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LOOKING BACK

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I.

JUST OVER 30 YEARS AGO, Playwrights Horizons produced the world premiere of Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*, which met with critical acclaim as both a play and a film. Back then, *Driving Miss Daisy* was a well-mannered comedy, its cast of characters ultimately reconciled and the world made nicer for it. Today, however, *Driving Miss Daisy* is more akin to a historical document, a dispassionate register of how people once thought – and, in certain cases, still think – about race and racism in the United States. Over the past three decades, the liberatory politics of activists and theorists have seeped into the groundwaters of popular thought, making it easier, now, to see *Driving Miss Daisy* in terms of its harms: its relegation of a Black man to servitude for a white woman whose moral edification remains paramount, its ignorance of how power governs their relationship, and its imagination of interracial friendship in terms so spurious as to be, for some, fantastical. Since Daisy first crashed her Packard onstage and onscreen, the culture has invariably shifted. These shifts have prompted Playwrights Horizons to consider its relationship to *Driving Miss Daisy* anew, to ask itself: if a play it produced has caused harm, then how might it make repairs?

That Playwrights Horizons now faces such a question is due to the efforts of theater professionals – writers and designers, directors and actors – who, for years, have testified to the many damages done by performing arts institutions across the nation. Some have taken to Twitter and HowlRound, addressed national conferences, published data, given interviews, held town halls, contributed to articles. Others have written open letters collectively authored.

See, for example, the dispatches from Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) theater makers in 2020; the Coalition of Bay Area Black Women Theater Artists in 2017; members of the Middle Eastern American theater community in 2017; Ferocious Lotus Theatre Company in 2017; and the Not in Our House Chicago Theatre Community in 2016. Still others have spoken out on their own. Playwright Rhiana Yazzie of New Native Theatre wrote an open letter in 2014, as did director Clinton Turner Davis nearly two decades earlier, in 1997. These messengers, sounding the alarm in communal spaces, blasting trumpets and beating drums, are joined in their efforts by a whole host of others who have conveyed their reports in confidence, preferring carefully-worded emails, slightly-strained conversations, and anonymous surveys over public action. Whatever the route, whether through open platforms or private passages, on TV or with HR, enough messages have finally arrived at their destinations – finally enough! – and, strewn across desks, aflutter in the wings, sown like seeds between each row of red velvet seats, they must now be minded.

To be a theater today is to take seriously these messengers and their messages. But how to begin? Because the harms have been both broad and deep, the road to remedy is both long and winding. This is not a complaint. It is a sincere survey of what's come upon us; an affirmation that the work ahead is prodigious; and a recognition that the general ends (equity, justice, liberation) are currently more evident than the specific means (behaviors, practices, policies) we might use to get there. Particularly for non-profit institutions, the task of redress will involve proposals and

presentations, workshops and webinars, announcements and approvals and reallocations – the kinds of things that are subject to schedules, deadlines, delays. As with any bureaucracy, progress slows as if by necessity. It's not so hard for one person to pivot, or even for ten to ratify a new constitution. It's much trickier for a hundred people – united less by common experiences than by a shared employer – to make collective revisions to their workplace in response to external calls for change. The management of employees, the administration of programs, and the observation of a mission statement – these dynamics are not easy to amend with speed.

Still, amendments are long overdue. The stone has been overturned and its underside revealed. What this essay attempts to parse, then, are some of the minor details of the revolution, as seen, so to speak, from within the walls of the chateau under siege – I write from my seat in the artistic department of a theater now coming to terms with its power. Taking a close look at one matter in particular – the relationship between a theater and its past productions – my hope is to illuminate the intricate latticework of commitments and considerations now facing theaters, from the perspective of someone currently staffed at one. My thinking revolves around Playwrights Horizons' production of *Driving Miss Daisy*, a play likely to arouse the ire of many progressive critics of culture, including some working at the institution today. We find ourselves wondering: if our theater's past engagements have fallen out of joint with its present ideals, how are we to navigate that disjunct? What gets walked back, what sticks with us, and how do we make those calls? To whom are we, the theater, ultimately responsible? To the artists we produce, or to the audiences we serve? Which artists and which audiences?

To be clear, this essay is not a strident defense of non-profit organizations. Neither is it a barreling take-down. It is, rather, a circumspect account of the questions at hand, the decisions to be made, and the values at stake in the spinous process of accounting for past harms. I'm curious about how change happens at the scale of the institution, and so, holding tight to that query, I've found it helpful to slow down a little, to feel for the grooves and notches. I want to see what's there in the shadow of the rock, wriggling and squiggling in the soil.

II.

Driving Miss Daisy premiered at Playwrights Horizons on April 15, 1987 under the direction of Ron Lagomarsino. The cast featured Dana Ivey as Miss Daisy, Morgan Freeman as Hoke, and Ray Gill as Boolie. Awarded the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in Drama, the play was adapted into a film the following year. Directed by Bruce Beresford, and starring Jessica Tandy, Morgan Freeman, and Dan Aykroyd, the film was nominated for nine Academy Awards. At the Oscars ceremony in 1990, it won Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Makeup, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

Set during Jim Crow in Georgia, *Driving Miss Daisy* tells the story of Daisy, a Southern Jewish woman who's gotten too old to operate a car by herself. After she crashes her 1948 Packard in the neighbor's yard, her son Boolie hires a Black man, Hoke, to be her driver. As ornery as she is uptight, Daisy doesn't take kindly to the idea that she's too frail to get around on her own, nor to the idea that she's wealthy enough to afford help. Over the next quarter of a

century, however, she and Hoke develop a gentle rapport that lasts late into their lives. "You're my best friend," she tells him near the end of the film, in the midst of an episode of dementia that Hoke, all kindness and compassion, quells. "Come on, Miz Daisy," he protests. "No," she says, "Really. You are."

Since its production at Playwrights Horizons over 30 years ago, *Driving Miss Daisy* has become a cultural touchstone. But its renown is complicated. In the decades since its premiere as a play and then as a film, it's come to symbolize a genteel sort of racism, one that promises progress but smooths over the harsh realities of racial difference. This is racism dressed up as friendship, with an invitation to tea on the front porch.

There's an episode of *The Daily* called "What Hollywood Keeps Getting Wrong About Race," where host Michael Barbaro talks to critic Wesley Morris about *Driving Miss Daisy*. Barbaro identifies as Jewish, Morris as Black. The events of the play were inspired by real life: the playwright himself writes that the play is drawn from childhood memories of his Jewish grandmother and her Black chauffeur Will Coleman, whose relationship lasted for a quarter of a century. But Morris calls *Driving Miss Daisy* a "racial reconciliation fantasy," a category that also includes movies like *The Help* – starring Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer alongside Jessica Chastain, Bryce Dallas Howard, Allison Janney, and Emma Stone – from 2011, and *Green Book*, which won Best Picture at the Academy Awards in 2019. The "fantasy" in all these cases is the idea, Morris says, that "prolonged exposure to a black person is going to cure you of your racism." Barbaro pushes him on this point, asking, "Doesn't inherently spending time with people who are different than we are make us more empathetic? And why would that be anything other than a good thing?" Morris pauses, then responds:

That's a deep question. The immediate answer, though, is that it's on the terms of white people. There's nothing mutual about any of these movies, any of this work. It's not mutual at all. You aren't going into the houses and lives of these black characters. And they're presented as so good as to have no agency.... So these are movies that would say they believe in equality, but there's nothing equal about the races in them. There's an inherent imbalance. And the fantasy, of course, is just acknowledging that black people exist and giving them some lines and casting a good actor to play them is a kind of argument for equality.

As Morris points out, equality requires mutuality. Insofar as *Driving Miss Daisy* fails to recognize Hoke's humanity – his life beyond the terms of his employment – it fails to articulate a vision of true equality. "The relationship," Morris says, "is entirely conscripted as service and bound by capitalism." We only ever see Hoke while he's on the job – while he is compelled, in other words, to appease his employer. He smiles, he laughs. He is congenial. The story never acknowledges that Hoke's good nature might have something to do with his professional obligation to keep Daisy content. There are power dynamics at play here, and not only to do with financial solvency. His livelihood is dependent upon her satisfaction, yes, but also: he is a Black man living through a period of American life defined by segregation

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and the systemic disenfranchisement of Black people. Daisy’s power over Hoke is both economic and racial – both capitalist and racist.

Of course, with Hans Zimmer’s springy score clarinetting beneath and between scenes, at least in the film adaptation, it’s easy to forget all that. It’s easy to forget, for example, that even Morgan Freeman’s immense talent cannot invest the character of Hoke with genuine depth of being, however much Freeman’s agreement to play the part might seem like an endorsement of the writing, and however much his stellar performance might seem to paper over Hoke’s paper-thinness. An actor’s skill is only a pale and partial remedy for a writer’s omissions.

This problem is hardly new: in 2019, scholar Fred Moten wrote in *The Paris Review* that Shakespeare had “given Negroes a problem” by making great Black performers responsible for bringing respectability to – and finding respectability within – Othello, a Black character sprung entirely from a white imagination. The problem isn’t that Shakespeare wrote outside of his lived experience. The problem is that Shakespeare did it somewhat crudely; Moten alludes to Othello’s “vacancy,” his “soullessness,” his “poverty,” his “inauthenticity.” There’s a good deal of work an actor has to do “to care for such a radically unlovable character.” For the small but growing cohort of Black actors who have assumed that burden (for centuries, including the twentieth, Othello was played by white actors in Blackface), the stakes are higher than Shakespeare knew: for the Ira Aldridges, the Paul Robesons, the Laurence Fishburnes, the James Earl Joneses, and, more recently, the Chiwetel Ejiofor, the onus was theirs to invent and convey Othello’s nobility, dignity, and humanity – qualities that Shakespeare perhaps didn’t know were under question.

Certainly, Black actors could decline the part. But that would mean consenting to Othello’s being played by actors of less stature, or by actors of less grace, or by actors who are white, actors who know little of Blackness as lived (such as Laurence Olivier, Paul Scofield, Anthony Hopkins, Michael Gambon, and Patrick Stewart, who have all assumed the title role). To refuse the mantle of Othello is to risk someone else making a mess of him. In this way, Moten says, “black folks are enjoined to take responsibility for white fantasy and solve a problem not of their own making.” The same is true for Hoke, who became the charge of Freeman, whose artistry makes it easy to forget that Hoke remains incomplete, his life beyond chauffeuring unseen and unknown.

Of course, it’s also easy to forget that the staggering revelation at the heart of *Driving Miss Daisy* is this: that a white person can warm to a Black person. For Daisy, the unthinkable becomes thinkable. No matter that she remains aloof

to her power and ignorant of Hoke’s world – his yearnings, his regrets, his joys. She calls what they have “friendship.” They’ve no need to reckon with the many forces that have so differently defined their personal horizons of possibility. She realizes, at the end of her life, that Hoke is worthy of her love – that the color of his skin can no longer disqualify him from that most fundamental of affinities, which ought to be given freely, with a sense of abundance.

To be sure, many viewers are familiar with these perspectives, and they have been ever since the film first came out. At the Oscars ceremony in 1990, actress Kim Basinger went off-script as she introduced the nominees for Best Picture: “We’ve got five great films here, and they’re great for one reason: because they tell the truth. But there is one film missing from this list that deserves to be on it, because, ironically, it might tell the biggest truth of all. And that’s [Spike Lee’s] *Do the Right Thing*.” *Driving Miss Daisy* won, of course, but not without criticism.

What a story like *Driving Miss Daisy* asks us to contend with is this: does a “racial reconciliation fantasy” do more harm than good? Does its tale of interracial friendship offer false visions of progress and harmony? Would it have been better for the play – and then the film – to never have existed at all?

Or, despite some of its errors, is there value to be netted in its well-meaning sentiments (interracial relationships are good), in its compensated employment of a Black actor (“I make a living doing this, at least,” Freeman told *The New York Times* in 1987), and even in its knack for starting conversations (here we are, after all)? Actress Mary Lucy Bivins, who was set to reprise her role as Daisy for the fifth time at Barter Theatre in Virginia in April 2020, describes *Driving Miss Daisy* as “a beautiful story that’s told with heart and humor.” Her love for the play is palpable, and her reasoning recalls Michael Barbaro’s provocation to Wesley Morris on *The Daily*. “If you care very much about people accepting differences,” Bivins says, “and learning to live together in – at the very least – harmony and – at the very most and best – friendship, then this story is as universal and timeless and important today as it ever was.” *Driving Miss Daisy* might espouse fantasies of interracial companionship, as Morris maintains, but Bivins isn’t necessarily off-base to treasure the characters’ amity and goodwill.

A more sympathetic reading of the story might also point us towards Daisy’s obstacles as well as to her triumphs. Daisy had spent much of her life assimilating into the norms of a racist social order, norms that would require extensive unlearning. Writing for the *Times* in 1987, Leslie Bennetts observed that the play – which she called “one of the season’s biggest Off Broadway successes” – tells of “two radically dissimilar people who began their association in mutual suspicion and mistrust and gradually, over many years, developed a profound but almost completely unacknowledged love for each other.” Alongside Morris’s apt criticisms, then, there must be room to recognize the considerable amount of time Daisy and Hoke spent together, earning one another’s trust over the course of two-and-a-half decades in a social climate that might have foreclosed the possibility of their friendship before it even began. I want to be careful, here, not to exonerate the story of its lacunae where Hoke and his life are concerned. Nor do I want to suggest that Daisy and Hoke’s love for each other is flawless and their trust absolute. But I do want to insist on the significance of Daisy’s cultural conditioning and the

many years that it took for her to consider replacing old habits of thought with more progressive alternatives. As Uhry told Bennetts, “those stereotypes” of Southern whites “running around being openly hostile and rude toward black people” were not exactly true – that animus was hidden behind “good manners,” simmering “under the surface.” Given the widespread anti-Blackness of the Jim Crow era, there must be some acknowledgement of Daisy’s barriers to understanding, and some room left for the possibility of her genuine transformation, however modest.

All this said, I admit that I find it difficult to launch a more generous defense of *Driving Miss Daisy*. Even if Daisy’s change of heart is an important first step, there are good reasons not to celebrate her redemption. The exigencies of justice, made visible by movements like Black Lives Matter, feel too immense to see her growth as anything but too little and too late.

III.

Of course, no messenger has delivered news of these exact harms to Playwrights Horizons. No one has reached out to our offices, demanding that we reconsider *Driving Miss Daisy* in light of its dated politics. No, the call to examine our history – and the productions that comprise it – arises from more sweeping calls to account. The “We See You, White American Theater” initiative, for example, articulates its observations in the present perfect tense, a grammatical mode that expresses past actions with present consequences. “We have watched you,” its authors intone, citing long histories of racism. The work of remedy and reform, therefore, requires that Playwrights Horizons own its former as well as its ongoing abuses, not just in the ways it’s worked but also in the stories it’s told.

At this point, a number of questions come to mind that range across guilt and responsibility, shame and accountability, public atonement and private growth, and the pursuit of justice in practice:

I wonder what qualifies as an instance of harm. Which of our stories have done injury? Which treatments of which people warrant apology, and to whom? Must the wounds be of a certain size or severity, or is no wound too small or too slight to receive acknowledgement? Can wounds be measured in such ways at all?

I wonder who is at fault. Is it incumbent upon Playwrights Horizons to name every offense and name itself the offender in each case?

With regards to older productions like *Driving Miss Daisy*, are we who staff Playwrights Horizons today responsible for the choices of those who were here before us, and if so, then how? Or can we declare ourselves a new theater? Taking into account new hires and eventual resignations, haven’t we already, over time, become a new theater?

I wonder who determines fault. As the producing organization, is Playwrights Horizons uniquely unsuited to the task of reviewing its own production history? Is this a project better undertaken by a journalist or scholar, someone outside the organization, a neutral party, a bystander? Are our interests and allegiances too many? Are we too close to the problem to be of any use at all?

Or, as the producing organization, is Playwrights Horizons the best candidate to discuss its production history with both reverence and specificity? Who else is balancing these thousands of spiraling concerns? Who

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else cares as much as we do about our values, our artists, and our audiences? Furthermore, who else is responsible for our actions and their consequences?

I wonder what is due to the artists of the productions under review. As we embark upon this work of looking back, should we look back in anger – or with patience? Is complete disavowal necessary? Is compromise possible? Can we give criticism with affection? Or should we sever ties? Is this the time to burn bridges?

Would such an audit be better handled through private conversations with the various parties involved, in order to cultivate an atmosphere of trust, so that admonitions might be better received and vulnerability permitted? Behind closed doors, is there more latitude to handle things with levity and even tenderness? Are private conversations the stuff of lasting relationships and genuine accountability? Or do private conversations cater too much to the comforts of those who perpetrated the harm?

Is the goal to change the artist’s mind? What if the artist has already recognized the harm? What if the artist has already changed their mind? Can they work in this town again? What if the artist has died? What if we’ve lost touch with them? What if we hope to produce them again someday? Can we?

I wonder what is due to audiences. Are statements of apology empty? Or is there value to saying, “I’m sorry,” in a place where everyone can hear it? Is it not everyone we have harmed, after all, since oppression harms even the oppressors?

Would a moderated panel, with time for questions and answers, be helpful? Should we host a series of debates, held over the course of several months, or even years? Would we record it? Print the transcripts and post them on a new page of our website and hope people click? Who would speak? What if an artist declined to participate in such a forum (or tribunal)?

Do we even need to look back at all? Is it enough, moving forward, for Playwrights Horizons to uplift the long-silenced and overlooked, to put real effort into programming plays that offer images and ideas charged with forward-thinking visions of society?

I wonder about the theater itself. Do we heap shame upon ourselves by recounting our offenses aloud? Do we heap shame upon ourselves by not?



IV.

So here we are. As the theater that produced it 30 years ago, what do we do with a play like *Driving Miss Daisy*? What responsibility do we bear to ourselves, to the playwright, to the play, and to those it harmed?

At one extreme, there are those who would advocate for its immediate expulsion from canons and syllabi, who would brook no patience for our loyalties to the writer, who would demand that we renounce our ties once and for all. This approach is swift and sure, its justice protean. Burn the house down and don't look back.

At another extreme, there are those who would say, "What's done is done," or, "Let bygones be bygones," or, "C'est la vie." There's no dearth of idioms for sloughing off the past while, somehow, preserving its norms. Forgive and forget and, whatever you do, don't look back.

This essay does look back, however imperfectly; and it asks theaters to look back as well. In writing it, I have tried to offer criticisms of one of Playwrights Horizons' past productions while, at the same time, noting what's tricky about doing so. After all, who can rightfully give criticism, and to what end? I was not there when Playwrights Horizons produced *Driving Miss Daisy*; I have not spoken to the playwright; and I cannot presume to speak for my colleagues, let alone for the theater as a whole.

These caveats accepted, what I write towards is the idea that looking back begins the work of repair. I write towards the idea that institutions might revisit their own histories with a spirit of curiosity rather than condemnation; that such revisitations are necessarily fraught but necessary to pursue; and that the path forward depends on our capacity to see clearly the path we've travelled thus far. I write

towards the idea, too, that there exist alternatives to tweets and call-outs; that criticism is not the purview solely of critics but also of theaters; and that the end game has less to do with scrambling onto the right side of history than with slowing down and seeing what we've left in our wake.

Where this essay lacks some courage is in the object it's taken for its lesson. *Driving Miss Daisy* is not a recent headline. With three decades of hindsight, the passage of time has made it less controversial a subject and, therefore, a less acute example of harm. The more urgent work lies in looking back across shorter distances, to those plays in recent memory, which live closer to our present selves.

Still, *Driving Miss Daisy* has served, I hope, not as an easy target of critique but as a conduit for conversation about harms and how to address them. The violences of race and racism, in particular, are sometimes clear as day but often swathed in shadow and pall. While pieces like *Driving Miss Daisy* open portals into this strange landscape, criticism allows us to map its topographies, making *race* something that can be seen and *racism* something that can be talked about, turned over, and reckoned with. Though criticism might sting, it's not all bad. To give and receive criticism is to fortify social bonds: these are acts of optimism. Things might feel tense for a while, but the path towards each other is there, somewhere beneath the rubble. A

(Page 60 and above) Dana Ivey and Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy* at Playwrights Horizons (1987). Photo by Bob Marshak.