

# Esquire

## Tyler James Williams Knows Why *Abbott Elementary* Will Stand the Test of Time

With season 4 in the books, the star teacher opens up about Gregory and Janine's future, corraling child (and adult) actors, and why this run of episodes is "the best season we've ever done."

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Aringworm outbreak, a library shutdown, a street fight in a parking lot, and "volunteers" who turn out to be the antiheroes from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. That's just a smattering of [Abbott Elementary](#)'s usual chaos in season 4, whose finale aired this Wednesday night. And if you ask Tyler

James Williams, who plays first grade teacher Gregory Eddie, the school year was an A-plus. With extra credit.

"It feels like we really caught our stride," Williams told me earlier this week. "Season 4 is the most *together* we've ever felt. We don't have any of the jitters of season 1. Season 2, it felt like we were still grappling with the show [being a hit] as it was happening. Season 3 was after the strike, so that was under duress."

If anyone in Hollywood knows good television, it's Williams. A working actor since childhood, Williams began his career on *Sesame Street* and [sketches on Saturday Night Live](#) before starring in *Everybody Hates Chris* as a youthful, fictionalized version of comedian Chris Rock in his autobiographical sitcom. Williams's early fame opened a path to regular gigs in adulthood, including a memorable run on *The Walking Dead* at the apex of its popularity and lead roles on short-lived procedurals *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders* and *Whiskey Cavalier*.

In 2021, Williams joined *Abbott Elementary* as mild-mannered Gregory, whose workplace romance with third grade teacher Janine Teagues (played by series creator Quinta Brunson) is just one key ingredient that's made *Abbott* an [Emmy Award-winning](#) darling. (Williams himself has been nominated three times for Outstanding Supporting Actor.) In the season 4 finale, the school takes a field trip to the Please Touch Museum, a popular (and real) interactive children's museum in Philadelphia. There, Gregory is bewildered when he sees Janine try to appease his cold-as-ice military father (played by a returning Orlando Jones), a volunteer chaperone.

"Please Touch Museum" marks a feel-good ending to what Williams feels was a "solid and grounded" year of **TV**. "I think it's the best season we've ever done," says the veteran actor. "I know people say that a lot, and I'm not really one to do that. I truly do believe we were firing on all cylinders the whole time."

With the buzz of season 4 still coursing through Williams—who also made his directorial debut with the episode "Science Fair" earlier this season—the actor and newly christened director sat down with *Esquire* for a postseason debrief.

*This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

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"I love any time we can get glimpses into Gregory's family," Tyler James Williams tells *Esquire*. "Just having somebody from his life and his past be there, it's one of those things that if we get to play it once a season, I consider that a blessing."

**ESQUIRE: "Please Touch Museum" sees Orlando Jones return to play Gregory's father. What was it like working with Jones again?**

**TYLER JAMES WILLIAMS:** Me and Orlando worked together for the first time on *Everybody Hates Chris*. We worked together twice. Once, he played a substitute teacher, and the second time it was for this kind of *Cosby Show* bit. So me and Orlando have really great shorthand. Any time he comes to set, he and I find this rhythm that adds beautiful color to the show, and it's because of that longstanding history. I love any time we can get glimpses into Gregory's family. We don't see it often, and there's a certain amount of vulnerability that comes up for him that he's not comfortable with. Just having somebody from his life and his past be there, it's one of those things that if we get to play it once a season, I consider that a blessing.

**The finale tweaks Jones's character a little bit. His military background and strict personality are played up more than they had been in his previous appearances.**

We take an episode to soften Gregory's dad. As a consequence of that, we soften Gregory as well. But we have 21 minutes to do that. Orlando brilliantly strings that together in this episode, from his most extreme and disciplined self to his most silly self, giving Gregory a view of what he could be as a man. It's that thing that happens to all people with their parents once you become an adult. You see them as people again.

**Do you think Janine's behavior in the episode changes how Gregory sees her?**

It speaks to how serious they're getting. Meeting parents is important in any relationship. But the fact she's willing to go the lengths to change herself grounds how serious they are getting. This is a relationship they want to be in for a long period of time. Ultimately, her finding herself even in the midst of this is what Gregory loves the most about her. He's seen Janine in progress a lot, but she always ends up where she needs to be. That resilience is what keeps his attraction to her growing. She's ultimately committed to her job and these kids. That's one of the first things they connected over in the pilot.

**What was it like shooting at Philly's Please Touch Museum?**

It's a really great museum for kids. I thought it was a great idea. Sometimes while shooting, it made it difficult. It was too good of an idea. It's loud. There's a conversation that Janine has, when the little girl skins her knee by the water. There were times I got splashed, kids playing with boats and stuff in the water. But that's our show—we work around that.

**Speaking of: I've always been curious about the logistics of working with so many kids on *Abbott Elementary*.**

It's part of the brilliance of the show. I was their age when I worked before, so I'm very used to these laws and constraints. They're what I grew up with. It's everybody else getting used to it. We can pretty much only

work nine and a half hours a day with the kids. They then have to get three hours of school. So really, you only get six. [Laughs.] And they have to break for lunch at a very specific time and you can't go over it.

It makes our show very efficient. We get things done in a few takes. Once we have the kids quieted down and ready to go, and everyone's gone to the bathroom, you get it done while you can. But everyone comes to our show and they talk about how good of a work atmosphere it is. Kids being around requires people to be their best selves.

### **Is it easier to wrangle the kids or the adults?**

The kids are far easier. *Far* easier. I directed an episode this year. Wrangling the adults was the hardest part. The kids are there and they're ready to work. They're sometimes way more professional than any of us.



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"Regardless of what happens in the world, we're going to tell the story of teachers who are just trying to find a way to do their jobs," Williams says. "That's not going to change."

### **Who is your favorite director?**

This is like picking your kids. [Laughs.] I love Spike [Lee]. I love the way he chooses to tell a story. I love the way he chooses camera shots and angles

that aren't necessarily realistic, but they are what it feels like to be in this person's body at the time. He's always been one of my biggest influences. [Working on *Abbott Elementary*] we're not just sending a camera somewhere. *What is it? How does this make the audience feel?* You're putting the audience somewhere in this room. How do you immerse them? How do they feel when chaos ensues around them? So he's a huge influence and specifically a bigger influence for me right now as I'm working on a mockumentary.

**Will you direct another episode of *Abbott* next season?**

Yeah, I think they're figuring that out now—what directors they want back and when they want to have them back. If they have me, I would gladly do it. We've reached the point where we have a tight collective of directors who really know this show.

**Will you ever branch out again into another show, or even film?**

I love TV, man. Because I started as young as I did, this is the way my brain works. I find myself, at times, having way more fun with the logistics of the episode coming together than being in the episode itself. So I'll definitely go elsewhere. I'm looking for places that could specifically use my skill set, being able to know TV really well and know comedy really well. Eventually I'll break outside of it. I find myself not being as much of a film guy, because I love the constraints of TV, of time frames and telling a long-form story. But you never know. Maybe one day that light will turn on for me too. But right now it's television.



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"He's seen Janine in progress a lot, but she always ends up where she needs to be," Williams says of his character's relationship with Quinta Brunson's Janine Teagues."

### **Circling back to *Abbott*, what's in store for Janine and Gregory in the new school year in season 5?**

I know some broad strokes. Part of the show is watching the journey of them finding themselves individually but also who they are as a couple. We'll continue to explore that with the other things that come up for couples—the other big milestones. I know that Gregory still hasn't really met anybody in Janine's family. So we're going to have to cross that bridge at some point. The writers and Quinta are breaking out [season] 5 now. I'm sure once they have something concrete, I'll get a call and it'll be something fun.

**We're talking about *Abbott Elementary* during a precarious moment for public education. The Trump administration is [gutting the Department of Education](#). I know *Abbott* is a comedy, but what importance might this show have amid this moment for American public schools?**

It's obviously been an interesting position to be in, to be telling this story now. Sometimes, it can be overwhelming. I never want to lose the forest from the trees. But what we found is our place in this conversation, and it's to tell the stories of the people on the ground. We can look at it pretty high up and try to see what's happening politically and systemically. But at the end of the day, those things affect individual people on the ground that cannot make those decisions and aren't in positions to make those decisions. That's the story we're telling.

Regardless of what happens in the world, we're going to tell the story of teachers who are just trying to find a way [to do their jobs]. That's not going to change. It's maybe getting harder. But it's not going to change. We're going to continue trying to do that accurately and bring light to it without making light of it. But feeling like there are superheroes every day on the ground figuring out a way to educate our kids—we've thrown every curveball at them that we possibly can, and they continue to do so—that's the story we're telling. And I think that's the one that is needed right now.

**Making it to season 5 is a rarity for a network-TV sitcom in the streaming era. What do you hope will be *Abbott Elementary's* place in the American sitcom canon?**

I hope we stand the test of time. That's why I do TV. Without tooting my own horn, I feel like I have one of those with my first show. It would be nice to have another one, because that's ultimately what I've always wanted to do. When I think about this community that is artistry and entertainment—and specifically TV—I always want to earn my spot here. We're given an incredible opportunity to do what we love, and I want to earn that spot. I want to make stuff that stands the test of time—stuff that's not even just trendy and good. Stuff that five, ten, 15, 20 years from now, people can still be getting laughs out of.

I hope we're one of those shows. I hope we're somebody's comfort show 20 years from now. It's one of the things I have with *Everybody Hates Chris*. Now the kids of *Abbott* say, "I watched that show!" And I'm like, "You weren't even alive when we made it." [Laughs.] "You weren't even a thought! I'm not even sure your parents were able to date." But that's TV.