

Driving Miss Daisy pleasant, for an off-night

Driving Miss Daisy
Alfred Uhry
Citadel Shoctor Theatre
through December 24

review by James Ingram

Agreeable. Pleasant. Enjoyable. To borrow from Paul Simon, "Alright, in a sort of a limited way for an off-night." They aren't negative words, but at the same time they don't exactly get the juices flowing. *Driving Miss Daisy*, a play by Atlantan Alfred Uhry now on at the Shoctor, is an agreeable, pleasant, enjoyable little comedy, performed by an exceptional cast, all of which is good. But it isn't really all that much more, which is something of a disappointment, given the potential of its subject matter.

Daisy Werthan is a tenacious, elderly Jewish widow whose premature demolition of a brand new Packard heralds the end of her driving career, although she is loath to admit it. Her son Boolie, an affable and successful businessman, hires a chauffeur on her behalf, whom she pointedly ignores on the grounds that she is too poor to enjoy such excess, preferring to maintain her independence by taking the trolley. After a week of quiet insistence by the dignified and only somewhat less aged driver, Hoke Coleburn, Daisy finally concedes. Gradually, over 25 years and a great many unassuming yet humorous episodes, the two learn to tolerate, respect, depend upon, and finally like one another.

The story is full of opportunities to explore attitudes toward race and class in the post-war South, most of which Uhry misses, choosing instead to assume a smaller, more personal focus. The intriguing twist on the old theme of southern black-white relations, with white being in this case Jewish, is never fully explored, except by way of conversational, indirect comments by characters. Daisy noisily decries her daughter-in-law's public and excessive celebration of Christmas, which she sees as toadying to social acceptance by Christians. Hoke forces her to see a parallel she would rather avoid when he relates an



Daisy (Rita Howell) is chastised by Boolie (Vince Metcalfe) in *Driving Miss Daisy*.

incident of anti-Semitic violence to a Klan-style murder he saw decades earlier. The points that are made, though sometimes poignant, do little more than scrape the surface of the issues involved, and as a result

the characters are well developed, while the themes suffer a bit.

The shortcomings of the script are more than made up for by the acting. While remaining suitably understated, the cast of

three do all they can with the material. Daisy, played by Rita Howell, is a defiant, obstinate, humourless little old lady, unwilling to admit to either prejudice or wealth and unwilling to make any concessions to time or to reality. Maintaining the dull doggedness of the primary school teacher she once was, her part is little more than an unrelenting barrage of complaints against her son, her chauffeur, and the general deterioration of the world. Howell is particularly successful in showing her growing affection for Hoke, while not in any way openly displaying it. And as she ages, from 72 to 97, she mellows not one bit, although Howell's depiction of the increasing infirmity of age in the last few scenes are a small masterpiece.

Hoke, portrayed by Errol Slue, is a wonderful foil, nearly as stubborn as Miss Daisy, though poor, uneducated, and far more reasonable. Despite his station, he refuses to surrender any part of his dignity, and, as much as he needs the job, he is just as likely to order his mistress around as the reverse. Slue's triumph in the role is creating a character that, despite his illiteracy or lack of sophistication, deserves Daisy's and our respect from the outset. And like Howell, he makes the many humorous moments in this very funny play work by underplaying the humour and remaining firmly in character. James Metcalfe, as Boolie, is perfect as the urbane, personable publisher whose big-city liberalism we begin to distrust in comparison to the far more down-to-earth views of the two main characters.

In the end, Frances Hyland's production is a warm, fluent, and easily digestible 90 minutes of short incidents. While the jokes are neither side-splittingly funny nor startlingly original, they are so well done by the cast that you hardly notice. And while the play is far from gripping, it is engaging and certainly not boring. *Driving Miss Daisy* is a play that doesn't set out to do very much, but does it very well. In the end it may be described as ideal holiday fare: light, entertaining, even gently touching. Just don't expect it to be more than it is.

Chalk Circle mesmerizes crowd

Chalk Circle
Dinwoodie Lounge
Friday, December 1

review by Jim Knutsen

When you pay gross amounts of money to see a band play live, you expect more than just an arrogant regurgitation of LPs and videos. You expect to see the musicians ply their craft with enthusiasm and perfection. You expect to hear how the band feels about the audience and the venue. You expect your money's worth. Above all, you expect

—Every song was beat out as though it held considerable importance to the band.—

the band to entertain you.

At Dinwoodie on Friday night, Chalk Circle delivered.

They delivered with confidence, near-perfection, and enthusiasm. Tait's unmistakably strong and consistent vocals, accompanied by his healthy charisma, kept the audience attentive. Although most of the attention was focused on Tait, occasionally Brad Hopkins (on bass) stole the show while hopping around like a child with a new toy or, shall I say, a musician with a new album.

Dinwoodie was but one of Chalk Circle's stops on a tour of western Canada to pro-

mote their new album, *As the Crow Flies*. Most of the material in their set came from this album. However, the band included about half of *Mending Wall* and just a few songs from their first album. Overall, the set was well chosen but their was one unforgivable omission, the song "My Artificial Sweetener." Tait himself admitted to me that axing this particular song was an unpopular move according to fans across Canada.

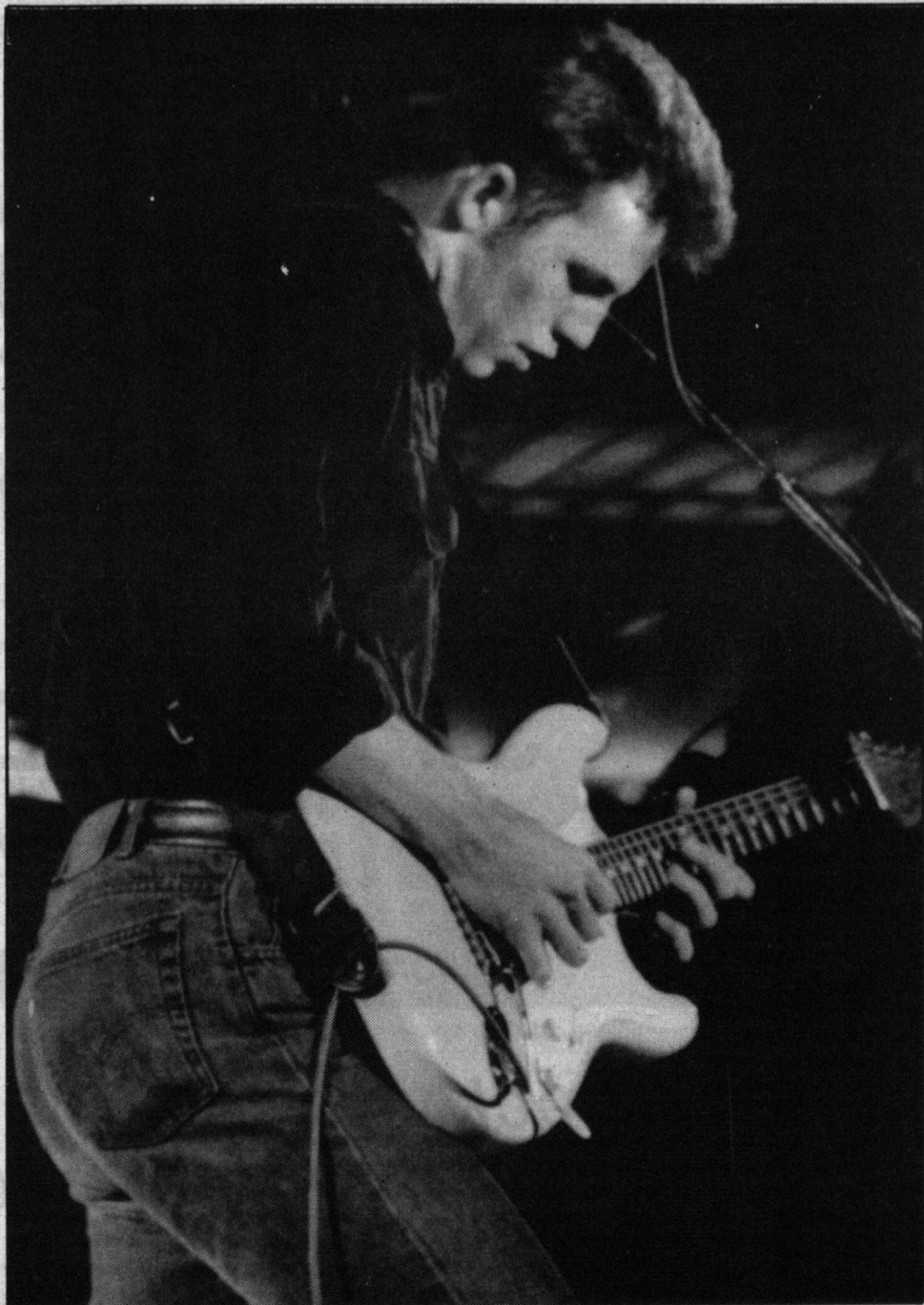
During the set, Chalk Circle didn't just play through any song. Every song was beat out as though it held considerable importance to the band. "20th Century Boy" and "This Morning" were pounded out with intense vigor and seemed to carry more than just the 'umph' that live performance holds.

The song "Sons and Daughters" seemed to particularly mesmerize the audience. The audience practically stopped moving (a feat for the usual Dinwoodie crowd) to fully appreciate the depth of the song. Tait introduced this piece as a song about two of his friends who camp up near James Bay every year. After the gig, Tait explained to me that it was an entirely fictitious story set in the future. "It's about two campers," Tait explained, "who, when they get to James Bay, are upset because they find that the Americans have switched the flow of water so that they can have the fresh water."

Little dancing went on at this show simply because Chalk Circle's performance and writing encourages almost complete captivation. This band wants you to sit back, listen, and enjoy. That is exactly what happened Friday night.

Included in the modern miracle of a low ticket price (eight bills a head) was a great opening band, Edmonton's own One Eyed Wendy. These boys warmed up the crowd successfully with their stylized metallic blues. My only criticism is with the band's weak vocals which couldn't sustain the piercing guitars.

Chalk Circle does what every band should try to do. They perform with a youthful vitality and deal with provocative emotions other than mere love and hate.



Chalk Circle's Chris Tait picks his guitar while mesmerizing the crowd at Dinwoodie last Friday.