

Reviews

Warmed by love

DRIVING MISS DAISY ★

Chelmsford

Rachel Halliburton

ALFRED Uhry's Pulitzer Prize-winning script tackles issues of racism and anti-Semitism, even though on the surface it has no more rage or indignation than a cup of Horlicks. Based on the slow-burning friendship between his stylishly cantankerous Jewish grandmother and the black chauffeur who worked for her for 25 years, it provides a delicately traced anatomy of how their servant/mistress relationship evolved into an unspoken love affair.

Uhry initially saw his play open in a 74-seater off-Broadway theatre in 1987 — little anticipating that an Academy Award-winning film, starring Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman, would both significantly boost the health of his bank balance and bring the story to a worldwide audience. Despite the film's success, Jon Harris's production reveals that *Driving Miss Daisy's* roots are firmly planted in the theatre, with the focus far more on the characters' interior journeys than on the time they spent amiably bickering in the car.

Virginia Stride plays Miss Daisy, the 72-year-old who spends her days fobbing off the cotton-wool-wrapped intentions of her son, and dropping acid comments about her daughter-in-law. The play starts in 1948 and self-righteous Stride is a woman who has no compunction at treating her black chauffeur Hoke like a servant, a thief, and psychological punchball. Yet the haughtiness gradually melts into affection.

Uhry has been criticised for not being more overtly political, however, Harris's production gently ambushes the audience through the wit and warmth of two proudly vulnerable performances.

● *Until tomorrow at Chelmsford. Box office: 01245 606505. Then between 14-16 March, The Corn Exchange, Newbury. Box office: 01635 522733.*



Endless variations that leave his audience numb: Stan Douglas photograph of Michigan Theatre 1997-9

Films of frustration

STAN DOUGLAS ○

Serpentine Gallery

Nick Hackworth

FRUSTRATION is the stock in trade of Canadian video artist and film-maker, Stan Douglas. The three short films installed here at the Serpentine, each with an accompanying body of nice photographs, deliberately frustrate the viewers' assumption that they are about to experience the straightforward narratives that they associate with cinema films.

Journey into Fear is undoubtedly the star of the show. It is named after a Second World War thriller by Eric Ambler, which was filmed in 1942 by Norman Foster and remade in 1975 by Daniel Mann, and is set on a large container ship about to reach journey's end. Two characters are engaged in a heated discussion in a cramped room. Graham is a pilot sent to guide the ship through rough waters and Möller is a "supercargo"

whose job it is to guarantee the safe and timely arrival of the vessel, but who's been bribed by unknown parties to delay the ship's arrival, an eventuality from which they will profit. In the discussion, Möller attempts to bend Graham to his will, but fails. However, as the audience finds out, the scene is followed by apparently endless variations. The core of the scene remains the same but the actions and dialogue are always different. Graham, Möller and the audience are trapped in a bizarre nautical Groundhog Day. Douglas's films seek to expose the artifice of cinema, in gen-

eral through their frustration of expectations of simple linear stories. In *Le Détroit* we see a young woman searching an abandoned house, for what we never discover, and similarly the six-minute sequence is followed by numerous minor variants of the original. Unfortunately, Douglas succeeds rather too well in inducing boredom and frustration in his audience.

Together with the bruised buttocks that are the inevitable result of sitting through the repetitive film sequences on the hard floor of the gallery, the boredom and frustration is enough to make you head straight for the nearest multiplex and its dumb narratives and nice cushioned seats.

● *Until 7 April. Serpentine Gallery, W2. Tel: 020 7402 6075.*

Sailing on a sensual sea

HEATHER NOVA ★★

Astoria

Max Bell

A QUICK glance at the artist and the venue might lead one to think a mistake had been made. Heather Nova couldn't possibly be popular enough to play the Astoria, could she? In the event, Nova nearly sold out the place and packed it with a hardcore fan base, who not only knew every one of her songs but hung on every word. The bars were empty.

Despite her lack of a press profile here, Nova's beautifully crafted songs travel by word of mouth. She spent her formative years on a 40-foot sailing boat that tacked between her native Bermuda and the West Indies, and the mid-Atlantic drift that rolls through her ornate ballads is as pronounced as the billowing sails she uses as stage props.

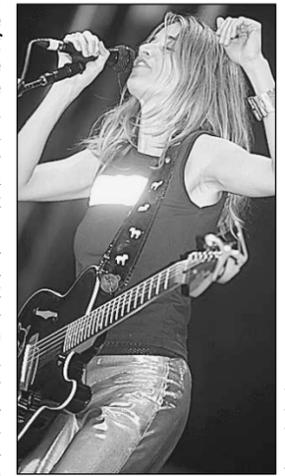
Dressed in her customary cut-off T-shirt and flared jeans, Nova sang into a microphone entwined with lilies while moving over a carpet. Having set the relevant level of intimacy, she steered a more or less unbroken course through songs from *Oyster*, *Siren* and the current album *South*.

Her songs deal with sensual frustration but they are an antidote to the histrionics of an Alanis Morissette. For Nova the danger is in the detail, so a song, such as *Virus Of The Mind* or *Help Me Be Good To You*, gets its message across as an undercurrent, leaving the recipient lost in a metaphorical Bermuda triangle.

Nova isn't part of any scene and seems immune to musical trends. If one had to categorise her appeal, she comes across like a one-woman Fleetwood Mac.

Yet, if the guitar solos and bobbing bass lines sound retrospective, her voice is a unique instrument.

She once wrote a song called *London Rain*, which remains a favourite here. Yesterday she poured over London and nobody complained.



Angela Lubrano

Unique: Heather Nova

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

Perfection blues

KELLY JOE PHELPS ★★★

Jazz Cafe

Jack Massarik



David Sinclair

Truly special: Kelly Joe Phelps

FOR several good reasons we needn't go into here, jazz has been struggling to hold on to a youthful audience, but not so the blues. Indeed this humble art form, little changed since its birth, seems to appeal to more listeners than ever before.

Last night, the Jazz Cafe was packed with a wide spectrum of Phelps fans, and the young 21st-century bluesmaster was thrilling them all to the marrow. True, this urban white American can hardly call himself an authentic bluesman, but, since the founding fathers are all long gone, that is hardly relevant. What matters is his artistry, which is considerable.

He was expected to attend with the trio from his new Rykodisc album, *Sky Like a Broken Clock*, but Phelps arrived with only his guitar for company — but that's all he needed. Slipping onstage in

a black T-shirt, jeans and a woolly hat, he settled down on a plain metal chair, and from the moment he began to play conversation ceased and the atmosphere crackled with excitement.

All eyes were on Kelly Joe's hands and his unique guitar-picking style, an amazing self-taught method in which the guitar rests flat on his lap and is played simultaneously with fingers and bottleneck, pedal-steel-guitar-style. The muscular country-blues licks he produced in this way were magnificent, but so too were his vocals.

Going leisurely in and out of tempo, he was not so much singing as sighing, talking and chuckling. Every effect, from frus-

trated rasp to sweet falsetto croon, was delivered with the precision of a Shakespearean actor, and he paid similar attention to period detail.

Whether on original songs like *Beggar's Oil* or classics like *Dutch Oven* (Woody Guthrie) and *I'm the Light of the World* (Reverend Gary Davis), it was remarkable to hear such handsome and complex music proceeding from one player alone. Phelps is truly something special.

● *Tonight. Box office: 020 7916 6060.*

LAST WEEK'S OPENINGS — WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

FILM	KEY											
	Good	OK	Awful	No review								
	Evening Standard	Daily Mail	The Times	Daily Telegraph	The Guardian	The Independent	Financial Times	Daily Express	Sunday Times	Sunday Telegraph	The Observer	Independent on Sunday
We Were Soldiers	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
Behind the Sun	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
Hearts in Atlantis	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
Comédie de L'Innocence	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
THEATRE												
Hinterland	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
Tartuffe	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful
OPERA												
Ariodante	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful	Good	OK	Awful