "The Cosby Show" and "Fat Albert" just as the DVD market was maturing.

He produced and distributed the Platinum Comedy Series, featuring comedians Dave Chappelle, D.L. Hughley, Steve Harvey and Cedric the Entertainer, right after their box-office hit "The Original Kings of Comedy." He also snagged the exclusive DVD rights to the BET Network's programming.

Clanagan heard about "Mama" during his early days as a concert promoter, when he pushed such acts as Luther Vandross and Ready for the World. The play was so popular that competing acts would seek dates that would not put them head-to-head against it.

Even before Perry released "Diary," Clanagan called "Mama" creator Vy Higgenson. After nearly four years and many conversations, Clanagan finally persuaded her to sign over the theatrical and home video rights to the play.

"Since it had been something that had been my baby for so many years, it was difficult to turn it over to someone who I didn't know," said Higgenson, the sister of the late Doris Troy. "One of the things that Jeff said, and we want to hold him to his word, is that he wanted to be the first black-owned studio. And I like that. I like wanting to help to contribute toward that."

Clanagan has had a knack for marrying concepts with pop culture trends, said his high school classmate and college roommate, Rodney Moore.

"I first noticed it in his junior year in high school, when we started doing promotions for parties and social events," said Moore, now an entertainment lawyer with the firm Greenberg Traurig. The pair paid their living expenses at the University of Washington by organizing events and parties.

"We lived comfortably in college," Moore recalled.

Clanagan says each of his feature film productions will be made for less than \$7 million. Making faith-based films is not much different from promoting concerts in that he is moving to fill a niche that Hollywood has not been able to grasp, he said.

"It is hard for African Americans and Latinos to get access at the studios," Clanagan said. "I want to provide that access for up-and-coming filmmakers.... This is the chance to produce family-friendly movies that don't perpetuate negative stereotypes that are often portrayed in the media."