

*Production:* Richard D. Zanuck (AA) and Lili Fini Zanuck (AA) for Zanuck Co.; released by Warner Bros.

*Direction:* Bruce Beresford

*Screenplay:* Alfred Uhry (AA); based on his play

*Cinematography:* Peter James

*Editing:* Mark Warner

*Production design:* Bruno Rubeo

*Art direction:* Victor Kempster

*Set decoration:* Crispian Sallis

*Special effects:* Bob Shelley

*Makeup:* Manlio Rocchetti (AA)

*Costume design:* Elizabeth McBride

*Sound:* Gloria S. Borders

*Music:* Hans Zimmer

*MPAA rating:* PG

*Running time:* 99 minutes

*Principal characters:*

Hoke Colburn . . . . . Morgan Freeman  
 Daisy Werthan . . . . . Jessica Tandy (AA)  
 Boolie Werthan . . . . . Dan Aykroyd  
 Florine Werthan . . . . . Patti Lupone  
 Idella . . . . . Esther Rolle

Alfred Uhry never dreamed his play would have such phenomenal success. It was originally scheduled for a five-week engagement in the spring of 1987 at an Off-Broadway theater that seats only seventy-four people. Purely on its own merits, it attracted such attention that it had to be moved to a larger theater. Additional productions were established in Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Atlanta, with other companies touring the country; amazingly, productions opened in London, Vienna, Norway, the Soviet Union, and other foreign countries. Uhry was awarded the 1988 Pulitzer Prize and was commissioned to write the script for the screen adaptation that has brought the story to added millions.

Daisy Werthan (Jessica Tandy) does not want a chauffeur. She is, however, already seventy-two years old and no longer capable of driving safely, as she proves by crashing her Chrysler into the neighbor's garage. Her son Boolie (Dan Aykroyd) hires Hoke Colburn (Morgan Freeman) and establishes all the future conflict with the following lines: "Hoke, I want you to understand, my mother is a little high-strung. She doesn't want anybody driving her. But the fact is you'd be working for me. She can say anything she likes but she can't fire you." Hoke himself is sixty years old and desperately needs a job. As he tells Boolie, "They hirin' young if they

hirin' colored, an' they ain' even hirin' much young, seems like." He offers Boolie rather dubious reassurance about his ability to handle Miss Daisy.

Boolie's mother's resistance to being chauffeured around town is anchored in her own character. She does not like to admit that she is getting old. Although she is fairly affluent, as the widow of a successful Atlanta textile manufacturer, she despises conspicuous displays of wealth. She grew up in poverty and was a school-teacher before her marriage. Furthermore, she is sensitive about being Jewish in a region traditionally seething with bigotry and has strict ideas about how Jews ought to conduct themselves. In a sense, hers is a more delicate position than Hoke's. Both belong to hated minorities, but hers is a tiny minority whereas his minority is virtually the majority. She tells Hoke that he does not understand her when he is trying to persuade her to make more use of her new Hudson and his services. He agrees, saying that if he had her wealth he would flaunt it. When she explains that she does not want to pretend she is rich, Hoke replies, "You is rich, Miz Daisy," and his fully orchestrated, three-syllable pronunciation of the tiny word "is" brings the house down. He is not merely contradicting her but expressing surprise, protest, envy, reassurance, and incomprehension of the strange ways of white people in general.

Morgan Freeman, who also played Hoke in the original stage version, does such a splendid job that he steals the show even from Jessica Tandy, whose distinguished acting career dates back to 1925. He handles the black Southern dialect, which is the crowning glory of both the play and the film, with consummate virtuosity. He can get more meaning into the words "Miss Daisy" than anybody would suspect such simple words could contain. This is what delights audiences and evokes outbursts of laughter. The bickering between employer and chauffeur is reminiscent of the exchanges between Jack Benny and his factotum Rochester, which made all America laugh in the golden age of radio.

The film, like the play, is a series of vignettes covering twenty-five years in the lives of Daisy and Hoke, from 1948 to 1973. Hoke gradually insinuates himself into her favor through patience, gentleness, and instinctive diplomacy. The most revealing scene comes in the late 1950's, when they take their longest excursion by car and eventually get lost. At one point, they have stopped by the roadside to eat a lunch that the frugal Miss Daisy has prepared, when two Alabama state troopers appear. Though the officers look hardly old enough to be shaving, they make a point of calling the elderly Hoke "boy." They show formal Southern courtesy to Daisy but obviously despise her for being Jewish. After she and her chauffeur drive off, the camera studies Hoke's face and then shifts to a close shot of Miss Daisy in the back. Both are experiencing nearly identical emotions of humiliation, anger, and helplessness. Like oppressed people everywhere, these two individuals are putting on a brave front to hide their fear of a world that respects only power.

This encounter does not occur in the play. It is an example of how the author and director have performed the sensitive task of "opening up" a stage play in order to utilize the greater flexibility of the motion picture camera. In the play, the many

activities involving automobiles have to be handled in the inhibited fashion that is unavoidable when large-scale action has to be represented on a stage; however, for cinematic purposes the story provides frequent opportunities to display old residential neighborhoods, the homely Southern landscape, and a succession of classic automobiles. More than the homes, the furniture, the clothing styles, or the old Coca Cola signs, the big, soft, ostentatious American cars of the 1950's and 1960's show that this film is as much about history as *Gone with the Wind* (1939): They are symbols on wheels, epitomizing a way of life that is inexorably evolving into something quite different.

The success of this extremely modest story, both as a play and as a motion picture, proves once again that characterization is the most important ingredient of drama. More specifically, the magic formula seems to be: Take two very different, very strong-willed and incompatible people, confine them together, and wait for the inevitable fireworks. Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* (1968) is a classic example. Felix Unger's neurotic fastidiousness and hypochondriasis accentuate Oscar Madison's gross slovenliness and animal vitality—and vice versa. Through the age-old artistic device of contrast, each character accentuates the other's uniqueness. In *Driving Miss Daisy*, the two principal characters not only are different in philosophical attitudes but also are further differentiated by sex, race, religion, education, and social status. In the last scene when Hoke, now eighty-five, goes to visit Miss Daisy, who is ninety-seven and confined to a nursing home, the audience understands that these two people who were originally so different have unconsciously taken on each other's best traits. Miss Daisy has become gentle, patient, humble, and less militantly independent; Hoke has become dignified, sophisticated, and relatively affluent. Through their long years of enforced association they have worn each other smooth.

Dan Aykroyd, who is best known as a zany comedian, shows intelligence and restraint in his portrayal of Miss Daisy's son Boolie, a cornfed Rotarian-type who is dutiful toward his "Mama" but not really interested in her concerns. His wife Florine (Patti Lupone), who is only referred to in the play, is brought to life in the motion picture version and is just the sort of nagging, childless, social climber the original dialogue suggested. Daisy's maid Idella (Esther Rolle), who remains off-stage in the play, is also incarnated in the film and provides humor as a servant who has grown so stoical under the ceaseless pecking of a fussy mistress that she seems to be carved out of mahogany.

A few critics have found fault with the film on political grounds. They suggest that Hoke is an "Uncle Tom," that it is improper in our enlightened age to portray blacks as nothing but faithful household servants, and they believe that the story tends to flatter Jews as being less bigoted than other whites. Audiences have not had their enjoyment tainted by such quibbles. The notion that every work of art should be or cannot help but be a political statement is thankfully fading into the dustbin of history, just as all the heavy rhetoric of Marxism has become a feeble echo that no longer impresses or frightens people. *Driving Miss Daisy* is not saying how things

ought to be but how things were. The love that develops between Hoke and Miss Daisy suggests in a low-key way characteristic of the whole story that, although there is great tension between blacks and whites, there is also the possibility of love, understanding, and laughter. Uhry says, "I wrote what I knew to be the truth, and people have recognized it as such."

In recognition of all the wonderful elements that came together so well in the film, *Driving Miss Daisy* was the most honored film at the Academy Awards. It won the Best Picture, Best Actress (Jessica Tandy), Best Adapted Screenplay (Alfred Uhry), and Best Makeup (Manlio Rocchetti) Awards, and was nominated further for Best Actor (Morgan Freeman), Best Supporting Actor (Dan Aykroyd), Best Art Direction (Bruno Rubeo and Crispian Sallis), Best Costume Design (Elizabeth McBride), and Best Editing (Mark Warner).

Bill Delaney

#### Reviews

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*The New Republic*. CCII, January 22, 1990, p. 26.  
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