

Preface to *Driving Miss Daisy*
by the playwright



There was a real Miss Daisy. She was a friend of my grandmother's in Atlanta, back in the forties when I was a child. She was a "maiden lady" as we called it then, the last of a big family, and she lived in what I remember as a spooky old Victorian house. There was a Hoke, too. He was the sometime bartender at our German-Jewish country club, and, I believe, he supplemented his income by bartending at private parties around town. And Boolie...well, I didn't really know him, but he was the brother of my dear Aunt Marjorie's friend Rosalie. They were real people, al right, but I have used only their names in creating the three characters in *Driving Miss Daisy*. I wanted to use names that seemed particular to the Atlanta I grew up in. The actual characters, though, are made up of little bits and pieces of my childhood. Quite a bit of my grandmother, Lena Guthman Fox, and her four older sisters have gone into Miss Daisy herself. And I guess my mother, Alene Fox Uhry, is in there too. Hoke is based on my grandmother's chauffeur, Will Coleman, but also on Bill and Riley and Marvin and Pete and other black chauffeurs I knew in those days. And Boolie is so many pieces of so many men I know (including me, I suppose) that it would be hard for me to say what exactly comes from what.

I find that there is unusual interest in my offstage character Florine, Boolie's wife. Many people have said (by mail or in person) that they know Florine, she is their aunt, their cousin, their old friend from home, etc., etc., etc., and who was she really? I will never tell.

When I wrote this play I dreamed I would be writing an introduction to it because I never though it would get this far. The original schedule was a five-week run at Playwright's Horizons, a New York nonprofit theatre, in the Spring of 1987, and I made sure various family members from Atlanta would get to town during that period. The theatre seated seventy-four people. Just the right size, I thought, for a little play that could surely have appeal only to me, my family, and a few other southerners. To my amazement, the appeal was much wider. When the five weeks was up, the engagement was extended for another five weeks, and by then the demand for tickets was so great that we had to move to a bigger theatre.

Flash forward a year and a half. Now there are several companies playing and many more productions planned in all parts of the world. I am in the process of writing the screenplay. I have won the Pulitzer Prize. Even as I write these words they seem unbelievable to me. When I wonder how all this happened (which I do a lot!) I can come up with only one answer. I wrote what I knew to be the truth and people have recognized it as such.

And I have been remarkably lucky. My wife, Joanna, has believed in me for thirty years. How can you ever thank somebody for that? And my daughters, Emily, Elizabeth, Kate and Nell, have always been loving and understanding about what I do for a living. Flora Roberts, my agent for twenty-five years, has always been my friend too, as well as a wonderful sounding board. I must also thank Jane Harmon, Robert Waldman, Andre Bishop, Ron Lagomarsino, Dana Ivey, Morgan Freeman, and Ray Gill for caring so much.

This has been one helluva ride!

-Alredy Uhry

from Uhry, Alfred. *Driving Miss Daisy*. New York: Theatre Publications Group, 1988.

Milestones in Southern States Race Relations, 1940s-1970s

1940 - Benjamin O. Davis, Sr.

- first African American US Army general
- worked to allow black and white troops to serve together in the army

1946 - Mahalia Jackson

- recorded "Move On Up a Little Higher" on Apollo Records
- song sold over 8 million copies, and established Jackson as a pioneer of gospel music

1947 - Jackie Robinson

- first African American Major League baseball player
- played for the Brooklyn Dodgers during his 10-year Hall of Fame career

1950 - Gwendolyn Brooks

- first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, for a book of poems called "Annie Allen"

1955 - Rosa Parks

- refused to give her seat up to a white man on the bus

1956 - Nat "King" Cole

- first African American to host a weekly TV show: The Nat King Cole Show (NBC)

1960 - Ruby Bridges

- first African American at an all-white elementary school
- at 6 years old, Ruby entered William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans
- she was the only child in school that first day, and for several days after that, as all the white parents left their children at home

1963 - Martin Luther King, Jr.

- delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech to over 250,000 protesters at Washington DC's Lincoln Memorial

1968 - Arthur Ashe

- first African American male tennis player to win the US Open

"You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise."

-Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" (1986)



Jews, African Americans, and Prejudice in Atlanta, Georgia

Some historians argue that prejudice against African Americans shielded Jews in the South from discrimination.

Certainly this is the case in comparison with American racism and European outbreaks against the Jews culminating in the Holocaust. Yet **Jews and blacks have been linked ambiguously in the South since the mid-nineteenth century**, and the eras of the greatest racism coincide with the rising specter of anti-Semitism.

In Atlanta, as elsewhere, **some Jewish peddlers, merchants, and landlords conducted business with African Americans**, often extending credit and courtesies contrary to common usage. **Jews also were the first to hire blacks as clerks and in other positions.** These not only were good business practices but also reflected a sense of association brought about by similar historical experiences of persecution. **Although the Jews were in a better position to become upwardly mobile, Jewish immigrants and African Americans shared poverty and resided in the same neighborhood** during the early twentieth century. At the same time, more-affluent Jews employed African Americans as domestic servants. The empathetic/patronizing nature of such relationships was dramatized in Roy Hoffman's novel *Almost Family* (1983) and Alfred Uhry's play *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987).

The Atlanta race riot of 1906 and a series of strikes against the Elsas family's Fulton Bag and Cotton Company, at one time the city's largest industrial employer, formed part of the backdrop for the **Leo Frank incident, possibly the most dramatic case of anti-Semitism in American history.** In 1913 Frank, a Jew raised in New York, was accused of murdering Mary Phagan, an employee of the Atlanta pencil factory he managed. Frank was convicted in a sensational trial largely on the testimony of a black janitor, Jim Conley, something virtually unprecedented in the Jim Crow South. Through his trial and appeals Frank was caricatured as the northern businessman and **Jew out to exploit young women from the rural South.** After the **commutation of his death sentence to life in prison** by Governor John Slaton, who believed him innocent, Frank was abducted from prison and **lynched** by citizens of Marietta, Phagan's hometown. Frank received a posthumous pardon in 1986. The case contributed to the founding of both the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Knights of Mary Phagan, a forerunner of the modern Ku Klux Klan. In 1915 Kriegshaber was elected president of the chamber of commerce, possibly in partial atonement for the Frank incident. Yet **the lynching shattered the sense of security felt by Atlanta's Jews**, who were routinely excluded from the city's elite social clubs. During the succeeding decades **Jews were attacked by the Klan**, the Columbians, and other right-wing groups. They were **tolerated but also singled out as different.**

Although **most Atlanta Jews remained silent concerning black rights**—the majority out of fear, but some out of acceptance of southern racial mores—**a few condemned discrimination during the 1920s and 1930s**, especially through the Atlanta Urban League. When Marx's successor at the Temple, Jacob Rothschild, provided leadership against discrimination, in 1958 the synagogue joined the ranks of those bombed. Unlike the Frank case, strong condemnation of the Temple bombing by Mayor William B. Hartsfield and *Atlanta Constitution* editor Ralph McGill, and dramatic community support, helped the wounds heal quickly. On the other hand, when Rich's Department Store and Leb's delicatessen were singled out by sit-in demonstrators during the early 1960s, the latter became a symbol of recalcitrance. Still, thereafter black-Jewish relations seemed to remain more positive on the local level than nationally, as partly reflected in the **establishment of the Black-Jewish Coalition** and numerous examples of positive interaction in government, and in 1962 doctors Irving and Marvin Goldstein built the Americana, the first integrated hotel in the city.

Mark K. Bauman, Atlanta Metropolitan College (March 15, 2004)

About the Playwright



Alfred Fox Uhry (born December 3, 1936) is an American playwright and screenwriter. He has received three of the most prestigious American awards for dramatic writing: the Academy Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Tony Award.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Uhry graduated from Brown University, and moved to New York City. Uhry's early work for the stage was as a lyricist and librettist for a number of commercially unsuccessful musicals, including *America's Sweetheart* about Al Capone and a revival of *Little Johnny Jones* starring Donny Osmond. His first collaboration with Robert Waldman was the 1968 musical *Here's Where I Belong*, which closed after one performance. They had considerably better success with *The Robber Bridegroom*, which was mounted on Broadway in both 1975 and 1976, enjoyed a year-long national tour, and garnered Uhry his first Tony nomination.

Driving Miss Daisy (1987) is the first in what is known as his "Atlanta Trilogy" of plays, all set during the first half of the 20th century.

The second of the trilogy, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1996), is set in 1939 during the premiere of the film *Gone with the Wind*. When produced on Broadway, it received the Tony Award for Best Play.

The third was a 1998 musical called *Parade*, about the 1913 lynching of Jewish factory manager Leo Frank. The libretto earned him a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical.



Photo: Kevin Clark