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Driving Miss Daisy

Southern Jewishness on the Big Screen

by **Eliza Russi Lowen McGraw**



Daisy (Jessica Tandy) and Hoke (Morgan Freeman) spend their time together with the trademark 1948 Hudson, and the world around them speeds by. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.



he release of the film *Driving Miss Daisy* in 1989 made American moviegoers aware of the ongoing presence of southern Jewishness.¹ Alfred Uhry wrote the film's screenplay from his 1987 autobiographically informed Pulitzer prize-winning play, the story of the relationship between Daisy Werthan, a Jewish Atlanta matron, and Hoke Colebum, her African American chauffeur. Like many Hollywood duos, Hoke, played by Morgan Freeman, and Daisy, played by Jessica Tandy, come together inauspiciously. Seventy-two-year-old Daisy crashes her car, and her son, Boolie (Dan Akroyd), deciding she needs someone to drive her, hires Hoke. At first Daisy will not even enter the car, but eventually Hoke wins her over. As they age, the two forge a strong and complicated bond that challenges some socially proscribed southern mores but leaves others intact. *Driving Miss Daisy* demonstrates the inseparability of Jewishness and history within a southern context. Daisy simultaneously exists within and without the dominant culture, figured throughout the film as representative because of her status as a white southern matriarch and exceptional because of her Jewishness.

Many films set in the South came out around the time of *Miss Daisy*. *Steel Magnolias*, for example, released the same year as *Miss Daisy*, depicts a group of women friends in Chinquapin Parish, Louisiana, whose lives center around the local beauty parlor. Although Bruce Beresford is Australian, by the time he began directing *Miss Daisy* he was already familiar with the landscape of the American South from his work on *Crimes of the Heart* (1987) and *Tender Mercies* (1983). Like *Steel Magnolias*, *Crimes of the Heart* stars a group of women, the three Magrath sisters who reunite in their tiny hometown of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, after Babe (Sissy Spacek), the youngest sister, shoots her husband.

Miss Daisy uses some of the same conventions to denote southernness on-screen that these other films use. Its light is the same October afternoon gloaming that permeates Hazlehurst and Chinquapin Parish at all times and seasons. Daisy's house appears as musty and congested as the Magraths', her quips as tart as those of the steel magnolias. "This is [Florine's] idea of heaven on earth, isn't it?" she asks her son when her daughter-in-law socializes with Episcopalians.² With its inclusion of southern Jewishness and the topic of race relations, however, the film extends cinematic conventions of southernness. *Miss Daisy* offers a visual vocabulary for southern Jewishness with its wide, bright shots of the Temple in Atlanta and southern-accented voices discussing synagogue carpooling and singing hymns in Hebrew. Noting that Daisy imperiously orders Hoke around while lauding Martin Luther King Jr., critics have cast *Miss Daisy* as a portrait of naive and reactionary white liberalism. Daisy's Jewishness, however, makes this depiction itself seem naive. In the film, southernness and southern Jewishness become interdependent, with Daisy's Jewishness the lens through which broader questions about southern race relations are interpreted.



Steel Magnolias, released in 1989, the same year as *Driving Miss Daisy*, depicts a group of women friends—played by Sally Field (left), Julia Roberts (right), Dolly Parton, and Daryl Hannah—in *Chinquapin, Louisiana*, whose lives center around the local beauty parlor. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Tri-Star Pictures, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.

MISS DAISY'S ATLANTA

Atlanta, Georgia, *Miss Daisy's* setting, provides an appropriate forum for such complicated questions. As the site of Leo Frank's arrest as well as the Temple bombing depicted in *Miss Daisy*, the city has been the setting for tragic episodes for Jewishness in the South. Frank, a northern Jewish superintendent in an Atlanta pencil factory, swore he was alone in his office when Mary Phagan, a young white girl employed by the factory, was murdered on Confederate Memorial Day, April 26, 1913. Although the evidence was not conclusive, Frank was nevertheless charged and sentenced to death. Governor John Slaton later ruined his own political future by commuting that sentence to life imprisonment. Frank survived an attack in prison in which a fellow inmate slit his throat, only to be kidnapped

from his cell and lynched. During the turmoil of the Frank case, Jewish Atlantans, who had felt safe within their New South city, were treated as outsiders and experienced new fear when a white supremacy group, the Knights of Mary Phagan, mutated into the reincarnation of the Ku Klux Klan.³

The 1958 Temple bombing, like the Frank case, constituted a moment of crisis for Jews in the South, and the two events stand yoked as tandem instances of Atlanta in turmoil. While Frank represented unwelcome northernness, however, the Temple community embodied southern Jewishness. The Jewishness under attack could no longer be portrayed as “foreign” when the Atlanta Benevolent Hebrew Congregation, known as the Temple, was bombed with a nitroglycerine device roughly equivalent to fifty sticks of dynamite. Five white extremists were indicted for the crime, and their successful defense was built on a foundation of anti-Semitism. The first lawyer for the five, Jimmy Venable, was an Imperial Wizard of the National Knights of the Klan. The second, Reuben Garland, assigned his research staff to such tasks as discovering if it was true that Kol Nidre, the Yom Kippur eve prayer, permitted Jews to invalidate all oaths, thus rendering it impossible for them to swear in a court of law.⁴ In 1959 a jury decided that the state’s evidence was too circumstantial to convict any of the accused, and no one was ever punished for the destruction. The anticlimactic trial punctuated a period of terror for Atlanta Jews. The event shook them into realizing that they were not accorded the same privileges as the city’s white Christians no matter how many Christmas trees they might display.

In addition to these historical events, Atlanta is the setting for another fictional mistress-and-servant pair more famous than Hoke and Daisy: *Gone with the Wind*’s Mammy and Scarlett O’Hara. Mammy’s obligation to Scarlett comes from her affiliation with Scarlett’s mother’s family, while Hoke’s desire to work for the Werthans stems from his expressed preference to work for Jews. A kind of reverse noblesse oblige runs through both scenarios. In each case, the African American subordinate knows the white mistress better than she knows herself. Hoke and Mammy are concerned with appearances: Hoke reprimands Daisy for wanting to take public transportation to the Piggly Wiggly, while Mammy constantly reminds Scarlett of what is “fitting” for a young lady of her stature and what makes her seem like “poor white trash,” such as revealing her bosom early in the day or consorting with Rhett Butler. Both Mammy and Hoke have strong opinions about employers. Mammy stays on with Scarlett even after the Emancipation Proclamation, calling Yankee carpetbaggers on the streets of Atlanta “trash” and fretting that Scarlett may know a “dyed-hair” woman. Boolie and Hoke have a similarly class-conscious exchange when Hoke informs Boolie that although he would not want to work for “trash” like Jeanette Harris, he does appreciate her offer of a high salary. Boolie asks if he will take Jeanette’s offer, and Hoke tells him, “Get on with you, Mr. Werthan. What you think I am? I ain’t



By the time Australian Bruce Beresford began directing Driving Miss Daisy, he was already familiar with the landscape of the American South from his work on Tender Mercies (above), in which songwriter Mac (Robert Duvall) tries to rebuild his life with his new wife, Rosa Lee (Tess Harper), and her son (Allan Hubbard). Daisy's director also had worked on Crimes of the Heart (below), in which the three Magrath sisters—played by Jessica Lange (left), Sissy Spacek, and Diane Keaton (right)—reunite in their tiny hometown of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, when Babe (Spacek) shoots her husband. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1983 Universal City Studios, Incorporated and © 1983 De Laurentis Entertainment Group respectively. All Rights Reserved.

studying about going to work for no trashy something like her. No, sir.” Hoke both flatters Boolie and explains how his theories of class play themselves out in his choice of employer. Boolie gives him a raise.

Uhry’s invocation of a nineteenth-century master-servant relationship is inevitable. The Mammy-and-Scarlett template for Hoke and Daisy emphasizes the theme of stereotypical southern servitude that some critics have chastised *Miss Daisy* for romanticizing. Ultimately, the Atlanta setting resonates with particular strength when it evokes the memory of Scarlett and Mammy.

CINEMATIC SOUTHERN JEWISHNESS

Daisy wrecks her car and requires Hoke’s services in 1948, the same year the Dixiecrats (the States’ Rights Democratic Party) achieved political success and Israel achieved statehood. Both events represent struggles for identity. *Driving Miss Daisy* demonstrates that in the wake of these salient events, southern Jewishness strove to define itself, even as it remained bound by its American traditions of simultaneous assimilation and distinction. The film does not explicitly refer to Israel or the Dixiecrats, but the choice of opening date resounds nonetheless. As Israel and the Dixiecrats fight for independence and validation, so does Daisy.

Uhry draws his characters and ambivalent view of southern Jewishness from autobiography. “That really was my grandmother and her driver,” he claims. “There is something about being Jewish, even as un-Jewish as I was brought up to be, that’s in the marrow of your bones.”⁹ The term “un-Jewish” as Uhry employs it implies that Atlantans like himself fall outside an authentic site of Jewishness. Yet he insists that this “un-Jewishness” is nonetheless “Jewish.”

Hoke comes to work for Daisy, in part, because of her Jewishness. “I’d rather work for Jews,” Hoke tells Boolie. “Oh, I know folks be saying they stingy, cheap, one thing and another, but don’t be saying that around me.” Hoke has experience with Jewishness, he reassures Boolie, mentioning his former Jewish employer and friend of Boolie’s father, Judge Stone. Just as Boolie asks Oscar, one of his African American employees, if Hoke works in his factory, indicating a “they all look alike” kind of prejudice, Hoke believes that his experience with Judge Stone qualifies him to work for all Jewish people. His comment also gently reminds Boolie that Hoke knows his prospective employer’s different status. Although the Werthan family business is a printing press in the play, in the film it is “Werthan Cotton and Bag Co.,” a change that positions the Werthans as purveyors of the *authentic* crop of Dixie.

Daisy and Hoke do not begin their tenure together in Eden, however. The following exchange takes place as Daisy insists she does not require Hoke’s services even as he tries to persuade her that she does.



The sharpness of the Atlanta setting of Driving Miss Daisy resonates with particular strength when it evokes the memory of Gone with the Wind's Scarlett and Mammy. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

"A fine rich Jewish lady like yourself ain't got no business dragging herself up the steps of no trolley carrying no grocery store bags. How about I come along and carry them for you?"

"I don't need you. I don't want you. And I don't like you saying I'm rich."

"Well, I won't say it no more."

"Is that what you and Idella talk about in the kitchen?"

"No, Miss Daisy."

"Oh, I hate this. I hate being talked about behind my back in my own house.

I was born on Forsyth Street and believe you me, I know the value of a penny."

Hoke's servility gives him the authority to pronounce what Daisy "should" do as a "fine rich Jewish lady." According to his code of conduct, such individuals do not take public transportation or carry their own groceries. "Fine," "rich," and "Jewish" come together as one epithet for Hoke, defining a type of person "like" Daisy, if not necessarily her. "Rich" is the adjective Daisy rejects, taking Hoke to task for making presumptions about her background. He rejects her refusal, telling her that he "won't say it no more." He will humor her, but not change his original characterization. To Daisy, being from Forsyth Street is proof of modest

financial circumstances and indicates that she does not fit Hoke's generalization. Not wishing to be perceived as rich, she commands Hoke not to wait for her directly in front of the synagogue, "like I was the queen of Romania." "Jewish" remains the unspoken modifier for Daisy, but her fear of being viewed as rich demonstrates an associated fear of being stereotypically Jewish, amassing fortunes in the nefarious way Tom Watson described in his vitriolic writings. Daisy would have been in her late twenties during the Frank case and Hoke some ten years younger. As native Atlantans, both would have understood the legacy of Frank's lynching and the implications of "rich Jews." Hoke's comment is not anti-Semitic as so much of the talk surrounding the Frank case was, but Daisy's vehement reaction indicates that its taint, even diluted, rankles.

Hoke and Daisy only edge toward camaraderie. While the two make their way to Mobile for Daisy's brother Walter's birthday, they each share something about their pasts. Hoke confides that the trip is his first outside Georgia, and Daisy tells him about a train ride she took in her childhood. They eat lunch in typically separate style; Daisy in the back seat and Hoke leaning against the car. As Daisy reminisces, the camera remaining on her face while Hoke's laughter resounds, two white Alabama policemen approach them. Calling the elderly Hoke "boy," one officer asks where he got the car. Daisy pipes up that the car is hers, and the policeman asks for Daisy's registration, then mispronounces her name as he looks at the paper. "Wertheran?" he asks. She corrects him, and the policeman says, "Never heard of that one before. What kind of name is that?" Daisy announces that Werthan is "of German derivation." The policeman's questioning demonstrates that he sees her as somehow illegitimate. She may appear white, but asking "what kind of name" she has shows that she is, by the policeman's reckoning, merely passing. As Daisy and Hoke drive away, the policeman says to his partner, "An old nigger and an old Jew woman taking off down the road together. Now that is one sorry sight." He pairs them as a pitiful duo, their togetherness multiplying their degradation. His view is a distortion of Boolie's, who sees the two off from Daisy's garage, yelling, "Good luck!" before shaking his head and adding a benevolent, "Good God," audible only to himself and the audience. The spectacle of Daisy and Hoke reminds audiences of the tenuous position each bears in racial terms along a southern road at mid-century. The audience, along with the police officers, watches them continue down the highway, considering whether this is indeed a pitiful image or one with its own power, embodied in the confidence Daisy and Hoke have in each other as well as the tension between them.

Daisy's stiff, sometimes authoritarian attitude toward her servants appears more lenient when compared with that of her daughter-in-law, Florine. Florine cannot keep help because of her temper, and in the course of the film the audience sees her impatiently demanding coffee from Gaynelle and raging at Katie Belle because there is no coconut for her Christmas ambrosia. Florine's behavior



Daisy's son, Boolie (left photo)—played by Dan Aykroyd—hires Hoke only to mutter, “Good God,” at the spectacle of Daisy and Hoke in the Hudson leaving Daisy's garage. On the way to Mobile (right photo), Daisy and Hoke pause for lunch before two white Alabama policemen approach and type them as “nigger” and “Jew.” Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.

reminds the audience that Daisy and Hoke have an exceptional, if troubled, relationship. Florine's impatience with servants and toadying assimilation are a foil to Daisy's relationship with Hoke and affirmation of her own faith.⁶

But Daisy and Florine nonetheless display similar insensitivity to Atlanta's racial complexities before the Temple bombing, as a scene at the younger Werthans' Christmas party demonstrates. When Daisy and Hoke drive to Boolie and Florine's, Hoke notes that he always enjoys Christmas with the Werthans. Daisy remarks that she is not surprised, since he is the only Christian there. Daisy imagines herself far ahead of Florine in matters of interracial relations and Jewish identity, but ultimately behaves similarly to Florine by asking Hoke to work on Christmas Eve.

These complexities come to light on a more individual scale when Hoke and Daisy go to the cemetery to tend her late husband's grave. Daisy asks Hoke to place flowers on the grave of Leo Bauer, a friend of the Werthans. He hesitates, and as the camera pans over the Hebrew lettering etched on the graves it appears that Hoke cannot find the grave because the name is in Hebrew. But when Daisy asks him why he does not take the flowers to the grave, Hoke confesses his illit-

eracy. English names also appear on the stones, and Daisy demonstrates how to sound out Bauer. Repeating “Buh—errr” as he walks along, Hoke eventually finds the grave. Fluent literacy comes to him through Jewish names. Daisy later presents him with a copybook—although “it isn’t a Christmas present,” she emphasizes. “Jews have no business giving Christmas presents.” She mediates her gift to Hoke through Jewishness, while Hoke enters Jewishness by proxy through reading Jewish names.

Like the gray headstones in the crowded cemetery, mirrors serve visual and thematic functions in *Miss Daisy*. The film navigates questions of identity through the constant presence of reflections. The rearview mirror in which Daisy and Hoke exchange looks distances the characters from each other. The frame used to advertise the movie depicts Hoke looking in the rearview mirror at Daisy. This image obviously demonstrates that driving is literally taking place, but it also shows how the two characters regard each other and each other’s image. The mirror—he in front, she in back, commanding—frames their relationship. Both have a measure of control. Daisy decides what to do, but Hoke actually drives. Hoke reminds Daisy that she cannot maneuver the car herself, so she tries to make him an extension of herself by insisting he drive slowly, or out of his way. Although the mirror bridges the space between Daisy and Hoke, they regard each other in it without ever getting too close.

Mirrors also augment the moment at which Boolie explains to his mother that he cannot go to hear Martin Luther King Jr. with her because his business might suffer if customers heard about his attendance. The audience sees both Boolie and Daisy reflected in a series of small mirrors. Framed photographs of Sig Werthan, Daisy’s late husband, stand between the two of them. As the older generation does what the younger does not dare to do, the remove offered by the framing and mirrors conveys distance. Even though Daisy and her son stand near each other, they are in different frames of mind and reference, unfamiliar to each other. While Boolie moves around, Daisy remains in the frame, never doubting she will hear King speak. She maintains high moral ground with her husband as their son faces conflict over the personal and financial burdens righteousness might force him to bear.

Daisy’s resolve is not purely virtuous, however. Boolie reminds his mother that if she is as unprejudiced as she claims, perhaps she could take Hoke with her to the King lecture. She tells Hoke that King is “wonderful,” but does not invite him to attend his speech. Her belief that Hoke could “hear [King] anytime he wants” demonstrates her continuing bigotry. The empty chair next to her throughout the speech symbolizes that there is space for Hoke, but also reminds the audience that Hoke and Daisy do not sit next to each other as a matter of course.

For Daisy and Hoke, the pairing of southern Jewish and black experiences extends beyond their encounter with King and the civil rights era to the Temple



When Daisy plans to go to hear Martin Luther King Jr., Boolie explains to her that he cannot accompany her because his business might suffer if customers heard about his attendance. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.

bombing. The audience sees Daisy alone in the car, clearly stuck in traffic while rain drums loudly on the roof. Hoke returns and tells Daisy why they are not moving as Daisy complains that she will be late for Saturday morning services:

“Somebody done bombed the Temple.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, it’s what the policeman just said up yonder. . .”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“You know as good as me, Miss Daisy. It will always be the same ones.”

Hoke attempts to establish camaraderie, placing Daisy’s experience in a larger context of oppression even as her questioning demonstrates incredulity. As they drive home, Daisy stares straight ahead while Hoke, glancing in the rearview mirror, tells her about a lynching he witnessed as a child. When he finishes, Daisy asks,

Driving Miss Daisy 51

"Why did you tell me that story?"

"I don't know, Miss Daisy. Just seem like that there mess back there put me in mind of it."

"That's ridiculous. The Temple has nothing to do with that."

"Yes'm. If you say so."

"We don't even know what happened. How do you know that policeman was telling the truth?"

"Well, why would he go and lie about a thing like that?"

"You never get things right anyway."

"Now, Miss Daisy, somebody done bomb that Temple back yonder and you know it."

"Go on. Just go on, now. I don't want to hear any more about it."

"You the boss."

"Don't talk to me."

This exchange reveals Hoke's belief in a basis of community between himself and Daisy. She rebuffs him, distancing the Temple crisis from "that"—Hoke's lynching story. Daisy doubts everything, from the policeman's report to Hoke's veracity. Instead of confronting the gravity of the Temple bombing's implications, and the fact that it could even be discussed in the same conversation as a lynching, Daisy denies that it has happened. A place in which she feels safe—the Temple, and by extension southern Jewishness—lies in ruins, and she dreads confronting the ramifications of the violence. Hoke's story becomes conflated with the Temple bombing, as Daisy progresses from not wanting to hear his narrative to disbelieving the policeman to silencing Hoke. Her command, "Don't talk to me," stems directly from her claim, "The Temple has nothing to do with that." Hoke believes that the Temple bombing brings them together, and for Daisy this is a daunting revelation, even as she characteristically repeats, "I'm not prejudiced." For the bombing to fall to "the same ones" challenges her faith in her safety at home. The South may be prey to brutal protest, as any cognizant observer of civil rights events would understand, but now *her* Jewishness becomes paramount through the assault, threatening to dismantle the stability of her identity. Julian Bond called the bombing a "proxy attack," suggesting that the white supremacists responsible were demonstrating prejudice against African Americans by assaulting the Jewish community.⁷ Through its portrayal of the vulnerability of southern Jewishness, however, *Miss Daisy* demonstrates the *inseparability* of Jewishness and blackness within southern society. Southern Jewishness and African Americanness become linked through violence and prejudice.



After the Temple is bombed, Hoke attempts to bond with Daisy under a common yoke of oppression. She rebuffs him, however, and prefers to deny the violence and any commonality that it might suggest between them. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.

Driving Miss Daisy 53

Miss Daisy came out in 1989, when the American quest for colorblindness sought in the seventies and eighties became a search for multiculturalism. As Todd Gitlin writes, the decades' symbols turned from 1987's July 4 cover of *Time* bravely announcing "We the People" to 1991's fife and drum corps made up of all ethnic types and asking, "Who are We?"⁸ Daisy and Hoke do not attempt the colorblindness of 1987 or the move in 1991 toward inclusive recognition. When Daisy and Hoke look at each other in the rearview mirror, their reflection gives rise to entanglements such as Hoke's consistent subjugation and Daisy's refusal to identify with him, as well as both characters' mutual reliance. Neither's identity erodes, but the two eventually demonstrate some form of communion, albeit strained and shaded—a vexed but challenging partnership.

Miss Daisy was a Christmas movie for parts of the country in 1989, a banner year for the cinematic South with *Blaze*, the story of Earl Long's paramour, and *Glory*, in which Freeman appeared as a black Union soldier, also appearing in theaters. *Miss Daisy* was widely reviewed and primarily deemed a testament to the bonds that form across ethnic lines even in a stratified society. Uhry won an Academy Award for his screenplay adaptation, and the film won three other Oscars: best picture, best actress for Jessica Tandy, and best makeup. For many reviewers, *Miss Daisy* was an "odd couple" film, a mild-mannered depiction of an unlikely interdependence, and it seems clear that the film's marketers desired it to be perceived as a messenger of good will, given its Christmas release. As Richard Shickel wrote in *Time*, "Mostly it is the simple presence of a good man that grants her age's greatest benison, expanding rather than shrinking her humanity." In *Playboy*, Bruce Williamson added that "All the . . . implications regarding racial harmony are more implied than socked across." Some abhorred its sentimentality; Stanley Kauffman wrote in *The New Republic* that the film has a "golden haze that might give Hallmark itself some pause." More pointed criticism of the film positions it as a rewriting of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, starring Hoke as the white-authored ideal slave, and David Stearitt asked in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "Will the filmmakers of Hollywood ever give us a movie about black Americans that doesn't fill the screen with white Americans as much as possible?"⁹

Most reviews of *Miss Daisy* denied the film its nuance in favor of promoting or deriding it. Much of its complexity derives from its treatment of Jewishness in the South, which Pauline Kael understood in her review for *The New Yorker*: "The movie is about the love between blacks and whites (Jewish division) at a time when a wealthy Southern Jewish matron plays mah-jongg, is addressed by her servants as Miss Daisy, and eats alone in the dining room even after she has become an advocate of civil rights." Kael positioned the film as a portrait of a time and place rather than a morality play. She noted that the "whites" in the film



Driving Miss Daisy was a Christmas film for parts of the country in 1989, a banner year for the cinematic South with *Blaze*, the story of the illicit romance between Louisiana Governor Earl K. Long and stripper Blaze Starr that shocked the state and rocked the powerful southern political machine in the 1950s. Paul Newman played the populist politician, and Lolita Davidovich played his sassy love interest. Photos by Sidney Baldwin, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

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belong to a “Jewish division” and links this to Daisy’s presumed Jewish brand of liberalism.¹⁰

In more popular expression, the figure of Miss Daisy is also used to denote imperiousness. In her humorous book *Clara, The Early Years: The Story of the Pug Who Ruled My Life* (1998), Margo Kaufman writes, “If I attempted to leave home alone, she skittered under my feet, dashed out the gate, and bounced defiantly into the passenger seat of my car. I felt like Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy*.” In a more direct critique, the rap group Public Enemy’s song “Burn, Hollywood, Burn,” ends with an announcer who booms, “Ladies and gentlemen, today’s feature presentation, *Driving Miss Daisy*,” followed by groans and deriding comments, “No, no, no” and “Bullshit.” The song includes the phrases, “As I walk the streets of Hollywood Boulevard / Thinking how hard it was to those that starred / In the movies portraying the roles / Of butlers and maids slaves and hoes.”¹¹ “Burn, Hollywood, Burn” indicts the movie industry for the traditionally derogatory treatment of African Americans on screen. Public Enemy

denounces *Miss Daisy* as representative of a painfully long line of racist films depicting black servitude.

Like *Public Enemy*, scholars also use the film as shorthand for a symbol of black thralldom and corrosive white misunderstanding. In his 1995 essay “Blues for Atticus Finch,” Eric Sundquist takes on Harper Lee’s 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, casting it as a “historical relic” because it represents

mid-century racial ambivalence in full bloom. . . . For all its admirable moral earnestness and its inventory of the historical forces making up white liberal consciousness in the late 1950s, Lee’s novel might well have been entitled “Driving Miss Scout.” That its basic answers to the questions of racial injustice appear almost irrelevant to the late-twentieth-century United States makes its cultural impact the more crucial to understand, not least because the novel pursues its ethical instruction with a cunning simplicity while at the same time implying that there *are* no simple answers, perhaps no answers at all.¹²

By positioning Lee’s novel as a “relic,” Sundquist equates *Miss Daisy* with a superannuated view of southern race relations. If *To Kill a Mockingbird* itself appears “almost irrelevant” to a more current audience, its aims as depicted in *Miss Daisy* represent the ongoing and damaging naiveté of southern narrative. Like Lee’s novel, *Miss Daisy* provides an “inventory of history.” But while Sundquist deems *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s moral goals “admirable,” he grants *Miss Daisy* no such attributes. *Miss Daisy* is, of course, not the text under scrutiny in Sundquist’s essay. Yet even in passing, *Miss Daisy* warrants, at least, the estimation given to Lee’s novel: that if it has any ethical goals, these are ambiguous. *Miss Daisy* may put forth no solutions to the racial turmoil of the society it depicts, but the film itself takes on more than racial struggles. To suggest that *Miss Daisy* represents the most racist aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird* ignores its connection to southern Jewishness, which deepens and complicates the relation between Hoke and Daisy and depicts an often cinematically invisible segment of southern experience.

Cultural critic Ann duCille also refers to *Daisy* as depicting facile racism. In a chapter in *Skin Trade* (1996), duCille defines “the *Driving Miss Daisy* syndrome: an intellectual sleight of hand that transforms power and race relations to make best friends out of driver and driven, master and slave, boss and servant, white boy and black man.” She takes to task white scholars who study black literature or history, arguing that such authors’ prefatory apologies “just may protest too much. . . . These prefaces acknowledge the ‘outsider’ status of the authors—even as they insist upon the rightness of their entry into the fields of black literature and history.” These questions of entitlement and presumption duCille raises represent cardinal issues for any study of a group to which the scholar may not belong. As duCille posits, the lines between study and entitlement often become blurred, and scholarly tone can become presumptuous rather than edifying.¹³



Daisy may not succeed in conquering her own racial bias, but her story, framed within her relationship with Hoke, is more than either a depiction of an unlikely friendship or white southern condescension. She is vexed as she tackles both the closed world of southern Jewishness within which she feels secure and the more open idea of an ethnically intertwined society. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1989 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.

Employing *Miss Daisy* as the nominal model for this situation is, however, misleading and even tends to indict duCille for the crimes she defines. For the “Miss Daisy syndrome” to operate, Jewishness must be replaced by a black/white binary that precludes ethnic shadings or any possibility of community between Hoke and Daisy as members of disenfranchised groups. Without discussing the film (or play) itself, duCille uses it as an emblem of patronizing assumptions: “Perhaps if I can approximate in words what is so offensive about these *Driving Miss Daisy* confessionals, I will do the field and all those who want to work in it a genuine favor. . . . How do you tell people who don’t get it in the first place that it is only out of the arrogance of white privilege or male prerogative that they

Driving Miss Daisy 57

find it an honor for a black woman to be proclaimed their black mother or their black friend or their black guardian or their black conscience?”¹⁴ For duCille, Miss Daisy herself—or Uhry, as the creator of the character—represents one of those who do “not get it in the first place.” Hoke, then, takes the position of the presumed-upon black friend in duCille’s formulation. There is no space for Jewishness in duCille’s “syndrome,” which explains the phenomenon of white or male scholars who ascribe their ability to speak for black women to a certain influential figure who, as duCille points out, never asked to be “their black conscience.” Hoke may represent just that to Daisy, but if Daisy is a deluded and presumptuous white figure, where does her consciousness about her own ethnicity enter?

DuCille does her field, as she writes, “a genuine favor” by warning its participants against blindness to privilege, but simultaneously does it a disservice by ignoring what must be crucial to any understanding of Daisy—her own southern Jewish position. Daisy does demonstrate the kind of false indulgence duCille accuses her of, but her struggles deserve to be treated specifically and on their own terms. Daisy is not simply a model of white privilege. Instead, while she may depend upon Hoke as her conscience, she also struggles on her own—albeit often fruitlessly—with proving that she is “not prejudiced” as her refrain goes.

Daisy may not succeed in conquering her own racial bias, but her story, framed by her relationship with Hoke, is more than either a depiction of an unlikely friendship or white southern condescension toward African Americans. Instead, Daisy tackles the closed world of southern Jewishness within which she feels secure and the more open concept of an ethnically intertwined society.

Driving Miss Daisy depicts southern Jewishness independently and in conjunction with race relations. The film acknowledges the complexity of southerners as individuals and the complexity of their relationships with each other; southern Jewishness smudges the color line laid down by southern custom. The film demonstrates that the snug world of southern Jewishness outgrew its close fit within the larger, moving panorama of the South. From 1948 to 1973, *Miss Daisy* tells us, the southern cultural landscape, preoccupied with racial issues, challenged southern Jewish identity.

NOTES

1. Recently, a proliferating number of texts proclaim the histories of southern Jews. Works such as Mike DeWitt’s documentary *Delta Jews* (1998) and the anthology *Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Alabama University Press, 1998), edited by Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, acknowledge the presence and validity of southern Jewish experiences. Memoir acts as the predominant genre of this expression, with a spate of recent books following up on Eli Evans’s groundbreaking *Provincials* (Atheneum, 1973) and *The Lonely Days Were*

Sundays (University Press of Mississippi, 1993). The latest additions to the genre include Helen Jacobus Apte's *Heart of a Wife: The Diary of a Southern Jewish Woman* (SR Books, 1998), Edward Cohen's *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), Stanley Ely's *In Jewish Texas: A Family Memoir* (Texas Christian University Press, 1998), and Stella Suberman's *The Jew Store* (Algonquin Books, 1998). Dolly Parton has bought the movie rights to *The Jew Store*, and plans to portray one of Suberman's Gentile neighbors.

2. All quotations from the film are from my transcriptions.

3. Much scholarly work and artistic interpretation focuses on the Frank case, including Uhry's musical *Parade* (RCA Victor, 1998), David Mamet's novel *The Old Religion* (Free Press, 1997), and the film *The Murder of Mary Phagan* (Century Tower Productions, 1987), starring Jack Lemmon as Governor Slaton.

4. Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Addison-Wesley, 1996), 309.

5. Alfred Uhry, interview by Paul Rudd, *Bomb*, summer 1997, 39, 40.

6. Similar issues of assimilation arise in Uhry's later play, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (Theater Communications Group, 1997), which also takes place in Atlanta and deals with the schism between Jews of Eastern European and German descent.

7. Greene, *The Temple Bombing*, 247.

8. Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (Holt, 1995), 41.

9. Richard Schickel, "Of Time and the River," *Time*, 18 December 1989, 91; Bruce Williamson, "Movies," *Playboy*, February 1990, 18; Stanley Kauffman, "On Films: Cars and Other Vehicles," *New Republic*, 22 January 1990, 26; David Stearitt, "Hollywood Focuses on Civil Rights," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 January 1990, 10.

10. Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 25 December 1989, 76.

11. Margo Kaufman, *Clara, the Pug Who Ruled My Life* (Villard, 1998), 4; Public Enemy, "Burn, Hollywood, Burn," *Fear of a Black Planet*, Pgd/Polygram.Def Jam, 1994.

12. Eric Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch," in *The South as an American Problem*, ed. Larry Griffin. (Georgia University Press, 1995), 183; for more on race in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, see Joseph Crespino, "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch," *Southern Cultures*, 6 (Summer 2000): 9.

13. Ann duCille, *Skin Trade*. (Harvard University Press, 1996), 110, 108.

14. *Ibid.*, 112.