
THE TALKIES



BLACK AND WHITE IN COLOR

by Bruce Bawer

For weeks now, a movie theater near my home has been playing *Glory*, the much-lauded movie about the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the first black regiment in the Civil War. The movie is doing very good business there, and much of the credit should doubtless go to the New York City Board of Education: for whenever I walk by that theater at noon or thereabouts on a weekday, I find myself in a crowd of high school students, mostly black, who are waiting to see the picture. Yep, you heard right: at a time when American schools—especially those in the inner cities—are graduating kids who can't read, write, or find the United States on a map, teachers (in New York City, at least) are hauling their classes to the movies during school hours.

Presumably, the idea behind these midday movie-theater trips is to use *Glory* as an educational tool—to make history come alive for students, and to give the black kids pride in their heritage. There's nothing wrong with these goals, I suppose, although (a) making history come alive for kids is hardly of any use if they don't also learn the facts of history and come to understand them, and (b) pride in something over which one has no control—whether it's one's sex, race, ethnic background, or national origin—seems to me a less meaningful commodity than it's sometimes cracked up to be.

Or maybe New York's high school teachers have been reading Hendrik Hertzberg, who in a recent issue of the *New Republic* wrote passionately about the experience of seeing *Glory* in "the cozy screening room of the Motion Picture Association of America." Hertzberg came away convinced that *Glory*, by illustrating "that the Civil War was a revolutionary war, that black soldiers were freedom fighters in that war, and that they were all the more heroic because they not only fought but had to fight to fight . . . could do more to alleviate the alienation of young blacks from the 'mainstream' than any

amount of . . . curricular victimology."

The other day, in an attempt to test Hertzberg's theory, I went to see *Glory* at a little past noon on a weekday. It was not an affair to warm a Hertzberg's heart. When Trip (Denzel Washington), a truculent ex-slave, began to deliver the movie's obligatory and improbable Big Speech, in which he expressed a prescient skepticism about postbellum race relations and proclaimed stirringly that he was fighting not for the white man's Union but for himself, the high school kids who were seated all around me grew bored and rambunctious, and jabbered noisily among themselves. When Trip tormented his fellow soldier Thomas (André Braugher), an intelligent, Emerson-reading Bostonian, the kids hooted delightedly, showing no empathy whatsoever for Thomas's poignant, acutely ironic position as a privileged member of society who has relinquished his cherished freedom only to find himself in the company of fellow blacks who seem thoroughly alien to him. And the kids laughed, too, when the seemingly hard-hearted Trip stood up, on the eve of battle, and, choking back tears, told his fellow soldiers that he loved them.

The only portions of the movie that drew as enthusiastic a response as the pre-movie soft-drink commercial—in

which an eminent basketball player leaped up and, to the cheers and applause of the entire audience, slammed a six-pack of Coke into a treehouse—were the hideously graphic battle sequences. The kids savored these episodes: they relished every thrust of a bayonet, every bullet in a chest, every exploding shell, every flying limb. It didn't seem to matter to them who was being sliced and diced, or for what cause, so long as there was a generous display of blood and guts. Plainly, they hadn't enjoyed anything so much since *Rambo*. (To be sure, there were demurrers. When the movie ended, a girl sitting near me shook her head at all the carnage. "I hate this kind of movie!" she declared.)

If I've gone on so extensively about the audience reaction to *Glory*, it's because this film has been acclaimed—not only by Hertzberg, but by many well-meaning white liberals—for something other than its artistic or entertainment value; they've celebrated it largely because, like Hertzberg, they figure it must be inspiring to blacks, especially to disaffected young members of the "underclass." But popular culture is not going to save these kids. On the contrary, it's part of

the problem: these kids' lives, as a rule, are already tragically circumscribed by rap music and slasher movies and MTV, by aggressive sounds and images with little or no thought content. Far from making them think, a movie like *Glory*, with all its grisly combat sequences, is experienced by them as simply one more raucous, belligerent, visceral event.

This is not to say that *Glory* is without merit. It is true, however, that the only surprising thing about this film is how thoroughly unsurprising it is: the characters, the conflicts, the big scenes are all exactly what you'd expect. In addition to Washington's Angry Young Slave and Braugher's Genteel Negro, the 54th contains one Wise Old Trooper (Morgan Freeman) and one Good-Natured Innocent (Jihmi Kennedy). The 24-year-old leader of the regiment, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick), whose parents are longtime abolitionists, is uncomplicatedly earnest and upstanding—a regular little Eagle Scout—and the obstacles he has to overcome are predictable: the jeers of white soldiers (which, of course, turn into cheers by film's end), the unwillingness of a narrow-minded supply officer to provide his men with shoes, the disinclination of the War Department to send black troops into battle.

There is, moreover, an oddly mechanical, low-voltage quality to the way the film's writer, Kevin Jarre, and its director, Edward Zwick, set up and resolve these conflicts. Indeed, if it weren't for the wonderfully staged and highly charged battle sequences, one might confuse *Glory* with one of those solemn, plodding biographical dramas, with titles like "Galileo: A Man and His Telescope," that you run across now and then on educational TV. Certainly the film's worst failing is that Shaw—thanks, largely, to Broderick's lack of range, presence, and moral weight—never grows as a character; and the film itself, excessively mindful of its Good Intentions, too often shares his empty earnestness.

The film's other major roles, by contrast, are remarkably well served by



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the performers. Schematically routine though their parts may be, Washington, Braugher, Kennedy, and (especially) Freeman all turn in riveting, beautifully shaped performances, lending depth and nuance to characters that might easily have been rendered as caricatures. And Freddie Francis's cinematography makes striking use of light and mist and shadow without being either too overpowering or inappropriately pretty. (The camerawork often reminds one of Francis's equally impressive work in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.) Just one question: Why is this movie called *Glory*? The whole point, I should think, is that these soldiers are *not* fighting for glory; they're fighting for a cause.

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Driving *Miss Daisy*, the Oscar-nominated film which has been adapted by Alfred Uhry from his play and directed by Bruce Beresford, is as gentle as *Glory* is brutal. The story couldn't be simpler: it's the late 1940s in Atlanta, and a feisty, seventyish Jewish widow, Mrs. Daisy Werthan (Jessica Tandy), has reached the point at which she can't drive anymore. Over her objections, her son Boolie (Dan Aykroyd), who runs the lucrative family cotton mills, hires her a wise, easy-going black chauffeur named Hoke Colburn (Morgan Freeman). Miss Daisy resents Hoke, and for a while refuses to get in the car with him; when she finally does relent, she nags him mercilessly about his driving. Gradually, however, she comes to like and respect him, and to rely upon his companionship; and over the years (for Miss Daisy and Hoke stay together for a quarter of a century) a genuine affection develops between them.

And that's pretty much it. There are no surprises, no sensational turning points, no grand sentimental scenes: along with Beresford's *Tender Mercies* (1982), this has got to be one of the most spare, understated movies ever made. Like *Tender Mercies*, however, *Driving Miss Daisy* is miraculously affecting—and I mean miraculously; for though it moves modestly and unhurriedly from episode to episode, taking care that every word and gesture comes across as utterly natural and unmagnified, it packs an unprepared-for punch at the end that does seem rather magical. It's a textbook demonstration of the fact that, even in the most notoriously immoderate of all genres, less can be more, and that—given an honest, humane, and intelligent script, a company of dexterous and discerning actors, and a sensitive, compassionate director with a first-rate eye for illuminating detail—a film's paucity of incident can be more than compen-

sated for by a credible and captivating richness of character.

And what unforgettable characters they are. Tandy brings to her performance as Miss Daisy the same capacity for tight-lipped toughness that, forty-five years ago, made her such a magnificently shrewish spouse to the long-suffering Gregory Peck in *The Valley of Decision*. But Miss Daisy is no shrew. She is, rather, an outsider in her society, a thoroughgoing Southern lady who nonetheless, simply because she's Jewish, will never seem *completely* Southern to her fellow born-and-bred Atlantans; she's also a rich woman who can't ever forget that she was born poor. This is not to say that she is ashamed of her erstwhile poverty, or that she—like Florine, her snobbish, social-climbing Georgia-JAP daughter-in-law—tries to hide her Jewishness. Far from it. But her exotic status *has* made her vigilant and wary and distrustful; she's on guard in a way that the good-natured Boolie, who was born into wealth, is not. If she's grown a tough hide, it's because she's felt a need for it.

Hoke has strength, too. And he has pride—*real* pride, the sort that's grounded in a quiet and amply justified sense of self-worth, that makes moral distinctions but doesn't lash out at each perceived slight, that's able to recognize and forgive human frailties for what they are. (This is true, too, of Rawlins, Freeman's otherwise very different character in *Glory*.) Hoke is also blessed with a marvelous sense of humor; he laughs readily, finding amusement where he can, laughing less at Miss Daisy, *per se*, than at the ironies and absurdities of life itself. If toughness is Miss Daisy's weapon against the pain of exclusion, laughter is his.

Both Tandy and Freeman are splendid actors—but we already knew that. The eye-opener here is Dan Aykroyd. Having floundered, in recent years, in one insipid comedy after another, the sometime Blues Brother proves himself here to be a very fine light character actor in the Jack Carson mold; he suits the film perfectly. So, for that matter, do Hans Zimmer's jaunty, good-natured score and Peter James's radiant photography. And the exemplary costumes and art direction do a phenomenal job of making one feel as if this is pre-Peachtree Center Atlanta.

Two small criticisms. First, the movie's focus tilts toward Miss Daisy—and reasonably so, since Hoke is the constant here, and she's the variable. But one does wish one knew as much about Hoke as about her. (It comes as something of a surprise, toward the end, when he turns out to have a granddaughter.) Second, there's

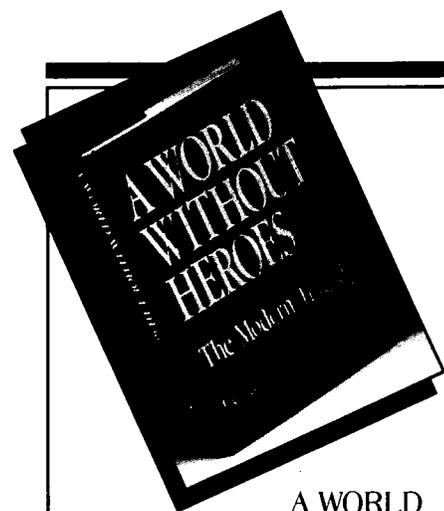
a short scene, about midway through the film, whose implications are unfortunate. During an excursion to Mobile in the 1950s, Hoke and Miss Daisy pull over for lunch, and are confronted by two patrolmen who demand to see their papers. Asked what kind of a name Werthan is, Miss Daisy explains that it's of German extraction. The car drives off, and one lawman quips: "An old nigger and an old Jew woman taking off down the road together—that is one sorry sight."

Bigot or not, would an Alabama highway cop really have said such a thing? Would he have pegged Miss Daisy as a Jew? And, if so, would he have considered the spectacle of her, Hoke, and their huge, shiny car a "sorry sight"? It seems unlikely. (If anything, he'd be envious.) What's truly dismaying about this scene, though, is that since these two cops are the most prominent gentile Caucasians in the movie, their encounter with Miss Daisy and Hoke appears to imply that affluent Jews are black people's natural allies against ignorant, less well-to-do white Protestant Southerners; and this implication, to my mind, is unfair to the many white Protestant Southerners who, despite their often deeply ingrained notion that political equality for blacks would represent a threat to their own precarious socioeconomic position, have helped in the last few decades to make the South (in the eyes of many observers) a less racially polarized place than, say, New York City.

But the highway episode runs counter to everything else in *Driving Miss Daisy*. For one of the most commendable things about the film is that, its concern with race relations notwithstanding, it recognizes that where the ethical constitution of ordinary people is concerned, nothing is (if you'll excuse the expression) black and white. When it comes to the question of race, the characters contradict and deceive themselves just as in real life. Take the Martin Luther King dinner sequence. In 1966, King comes to Atlanta to speak at a gala fund-raising dinner to which Boolie and Miss Daisy have purchased tickets. Though Boolie claims to admire King, he decides not to attend because he's worried how his fellow businessmen will react; Miss Daisy, also a declared King fan, chides Boolie for not going, but balks at his sincere proposal (hardly that of a redneck!) that she take Hoke as her escort; she finally mentions the suggestion to Hoke when the two of them are in her car, headed for the dinner, and does so in an oblique, unintentionally insulting way, provoking a rare outburst of indignation on the part of Hoke, who would clearly like to have been asked. The unpleasantness is never resolved.

A less intelligent movie would've ended the sequence with all three of them—Miss Daisy, Boolie, and Hoke—at the King dinner, basking in their bold and righteous interracial solidarity, challenging all Atlanta to reproach them. Uhry and Beresford prefer, sensibly, to keep the characters believable—human, not saintly.

Indeed, while the gradually shifting tone of the relationship between Miss



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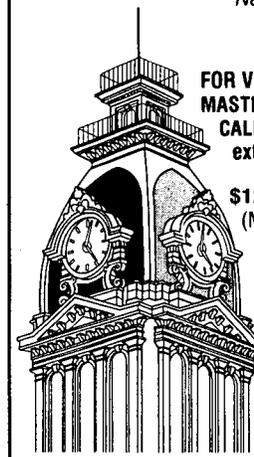
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Daisy and Hoke can be seen as a metaphor for the developing relations between the races in the South from the forties to the seventies, the filmmakers don't press this interpretation upon us. They're smart enough to recognize that

the value of *Driving Miss Daisy* lies in its particularity, in the precision with which it attends to the lives and personalities of these two individuals. It's an unapologetically "small" story, the sort that is often swallowed up helplessly on

the big screen—and the ultimate testament to its power is that it fills the screen at every moment. In a time of war and space epics, of super heroes and big-budget special effects, it's nice to be able to say that the most pro-

foundly satisfying movie in a long, long while is a quiet, unpretentious story about people and what they can mean to each other—a film about the brief, luminous moments that add up to a life. □

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



THE RUSSIAN TEA ROOM

by Richard Brookhiser

I wonder how many people learned that Russians drink tea out of glasses the same way that I did, from the Signet Classic edition of *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*? (The price on the cover of my copy is 95 cents, so I learned it a long while ago.) Ten pages into "The Kreutzer Sonata," the narrator and the man who killed his wife are settling into a long train ride side by side, and the killer offers the narrator some tea. "The tea was really like beer," I read, "but I drank a glass of it.*" At the foot of the page, the helpful mate of the asterisk explains: "*Tea in Russia is usually drunk out of tumblers."

Tea at the Russian Tea Room is drunk out of tumblers too. If it isn't made in samovars (another discovery of my high school reading) it's not for lack of equipment, for there are several dozen samovars filling strategic shelves on the restaurant's walls.

The Russian Tea Room is on 57th Street in Manhattan, just east of Carnegie Hall. "Slightly to the left of Carnegie Hall," was how their cutesy radio ads used to put it. Has that changed, in the Age of Gorbachev? If the Baltic states are allowed to secede, will the restaurant hop over the concert hall to the other side?

It sits in a townhouse, scrunched by larger neighbors. Inside the door, the general impression is one of great depth, as in a sumptuous bowling alley. The pecking order of tables seems to be: tables in the middle of the floor, lowest; banquette seats along the wall, next; curved booths along the wall, success in New York. I've never succeeded yet. The waiters, even the obvious Hispanics, all wear blouses which are meant to suggest Cossacks; the paint-

ings on the walls, which hang wherever the management forgot to put a samovar, are supposed to suggest the stuff the Hermitage sent over from its post-Impressionist collection.

I wonder what a Russian would think of the place. In my experience, East European émigrés are extraordinarily bristly when it comes to any topic having to do with their homelands. American ignorance upsets them the least; sometimes, they even take it with good grace. An American with an opinion is a different matter; unless it coincides exactly with the émigré's, the social barometer drops ominously. If the contrary point of view belongs to a fellow émigré, expect tornadoes and hail. This kind of thing pops up all the time in Nabokov: the Komarovs (a professor and his wife in *Pnin*) "would throw Russki parties every now and then, with Russki hors d'oeuvres and guitar music and more or less phony folk songs—occasions at which shy graduate students would be taught vodka-drinking rites and other stale Russianisms. . . . Only another Russian could understand the reactionary and Sovietophile blend presented by the pseudo-colorful Komarovs . . ." Sorry I asked. "Only another Russian" is a mistake, though. Nabokov should have written, "Only *one* other Russian." Some other Russian would have a slightly different fight to pick with them.

So no Russian has to come here. The reason you've come here, alcoholicly speaking, is vodka. We encountered vodka once before, at the Paradise in Brighton Beach (*TAS*, December 1988). That was a legitimate form of it: sheer alcohol, honest and efficient as a lube job. The Russian Tea Room takes a more differentiated approach, for there is actually a vodka menu. You

can order vodka from a dozen lands, as unlikely as Ireland and Israel. Be smart, and order one from Russia or Finland. The glass it comes in arrives nestled in its own bowl of ice, looking like some sort of science experiment (cold fusion?). You can also order a number of vodka drinks with Russki names. My favorite is the Pavlova, a creamy concoction which is the color of the thighs of the corps de ballet, and which tastes like mother's milk, but isn't.

You can eat well here too, but be warned—you won't have to eat again for a week. The chicken Kiev (the menu calls it by its Frenchy name, *côtelette de Kiev*) is very nice, but when your waiter slices it open for you, the butter flows like the Dnieper.

There is something Christmasy about the place, which makes it always delightful to visit, but which can also be a bit of a shock when you come in off 57th Street in August. Partly it's the color scheme: the walls, what you can see of them between paintings and samovars, are a deep, piny green. Partly it's because the management leaves ornaments on the chandeliers all year round. The samovars look like ornaments too—some big as diver's helmets, some small as traveling hair dryers, all metal and all gleaming so brightly it looks as if the spigots were winking at you.

But all the decorations in the world wouldn't give the place a holiday air if the food and drink weren't copious, with that festive abandon that a Westerner, anyway, associates with Russian dining.

The following story is hearsay, but I had no reason to doubt the teller. He was an elderly Englishman who claimed to have heard it from a schoolmate of his, a young Russian émigré from a once-wealthy family. The family had been vacationing some place in the south of Russia—perhaps Yalta. Vaca-

tion over, they headed back to St. Petersburg. Along the way, one of the servants in the entourage remarked that the area through which they were passing rang a bell of some kind: didn't they own an estate in the neighborhood? No one seemed to know, but they asked around until, sure enough, they found a property, unvisited for years. The retainers who had been maintaining it, as surprised as the travelers, opened it up, and the family rested from its journey. A plate full of butter is several orders of magnitude less extravagant than an extra house, but both, it seems to me, convey the same spirit.

The trouble with deciding how "real" the copiousness of a place like the Russian Tea Room is arises from the fact that everything in it has been plucked out of time, and preserved wholesale. But time, when it has a chance to unfold naturally, selects and winnows. America, to consider our own past, went through a period known as "the twenties." Sixty years later, only certain things from the twenties have survived—Bix Beiderbecke, not Paul Whiteman; F. Scott Fitzgerald, not James Branch Cabell. Nostalgia short-circuits the picking and choosing of time by preserving everything, down to the salt shakers. Exile is enforced nostalgia, comprehensiveness imposed by history. Nabokov, if you calmed him down, would have understood.

That's a lot of weight to put on a restaurant, especially when the fare is so substantial to begin with. We don't know what will become of the Soviet Union. It may break back into time, and become Russia once more. If it does, it will find some good drink recipes waiting for it left of Carnegie Hall. □

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