

Westword review

Driving Miss Daisy at the Barth Hotel is one of the best nights of theater in Denver

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I'd almost describe [Driving Miss Daisy](#) as a courtly piece. Written in the 1980s, the play deals with racism, but in a muted, thoughtful way. There's no big drama, no didacticism, no major political message, just an examination of the changing lives of three people in Georgia as they move through the years from 1948 to 1973, through the process of aging and the small gestures that shape and define human relationships.



Michael Ensminger

Billie McBride and Dwayne Carrington in *Driving Miss Daisy*.

At the play's beginning, 72-year-old Daisy Werthan has just totaled her car. Her son Boolie, a successful businessman, is convinced it's no longer safe for her to drive and — over her strong protests — hires a driver for her, Hoke. The woman is no picnic. She's willful, argumentative and spoiled; she drives Hoke crazy with backseat driving and a stream of irrational commands. The racist themes may come through quietly and sideways, but they're most distinctly there. When she's not suspecting him of stealing, Miss Daisy orders Hoke around like a child. The Werthans are Jewish, and Hoke has his opinions about Jews, too, though they're more benign. He likes working for them, and disputes the stereotype of Jews as greedy and money-grubbing. It's Miss Daisy herself who makes fun of her Jewish daughter-in-law's nose. Even if you've never seen the play before, or the 1989 film with [Jessica Tandy](#) and [Morgan Freeman](#), you know a bond will develop between Daisy and Hoke. But when it does, it's presented with a refreshing absence of sentimentality.

There really couldn't be a better setting for this play than the Barth, an elegantly faded downtown hotel that's now a home for low-income elderly and disabled people, run by Senior Housing Options. The lobby is shabby, but still beautiful. In this venue, the sense of time passing and the way hot concerns and sentiments can be mellowed by a kind of

resigned wisdom becomes particularly acute. Although the audience is almost as well-lit as the stage and the set is minimal, the direction, by [Ashlee Temple](#), is skilled. And sound designer El Armstrong introduces an evocative series of songs to indicate the passing of the years, from [Eartha Kitt's](#) "Santa Baby" to the Kingston Trio singing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone."

I've always believed all you need for excellent theater — besides a worthwhile script — is good acting, and Temple has cast three of Denver's strongest: [Billie McBride](#), [Sam Gregory](#) and [Dwayne Carrington](#). Not only that, but these very different performers work together with sensitivity, mutual generosity and respect. We've seen the not-quite-thousand faces of Gregory in several venues, including the Denver Center. His good-natured Boolie is both businesslike and charming, wise to racist realities but unwilling to challenge them. He loves his impossible mother while remaining fully aware of just how infuriating she can be. McBride is every bit as pinch-lipped and annoying at the beginning as Daisy should be, and when the woman softens, McBride makes it clear that this softening is caused as much by growing need and infirmity — along with Hoke's simple proximity — as by any growth in awareness and empathy. And still, she makes us see Daisy's humanity, and care for her. If any of the characters displays real understanding, it's Hoke — though for all his wisdom and compassion, he also knows how to take care of his own interests. Carrington gives Hoke depth and dignity without making him one of those too-noble-to-be-true black figureheads.

When I visit the Barth for these annual productions, I'm always struck by the down-to-earth warmth of the staff members who usher in the audience, guide a couple of residents through a brief welcoming introduction, and keep a watchful eye out for disruptions as the production unfolds. At the play's opening, we're told that *Driving Miss Daisy* is an important fundraiser for Senior Housing Options, which runs several facilities in Colorado. Like so many organizations these days, SHO constantly finds itself forced to do more with less. Money raised from this production will pay for over-the-counter medications and provide computers for clients to find forms and government information, connect with libraries, and communicate with friends and family. Supporting this good work is reason enough to see *Driving Miss Daisy* — but it's not the primary reason. Which, simply, is that this is one of the best evenings of theater this town has offered recently, and you don't want to miss it.