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Marc Robin

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FULTON THEATRE

STUDY GUIDE



Driving Miss Daisy

By Alfred Uhry

Director by Marc Robin

Scenery and Lighting Designer Paul Black

Costume Designer Beth Dunkelberger

Sound Designer Joseph Simon

Make-up Designer Anthony Lascoskie, Jr.

Stage Manager Anne M. Jude

Cast

Daisy Werthan

Louisa Flaningam

Hoke Colburn

Roscoe Orman

Boolie Werthan

Mick Weber

This STUDY GUIDE has been written for you, the teacher, and your students. It is intended to provide suggestions for discussion and activity ideas for use both before and after the play. By necessity, its contents cover a wide range of grade levels. Please feel free to select the material most appropriate for your class.

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BACKGROUND

The following is abridged from *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*:



Alfred Uhry, a playwright, lyricist, and screenwriter, is best known for his play *Driving Miss Daisy*, which premiered in New York in 1987 and was later adapted into a film. Uhry has received a Pulitzer Prize, an Academy Award, and several Tony Awards for his work – the only playwright to win all three awards.

Alfred Fox Uhry was born in Atlanta on December 3, 1936, to a prosperous family of German-Jewish descent. ...He attended Brown University...where he received a degree in English and drama in 1958. [While there, he wrote college musicals with a budding young composer Robert Waldman who became his best friend. Waldman was instrumental in getting both of them jobs at Frank Loesser's publishing company, following their graduation. "We wrote songs for him and got \$50 a week as an advance against royalties," Uhry remarked. "It was essentially a master class." But it was also a real stepping-stone. Through Loesser, Uhry and Waldman met novelist John Steinbeck who approved their idea to write a musical based on *East Of Eden*." Loesser connected the two with his children's tutor, the then aspiring writer Terrance McNally, and the three young men penned *Here's Where I Belong!* which opened and closed on Broadway in one night. "None of us mentions it on our bios," noted Uhry. Having relocated to New York City, Uhry began teaching English] at the Calhoun School. In 1975, after [other] failed attempts at writing a successful play, he [again] collaborated with Robert Waldman to adapt Eudora Welty's short novel *The Robber Bridegroom* into a musical. The production received a Tony Award nomination for Best Book of a Musical, and it marked Uhry's first success as a playwright.

After many long years working in the theater, Uhry encountered his next big success in 1987. On April 15 *Driving Miss Daisy* opened at the Studio Theater at Playwrights Horizon in New York City. **Set in Atlanta, *Driving Miss Daisy* spans a quarter of a century, from 1948 to 1973, with the action taking place before, during, and after the civil rights movement. The plot centers on two characters, an elderly Jewish widow named Miss Daisy Werthan and her African American driver, Hoke Colburn. The characters, inspired by Uhry's grandmother Lena Fox and her chauffeur, Will Colman, are universal figures that appeal to a wide audience. Miss Daisy and Hoke struggle to determine their personal and social roles as the world they have always known changes before their eyes.** The original production featured Atlanta native Dana Ivey as Miss Daisy, Morgan Freeman as Hoke and Ray Gill as Miss Daisy's son, Boolie. *Driving Miss Daisy* was an immediate success, and it earned Uhry the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

In 1989 Uhry wrote the screenplay adaptation of *Driving Miss Daisy* for a film starring Jessica Tandy, Morgan Freeman, and Dan Akroyd. The movie was filmed in and around the Atlanta area and...received an Academy Award for Best Picture, and Uhry received the award for Best Screenplay.

[In addition to *Driving Miss Daisy*, Uhry's plays include *Here's Where I Belong* (1968), *The Robber Bridegroom* (1975), *Swing* (1980), *Little Johnny Jones* (1982), *America's Sweetheart* (1985), *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1996), *Parade* (1998), *Edgardo Mine* (2002), and *LoveMusik* (2007). He has also written a number of screenplays.]

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION IDEAS

1. Theatre

- a. Have your class discuss the ways in which theatre is similar to and different from movies, television, and even other live events such as concerts, circuses, and even games of sports.
- b. Explore the roles of director, playwright, composer, actor, designers (of set, costume, and lighting), etc, in the creation of a play.
- c. The structure of *Driving Miss Daisy* is very episodic, and the play takes place over the course of twenty-five years. Its staging is deliberately very minimalist. Ask your class what was done theatrically (in terms of set, costuming, and lighting design) to help enhance the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the play as well as their imaginations? What images do they remember the best? Why?

1948

▶ 1973

- d. Alfred Uhry insisted on writing his own screenplay for the movie version of this play (a clearly wise decision as it resulted in an Oscar!). Of the process, he noted:

Movie writing – specifically adapting a play or novel for the screen – presents its own challenges. You have to learn to write shorter scenes with less dialogue or no dialogue. ...The screenwriter's job is to find the meat of the character, determine what he wants and then translate that into dramatic action.

If time allows, have your students watch the DVD of the movie version of *Driving Miss Daisy*. Have them compare and contrast the stage version to its film adaptation. How was the experience of the work different for them?

2. Exploring Characters

- a. *Driving Miss Daisy* centers on two very memorable characters – an elderly Jewish widow named Miss Daisy Werthan and her African-American driver, Hoke Colburn. (Daisy's adult son Boolie is the only other character in the play.) Playwrights use dialog to bring their characters to life and give audiences insights into their thoughts, feelings, personality traits, and relationships with other characters. Examining dialog can give one a better understanding of the characters. Have your students read the following passage from *Driving Miss Daisy*. Then have them explain what the dialog reveals about the characters.



Here Daisy, a retired schoolteacher, is 72 years old. When she wrecked her car in her own driveway, her son Boolie insisted that she get a chauffeur to drive for her. She did not like the idea, and was sure that she would not like

Hoke, the chauffeur. Daisy and Hoke, a man of great humor, patience, and dignity, have by this point in the play learned to respect and appreciate one another despite their differences. But they don't talk about their growing friendship. As this scene opens, Miss Daisy is taking care of the flowers on her dead husband's grave.

Lights come up brightly, indicating hot sun. Daisy, in a light dress, is kneeling, a trowel in her hand, working by a gravestone. Hoke, jacket in hand, sleeves rolled up, stands nearby.

HOKE: I jes' thinkin', Miz Daisy. We bin out heah to the cemetery three times dismont' already an ain' even the twentieth yet.

DAISY: It's good to come in nice weather.

HOKE: Yassum. Mist' Sig's grave mighty well tended. I b'lieve you the best widow in the state of Georgia.

DAISY: Boolie's always pestering me to let the staff out here tend to this plot. Perpetual care they call it.

HOKE: Doan' you do it. It right to have somebody from the family lookin' after you.

DAISY: I'll certainly never have that. Boolie will have me in perpetual care before I'm cold.

HOKE: Come on now, Miz Daisy.

DAISY: Hoke, run back to the car and get that pot of azaleas for me and set it on Leo Bauer's grave.

HOKE: Miz Rose Bauer's husband?

DAISY: That's right. She asked me to bring it out here for her. She's not very good about coming. And I believe today would've been Leo's birthday.

HOKE: Yassum. Where the grave at?

DAISY: I'm not exactly sure. But I know it's over that way on the other side of the weeping cherry. You'll see the headstone. Bauer.

HOKE: Yassum.

DAISY: What's the matter?

HOKE: Nothin' the matter. *(He exits. She works with the trowel. In a moment, Hoke returns with flowers.)* Miz Daisy...

DAISY: I told you it's over on the other side of the weeping cherry. It says Bauer on the headstone.

HOKE: How'd that look?

DAISY: What?

HOKE: I cain' read.

DAISY: That's ridiculous. Anybody can read.

HOKE: Nome. Not me.

DAISY: Then how come I see you looking at the paper all the time?

HOKE: That's it. Jes' lookin'. I dope out what's happening from the pictures.

DAISY: You know you letters, don't you?

HOKE: MY ABC's? Yassum, pretty good. I jes' cain' read.

DAISY: Stop saying that. It's making me mad. If you know your letters then you can read. You just don't know you can read. I taught some of the stupidest children God ever put on the face of the earth and all of them could read enough to find a name on a tombstone. The name is Bauer. Buh buh buh buh Bauer. What does that buh letter sound like?

HOKE: Sound like a B.

DAISY: Of course. Buh Bauer. Er er er ere er. BauER. That's the last part. What letter sounds like er?

HOKE: R?

DAISY: So the first letter is a –

HOKE: B.

DAISY: And the last letter is an –

HOKE: R.

DAISY: B-R. B-R. B-R. Brr. Brr. Brr. It even sounds like Bauer, doesn't it?

HOKE: Sho' do Miz Daisy. Thass it?

DAISY: That's it. Now go over there like I told you in the first place and look for a headstone with a B at the beginning and an R at the end and that will be Bauer.

HOKE: We ain' gon' worry bout what come 'n the middle?

DAISY: Not right now. This will be enough for you to find it. Go on now.

HOKE: Yassum.

DAISY: And don't come back here telling me you can't do it. You can.

HOKE: Miz Daisy...

DAISY: What now?

HOKE: I 'preciate this, Miz Daisy.

DAISY: Don't be ridiculous! I didn't do anything. Now would you please hurry up? I'm burning up out here.

- b. We can also tell about characters from their actions as well as their words. After seeing the play, have your students discuss the different ways that Daisy, Hoke, and Boolie treat and/or view Daisy's many automobiles, and what we learn about each character from this.
- c. Although Daisy and Hoke are very real and specific characters, they are also universal figures that appeal to a wide audience. This appeal was a surprise to their creator, who noted in the preface to the published work:



When I wrote this play I never dreamed I would be writing an introduction to it because I never thought it would get this far. ...When I wonder how all this happened...I can come up with only one answer. I wrote what I knew to be the truth and people have recognized it as such.

This was a sentiment shared by the many critics who applauded the play. Daisy and Hoke are quite specific characters, but ask your class, after viewing the play, what makes them so universal? What do these characters share with all people, whatever their background?

- d. Hoke is 60 years old when the play begins. He is an unemployed, uneducated African-American. He has worked as a driver and deliveryman previously. He is pleased when Boolie hires him, both for the job and because he likes to work for Jews. He is extremely patient with Daisy and tolerant of her barely disguised prejudices. He also is not afraid to speak up to her, always, however, in a quiet, respectful manner. When his dignity is at stake, he speaks up for his rights. His integrity teaches Daisy to be a more humane person. But Hoke also develops as a result of his relationship with Daisy. After seeing the play, have your class discuss the ways he has grown through his interactions with this other character.
- e. One way that actors "get into" their roles is to imagine their characters in situations that are implied but not included in the play. Have your students try to imagine Daisy and Hoke in other situations and write another short scene for inclusion in the play.
- f. As noted earlier in this **Study Guide**, Alfred Uhry based Daisy and Hoke on real people, specifically his grandmother and her chauffeur. Have each of your students write a short scene

based on a memorable person or people in their lives. Allow them to change the names and fictionalize the situation as much as they need to, while writing what they know to “be the truth” of those characters.

3. Prejudice

- a. Prejudice is an important theme in the play. It is demonstrated against both African Americans and Jews. Audiences of *Driving Miss Daisy* are here and there reminded of the situation for African Americans in the South. Hoke, for example, tells Boolie that he has a hard time finding a job, for employers are “hirin’ young if they hirin’ colored.” Years later, Hoke refers to the fact that African Americans cannot use white facilities. Prejudice against Jews is demonstrated through the bombing of the temple and Boolie’s reference to businessmen who dislike and stereotype Jewish people. He recognizes their belief that “as long as you got to deal with Jews, the really smart ones come from New York.” Hoke also specifically mentions the way many Southerners feel toward Jews: “People always talkin’ ‘bout they stingy and they cheap.” As scholar Julius Novick informs us, the playwright even incorporates

the second most traumatic event in Atlanta Jewish history, after the Leo Frank case: the bombing of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, generally known simply as the Temple, in 1958. Daisy’s response: I’m sure they meant to bomb one of the conservative synagogues or the orthodox one. The Temple is reform. Everybody knows that.” Evidently for her there are Jews, and there are Jews. Hoke sets her straight: “It doan’ matter to them people. A Jew is a Jew to them folks. Jes like light or dark we all the same nigger.”



Mayor William Hartsfield and Rabbi Jacob Rothschild examine rubble on October 13, 1958, the day after the bombing of the congregation’s synagogue, known as “the Temple.”

After seeing the play, ask your students to cite other examples and to also note changes in thinking that occur through the course of the play’s twenty-five years.

- b. Relate these changes to the historical context of the play, specifically the course of the Civil Rights movement. Have your class conduct research into racial and religious relations in the South from the 1940s to the present day. Particular attention can be paid to landmark Supreme Court decisions. How does the world that Daisy and Hoke have always known change before their eyes through the course of the play? And how does this affect their struggle to understand their personal and social roles in that world?
- c. Theatre writer, Don Shewey reminds us that Daisy is a cranky and suspicious woman. And even though, as a retired school teacher, she’s smart enough to know better, she’s no less susceptible to prejudice than any other Southerner of her time. Although she realizes that it reeks of racial injustice, she clings to her decorum. Eli Evans adds that Southern Jews, imitating their Christian neighbors, “would know deference and come to expect it of the

blacks.” Miss Daisy and her businessman son Boolie clearly do. A single missing 30-cent can of salmon is all she needs to convict all black males of congenital thievery. As she puts it: *“They all take things you know...They are like having little children in the house. They want something so they just take it. Not a smidgen of manners. No conscience.”* Her physical and social vulnerability, because of her age, and because she’s Jewish in an overwhelmingly Christian society, only exacerbates the sharpness with which she hides her fear and fragility. But, as Julius Novick notes, “her feelings are complicated.”

Having power over blacks and feeling superior to them makes Jews feel white, but it conflicts with the Jewish imperative to identify with the oppressed; every year at Passover, after all, Jews recite, “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt.” Thus when Boolie compares his mother to Governor Talmadge, a leading segregationist, she is insulted: “What a thing to say! I’m not prejudiced.” She buys tickets to a dinner honoring Martin Luther King; when Boolie declines to go because he is afraid people would call him “Martin Luther Werthan” behind his back, and his business would suffer, she vacillates uneasily about whether to invite Hoke.

As for Hoke, Shewey suggests that perhaps as audience members we want to see him be brazen and wise-cracking, and to give Daisy her comeuppance. Instead, he is servile and uncomplaining, dignified yet taciturn, valiantly maintaining his own integrity and sense of humor without disturbing the mask of submissiveness he must wear to survive in the white world around him. Indeed, it is the grace and inner strength he musters that keeps him from being destroyed by the racial prejudice he encounters everyday. The play’s final tableau – she’s in a nursing home being spoon-fed by him – “leaves the audience with a sigh whose sweetness has to be measured against the distance this odd couple has traveled to this moment of human intimacy.” Ask your students to first chart examples of prejudice in the play and then to chart examples of incidents that slowly lead Daisy and Hoke to become “best friends.” What lessons can be learned in their psychological journeys that may be applicable to all of us?

- d. Sadly, prejudice takes many forms. Aside from the issues of race and religion in *Driving Miss Daisy*, can your students note any other forms of bias in the play? Have them, for example, consider attitudes conveyed about the elderly. Finally, have them compare the prejudice displayed in the play to examples of prejudice in their own lives. What can they suggest doing personally to combat that? Is there a class project that could be devised to increase understanding between different peoples?

4. Further Readings

Below is an annotated list of other plays and novels that relate to *Driving Miss Daisy* in different ways. If time allows, have your class read one of these works and, after seeing “*Daisy*” at the Fulton, find points of comparison.

Uhry's second straight play, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1996) tackles the unexplored aspects of Southern anti-Semitism. Uhry again returns to the Affluent Jewish community in Atlanta, but here in the year 1939.

The third of Uhry's "Atlanta Trilogy" is the musical *Parade* (1998) that examines the infamous Leo Frank case of 1913.

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun* (1959) explores what happens in 1940s Chicago when an African-American family attempts to move into an all-white neighborhood. It is based on the playwright's own experiences.

The Carson McCullers novel *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* (1940) draws on the Southern gothic literary tradition. Its protagonists include a man who is deaf, an African-American doctor and a widower who all live in a Georgia mill town, and are drawn together by their outsider status.

Evan O'Connell's novel *Mrs. Bridge* (1959) chronicles the adult life of Mrs. Bridge, a well-off Midwesterner.

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