

## Driving Miss Daisy ★★★½

**Year of Release:** 1989

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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*Driving Miss Daisy* takes its sweet time to tell a small, intimate story. It's a quiet film, a slow film, a deliberate film. But if you're patient with it, the movie offers innumerable rewards, such as a pair of self-assured performances by Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy.

*Driving Miss Daisy* is based on Alfred Uhry's Pulitzer-prize winning play of the same name, which first opened in New York in 1985. The play has garnered international acclaim with productions in Chicago, Los Angeles, London, Vienna, Norway, and the Soviet Union. Uhry himself wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of *Driving Miss Daisy*; he also penned the wonderful sleeper, *Mystic Pizza*.

The film, like the play, is set in Atlanta, Georgia, and it revolves around two people in their twilight years: a cranky, 70-something Jewish widow who feels guilty about her wealth and a 60-something black man who becomes her chauffeur. The movie relies on character, rather than plot, to propel the action. In fact, the movie has no discernible plot in the traditional sense; it doesn't present a linear story in which all the scenes flow together. Rather, *Driving Miss Daisy* is made up of the routine activities of everyday life: shopping, listening to the radio, visiting the cemetery, eating fried chicken, and so on. The film also incorporates into the story line actual events in Atlanta's history, including the 1958 bombing of The Temple (the city's oldest Jewish congregation) and a 1965 ceremony honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The story begins in 1948 with Daisy (Tandy) crashing and wrecking her Packard as she pulls out of her driveway. The insurance company cancels her insurance, and her son, Boolie, decides to hire her a chauffeur. Freeman, reprising his role from the play, plays the chauffeur, Hoke. The film chronicles the warm friendship that slowly but surely blossoms between the chauffeur and his reluctant passenger. *Driving Miss Daisy* is a movie about human nature, aging, prejudice, and a great many other things, but more than anything, it's about a relationship: one that spans 25 years, four cars, the advent of civil rights, and one gravely important 33 cent can of salmon.

Daisy is strong-willed and set in her ways, and, from the outset, she is utterly opposed to the idea of having a chauffeur. Initially, she treats Hoke with contempt, refusing to let him drive her any-

where. Once she does get in the car, Daisy is the ultimate back-seat driver. To make matters worse, she is extremely self-conscious about what others might think if they were to see her being escorted around town by a hired hand. Eventually, however, Daisy is worn down by Hoke's good-natured charm and infectious cheer; she softens and opens up to him.

Tandy plays the part of Daisy exceedingly well, but unfortunately this feisty, cantankerous character is just a smidgen too commonplace. We've seen this woman countless times before in other incarnations, from *On Golden Pond* to *Cocoon*. Nevertheless, Tandy manages to put enough of a personal stamp on the familiar character to make it her own.

Freeman, as Hoke, on the other hand, gives a more distinctive performance. There is something profoundly moving about the way Hoke maintains his pride and dignity in a society which forbids him from using public rest rooms because of his skin color. Hoke is uneducated and illiterate, but Freeman always suggests that there is something more to this man, an inner strength beneath the simpleton exterior.

Both Freeman and Tandy seem to be in their element, in full command of their natural charisma. They flirt with the camera and dominate scenes without overtly calling attention to themselves. They bring a light touch to their humorous banter and to the movie's gentle humor. At the same time, Tandy and Freeman provide more than a few moments of truly poignant drama.

In his first dramatic role, Dan Aykroyd is surprisingly chubby and unexpectedly effective as Boolie, Tandy's loving and patient son. Drama seems to agree with Aykroyd; taking a break from comedy seems like a good move for the actor, especially when you consider the wretched comedies he has made recently (*Ghostbusters II*, *The Great Outdoors*, *My Stepmother Is an Alien*). The only other significant characters in the film are Daisy's housekeeper, Idella, marvelously played by Esther Rolle ("Good Times"), and Boolie's pretentious wife, played by Patti LuPone.

Under the direction of Bruce Beresford (*Crimes of the Heart*, *Tender Mercies*), *Driving Miss Daisy* seems a bit stogy now and again. But fortunately, Beresford never forgets he's shooting a movie, and accordingly, he offers plenty of striking cinematic

touches, such as gorgeous shots of flowers, trees, and tomatoes.

In adapting *Driving Miss Daisy* from the stage to the screen, the filmmakers have achieved a delicate subtlety. Uhry understands that what his characters do not say can be just as important as

what they do say. Beresford wisely exercises restraint in the film's dramatic moments. The movie tugs at your heart, but it never goes for the jugular. The only sap in *Driving Miss Daisy* is in the trees.

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