

STAGE REVIEW

'Amadeus'

An ambitious and rewarding version of Peter Shaffer's tale of envy and music

By Bob Brown

If you saw Milos Forman's 1984 film, you'll remember Tom Hulce's over-the-top performance as the impetuous Mozart and F. Murray Abraham's Oscar-winning turn as the jealous court musician Salieri. But most of all you'll remember the glorious score.

After all, the real star in this music-filled non-musical is the work of the young genius. In playwright Peter Shaffer's vision, brilliant compositions flowed from the man-child Mozart like water from a spring. He had a potty mouth, but his composition pages were clean as a whistle with nary a cross out.

Contributors to WWFM, the Mercer County Community College classical station, were treated to a special pre-performance of *Amadeus* at the Kelsey Theatre on campus. In preparation for the evening, guests enjoyed brief period performances on authentic instruments by violinist Andrew Kirkland and forte-pianist Clipper Erickson. Professor Floyd Grave of Rutgers, in a mini-lecture, denied that Mozart was a public scamp or that he hardly had to work on his compositions. Also, Grave said, Mozart was in no position to threaten Salieri's secure tenure at the court of Emperor Joseph II in Vienna. And both knew it. But dramatic intrigue requires what artistic license allows — something more titillating.

Director Lou J. Stalsworth, commenting on the PinnWorth Productions offering at Kelsey, wrote in production notes that he expected to present a play with "beautiful dialogue, thought-provoking entertainment, and — of course — soaring music. What I didn't expect was to wade through multiple versions of the script before arriving at this one: Shaffer's sixth and (perhaps) final version..." Shaffer told a reviewer he was inspired by "The conflict between virtuous mediocrity and feckless genius," a fascinating conflict he tinkered with to achieve perfection.

This play is Salieri's story. His monologues and conversations constitute the most substantial part of the text. And, as Stalsworth says, it is beautiful writing indeed. Veteran actor John M. Shanken-Kaye, who has appeared in many local productions, does quite a creditable job, slipping from the elder Salieri back into his younger, more jealous self as he confronts and plots against the upstart newcomer.

While he fears the intrusion of the more gifted Mozart, Salieri can't help admiring his work even as he schemes to poison him. The Italian composer is accompanied by a virtual duet — Venticelli No. 1 and Venticelli No. 2 (Walter Rosenfeld and Rob Gough), who bring fresh news and comment on events, swooping in to bookend the conversation.

In snatching a first look at Mozart's manuscripts, Salieri is astonished by their sublimity, the soaring line of an orchestral oboe, handed off to the clarinet. The sound system at Kelsey is good enough, and the crew adept enough (Judi Parrish at the helm), that these interweavings of dialogue and music can raise the hair on the back of your neck.

Mozart is an incongruity: a musical god in the body of An



immature schoolboy. Matty Daley, who was brilliant in last year's *Equus*, plays him to the hilt, romping with his Costanze (equally lively Ashley Stuart) when he's not scribbling out masterpieces, tinkling at a keyboard, or sparring cheekily with the snippy Italophiles of the Viennese court: Count Von Strack (Russ Weiss), Count Orsini Rosenberg (Chris Arena), and Baron Van Swieten (Frank Ferrara). The Emperor (Sean McGrath) is an amusing twit who brushes away complexities with the wave of the hand and a cheery "Well, there it is then!"

Feeding unbridled appetites, Salieri has a fondness for luscious Italian desserts and his equally luscious student, the saucy Katarina (Elizabeth Rzasa), to whom Mozart also succumbs. Just as scrumptious are period costumes conjured up by Kate Pinner. Mozart alone must have a half-dozen changes in the course of an act. Some of his combinations looked like striped confections. In one scene he switches to a pink wig that is a virtual cotton candy blowout.

This is an ambitious and rewarding production that shows the hard work of its cast and supporting crew. Above all, there's the sublime music, without which there would be no cause for a play. It's said that classical music is in a death spiral. Recordings are a hard sell and orchestras are folding for lack of an audience. For all its historical inaccuracies, *Amadeus* is the kind of art that can inspire and perhaps pique the classically challenged enough to look further — not only into Mozart, but also into his contemporaries and beyond. ●

Amadeus continues at Kelsey Theatre on the Mercer County Community College campus, 1200 Old Trenton Road, West Windsor, Jan. 14-15, 7:30 p.m., Jan. 16, 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$14, \$12 seniors, \$10 students/children. 609-570-3333; www.kelseyatmccc.org