



October 2 - 28, 2001

Mainstage

Exploring

AMADEUS

an IRT Study Guide

In December of 1891, the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died suddenly in Vienna, Austria, at the age of 35. Like such legendary figures as Evita Peron, James Dean, or Marilyn Monroe in more recent times, Mozart was a shooting star who blazed brightly and died young. Such figures almost always become mythologized, shrouded in legends which obscure the often complex truth. Mozart was no exception. To subsequent generations he seemed an angel, a gentle spirit, a wispy creature as delicate and refined as one of his early piano sonatas, for only such a heavenly creature could have composed such heavenly music.

In 1825, the composer Antonio Salieri died at the ripe old age of 75, also in Vienna. He had lived a long, full life, enjoying riches and acclaim for most of his life. In his latter years, however, he had watched his life's work fall into an obscurity from which it would likely never emerge. A century and a half later, his name would be merely a bizarre footnote in musical history: that crazy old composer who on his deathbed claimed he had poisoned Mozart.

In 1979 Peter Shaffer took what few facts are known about Mozart's final years and the even fewer facts known about Salieri and molded them into a play, filling in the many factual gaps with dramatic possibilities. He was not the first to do so. Russian poet Alexander Pushkin had written his own play, *Mozart and Salieri*, in the early nineteenth

Music & Murder

century. But Shaffer placed in the public eye a Mozart that until then had been known by only a few adventurous scholars: a trash-talking braggart with a kinky side who also happened to write glorious music. This "darker" side of

Mozart had been hidden away in untranslated or mistranslated letters written in his own hand.

Shaffer's premise was a simple one: Suppose it were true.... Suppose Salieri had actually murdered Mozart.... Why would he do such a thing? *Amadeus* suggests a possible answer.

Shaffer's play was an enormous success in London and New

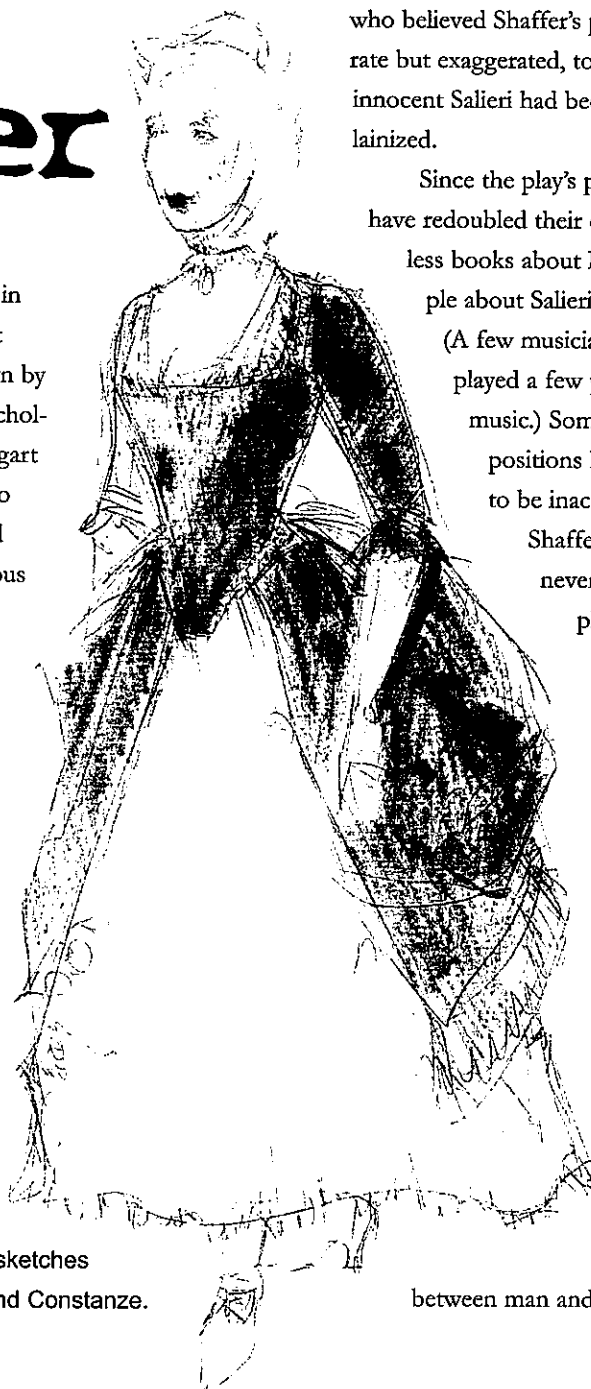
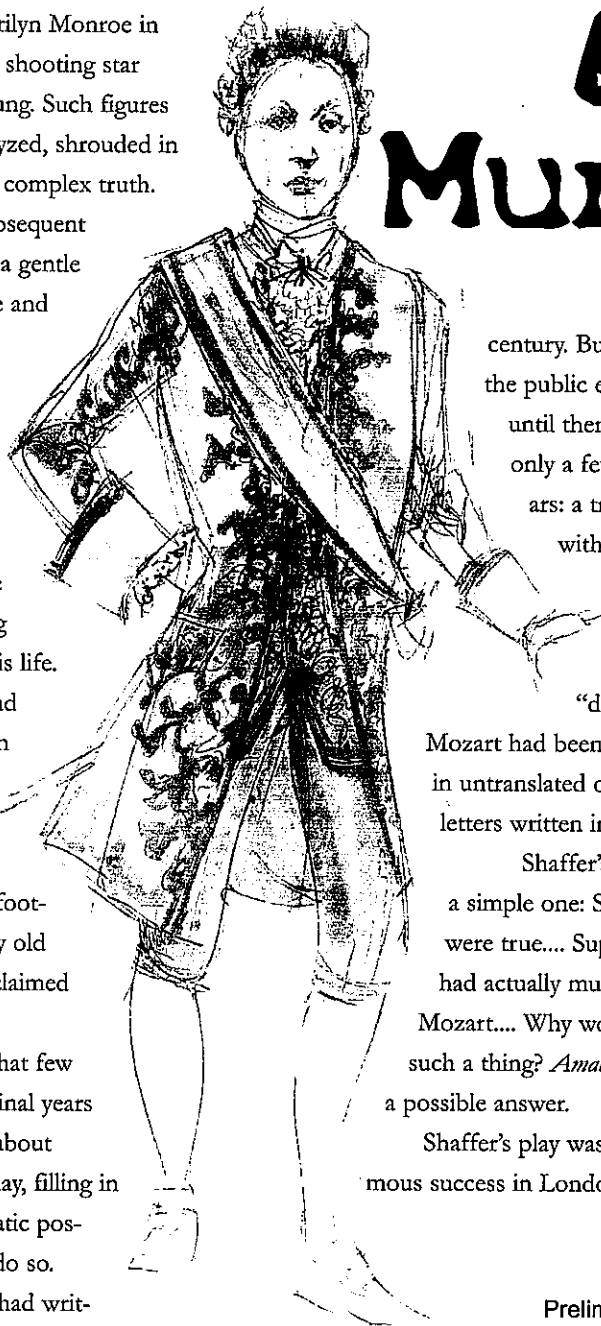
York, then received even further acclaim in an Oscar-winning film version. The play also unleashed a storm of controversy, from those who refused to believe that Mozart could be so foul-mouthed, to those

who believed Shaffer's portrait was accurate but exaggerated, to those who felt an innocent Salieri had been unjustly villainized.

Since the play's premiere, scholars have redoubled their efforts, and countless books about Mozart and a couple about Salieri crowd the shelves. (A few musicians have even played a few pieces of Salieri's music.) Some of Shaffer's suppositions have indeed proven to be inaccurate. But

Shaffer's purpose was never to write a biography, or to set the story straight, but to take two fascinating figures and create imaginative and dramatic possibilities for them, inspiring a thoughtful and provocative discussion about genius and hard work, the concept of worthiness, and the complicated relationship

between man and God. ★



Preliminary costume sketches
by David Zinn for Mozart and Constanze.

Antonio Salieri was born in 1750 in the small town of Legnano, Italy, between Venice and Mantua. At a young age he began to study the violin, pianoforte (ancestor of today's piano), and singing under his brother, Francesco. Even as a child he had a discerning ear for music: his father once scolded him for being rude to a monk, but Antonio replied he could not be nice to the man because he was a bad organist.

By the age of fifteen, Antonio had lost both his mother and father, and he and his five brothers and sisters were left in abject poverty. A year or so later an old family friend learned of the family's misfortune and sent Antonio to Venice to study music. Florian Gassman, the official chamber composer in Vienna at the time, was visiting Venice on a commission; he met young Salieri, took

von Helfersdorfer; together they would have eight children. Salieri next spent two years in Italy, composing a number of new works and increasing his fame. Upon his return to Vienna he composed, at the Emperor's request, his first work in German, a singspiel (musical play) called *The Chimney Sweep*. Its success was overshadowed the next year by Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*. Legend has it that Salieri actively plotted against the premieres of Mozart's operas *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, but there is little firm evidence either to prove or disprove these allegations. Mozart himself escorted Salieri to a performance of *The Magic Flute*, and according to Mozart's letters Salieri was highly complimentary.

In 1788 Salieri succeeded Giuseppe Bonno as Court Composer. He was now the most important musical personage in Vienna. The death in 1790 of Emperor Joseph II, however, proved to be a turning point; Joseph's successor's were less interested in music in general and particularly less interested in Italian music. The next year

Salieri resigned from the Italian opera in circumstances that remain clouded.

Over the next decade, Salieri's prominence at the Viennese court decreased, but the demand for his works throughout Europe increased.

Eventually, however, changing opera tastes caused his popularity to wane, and after 1805 he composed almost exclusively church music.

Despite his declining popularity, Salieri received many honors and awards such as are often presented to those who have lived a long life of prominence: In 1816 Emperor Franz I gave him a civic gold medal with a chain of honor, he was inducted into the French Academy, and Louis XVIII gave him the medal of the Legion of Honor. In 1820 his eyesight began to trouble him, and his health in general began to decline. In October 1823 he suffered a nervous breakdown, and the following month he slit his throat in a failed suicide attempt. Rumors began to circulate that Salieri was claiming to have poisoned Mozart, but this was little believed at the time. When Salieri died in 1825, his funeral was attended by all the major musical figures of Vienna.

During his career, Antonio Salieri composed some 40 operas which were performed all over Europe. In his lifetime he was considered one of the most important opera composers of the day. His pupils included Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt. He was rich, honored, and respected. But after his death, his name was quickly forgotten, except in vague association with Mozart, and only in recent years has some small interest revived in his work as a composer. ★

Illustrations from left, clockwise:

Antonio Salieri

Joseph II, Emperor of Austria

Constanze Weber Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The city of Vienna, 1780s



Antonio

him on as a pupil, and brought him back to Vienna in 1766 to be his assistant. Upon being presented at court, Salieri immediately impressed Emperor Joseph II with his talents and became a regular visitor to the palace with Gassman.

An anecdote from Salieri's early years in Vienna reveals something of his personality. It seems the opera theatre had a battered, old spinet piano which was in such poor shape it could not stay in tune even for the length of a rehearsal. One day Salieri, frustrated by the manager's stinginess, pulled a chair up next to the piano, stood on the chair, and jumped into the instrument. Needless to say, this action finished it off. That evening, when the piano tuner arrived to prepare the piano for the evening's performance, the wreckage was revealed: nearly all the strings were broken and the soundboard was smashed. Salieri stood quietly by while the orchestra speculated what might have caused such destruction; but all were pleased when the management was forced to buy a new instrument.

Within two years Salieri's compositions began to be played here and there throughout Vienna. In 1770, while Gassman was in Rome, Salieri began to compose his first opera to a libretto by a young, equally inexperienced poet. When another opera scheduled for performance was suddenly canceled, Salieri's work was chosen to take its place. Thus he had his first opera performed. Over the next three years he composed eight more, becoming quite a well known figure in Vienna.

In 1774, upon Gassman's death, Salieri was appointed his successor as Imperial Royal Chamber Composer, and was given the additional position of Conductor of the Italian Opera. (At this time in musical history, opera was still fairly new and mostly performed in Italian at courts and royal opera houses throughout Europe. In Vienna, Joseph II was interested in promoting the native language, German, so in addition to the Italian court opera he created a National Opera to perform exclusively German works for a more widespread public.)

The following year Salieri met and married Therese

Salieri

Wolfgang

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756. His father, Leopold Mozart, was a musician in the chapel of the Archbishop. From a very early age, young Wolfgang showed such musical promise that his father devoted his life to educating the boy and exhibiting his talents. Between the ages of six and fifteen, Wolfgang spent half of his time touring the courts of Europe. He was a virtuoso pianist, reading concertos at sight and improvising variations and fugues. He could hear any piece of music once and repeat it, note for note. He was composing minuets at six, his first symphony at eight, his first opera at twelve.

Back in Salzburg, Mozart chafed at the life of a provincial court musician, and in 1781, at the age of 25, he moved to Vienna. The capital of the Austrian empire, Vienna was a city mad for music. There were operas, symphonies, and other concert series. Besides being eager audiences for professional performances, the citizens were devoted amateur performers; indeed, the Emperor Joseph II himself spent a portion of every afternoon at the keyboard, playing and even composing. Vienna offered the finest opportunities to a musician of Mozart's caliber.

Vienna also offered the stiffest competition for any musician. In the eighteenth century, composers made their living not through the selling of their works but through appointment to a position as composer for a court or cathedral or opera company. The larger the

tos, a great number of chamber works and symphonies, and his five greatest operas. Almost all of these works were composed "to order," as it were. Mozart very rarely wrote purely for his own satisfaction; almost everything he wrote was in response to a commission or some other occasion for which he expected payment.

Mozart needed a constant stream of income because he had a family to support. He married Constanze Weber, the daughter of his landlady, in 1782. They had six children, only two of whom survived infancy. Constanze has been much maligned by Mozart biographers as a flighty, unsubstantial girl who could not appreciate her husband's genius; but the evidence clearly shows that theirs was a happy marriage. They rarely parted, and when they did, Mozart's letters are full of longing for her. After his death, she very prudently managed his musical estate, his unpublished manuscripts being all she had to live on.

In 1787 Mozart finally received a court appointment as Chamber Music Composer to the Emperor; but this was far from what he longed for, and the pay was merely an honorarium. In 1789, Constanze became seriously ill due to an ulcerated leg, a very dangerous condition in those days of limited medical knowledge. The treatment included sulfur baths which required extensive visits to

as "acute miliary fever," which today is believed to have been rheumatic fever. He was 35 years old. He was buried in an unmarked, common grave.

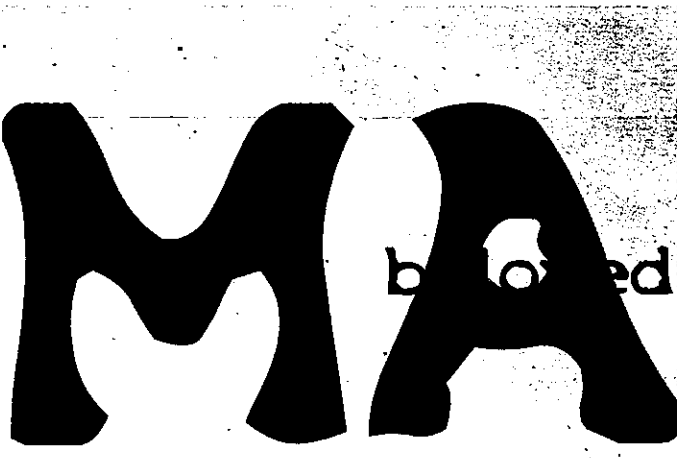
Today such a burial is associated with extreme poverty and lack of concern; but at that time in Vienna it was the standard burial practice.

Mozart's grave, or lack thereof, is one of many circumstances leading to the accumulation of legend.

Because there are so many gaps in our knowledge of Mozart's life, and because of his early and unexpected death, a shroud of mystery and legend has grown to obscure what facts are known. Mozart's letters pleading for loans have contributed to the legend of Mozart's death in abject poverty, despite known sources of income from

commissions, publications, and concerts. Following his death, rumors of poisoning developed; one of these rumors involved Court Composer Antonio Salieri, who in his old age was said to have claimed to have killed Mozart himself. But since Mozart's two attending physicians happened to be the era's experts on poisons, and neither of them ever suggested poison as a factor, it seems highly doubtful.

Nonetheless, such legends persist. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Mozart was thought of as some sort of angelic sprite, as pure and delicate as his music; in fact, we know from his letters that he was a down-to-earth fellow who enjoyed billiards and rowdy company, and whose language was anything but pure. ★



the spa at Baden. Medical expenses were staggering, and Mozart's letters from this period are full of requests for loans.

In October 1891 Mozart received a mysterious anonymous commission for a *Requiem*, a mass for the dead. He never quite completed this work, for on December 5 he died suddenly after an illness of two weeks. The official cause of death was listed

court, the larger the remuneration, and the greater the musical resources available. This is what Mozart hoped for. Unfortunately, while there were several court positions to be had in Vienna, they were already filled. Mozart thus became the first composer to try to make a living freelance, as it were, surviving on commissions, concert performances, and sheet music sales.

Mozart's output in Vienna included 17 piano concer-



Mozart

Playwright Peter Shaffer

Peter Shaffer was born in Liverpool, England, in 1926. His twin brother is Anthony Shaffer, the author of mystery and thriller plays such as *Sleuth*. After working in a coal mine during World War II, Peter studied history at Cambridge. Moving to New York City, he discovered that publishing jobs were just as scarce there as in England, and he ended up working in acquisitions for the New York Public Library. Returning to London after three years, he worked for a music publishing firm, eventually writing literary and music criticism for magazines.

Meanwhile he wrote three detective novels (one on his own and two in collaboration with his twin brother) and three scripts for radio and television. In 1958 his first play for the stage, *Five Finger Exercise*, began a very successful two-year run in London. It was subsequently produced in New York, beginning a pattern of successful productions on both sides of the Atlantic. Shaffer continues to maintain residences in both cities.

This double residence reflects a duality that is a major theme in all of Shaffer's stage works (a theme further informed by his status as a twin). Even *Five Finger Exercise*, which features a family of five, is played largely in scenes of just two characters in conversation. Shaffer's next work was a double bill, *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye* (1962); the plays each explore troubled relationships. Another pair of comic one-acts, *Black Comedy* (1965) and *White Lies* (1967), deal with trickery and deception.

The Royal Hunt of the Sun (1964) is a spectacular, epic interpretation of Pizarro's conquest of the Incan Empire. It is the first of several plays in which Shaffer explores similar themes. *Equus* (1973) is the story of a cold, repressed psychiatrist who treats a patient with an intense obsession for a horse but at the same time envies his passion. *Amadeus* (1979), Shaffer's greatest success, continues to examine this conflict, with the proper, respectable, but uninspired Salieri tormented by the brilliantly gifted yet socially offensive Mozart. *Lettice & Lovage* (1987), with its droll portrayal of an overly creative tour guide and an overly rigid Historic Trust bureaucrat, is perhaps a comic answer to the storm of controversy about historic accuracy which greeted *Amadeus*. In each of these plays Shaffer creates an intensely dramatic battleground for the conflict between civilization and nature, between rational order and chaotic creativity, between logic and passion. ★

Questions for Critical Thinking

The Play

- What aspects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century are reflected in the play? What aspects of our current age are reflected in the play? Give examples from the script. Is familiarity with the historical background of the play necessary to fully grasp the situation, characters, and ideas set forth by the dramatist? In what way does a broader knowledge of history enhance the experience of such a play as *Amadeus*?
- How important is it that the dramatist remains faithful to historical facts in writing a fictional work? What do you know about the historical facts surrounding the lives of Mozart and Salieri? How have these facts been worked into the story of the play? What truth is expressed in this play: Historical truth? Psychological truth? Metaphorical truth?
- "Amadeus" means "loved by God." Discuss the significance of the play's title to its characters, plot, and themes.
- Do you find Salieri to be a sympathetic character, a villain, or something else? Defend your answer with references to the script. To what other characters in literature can he be compared? Consider the character of Mozart the same way.
- Consider the effect on the story of Shaffer's having set up Salieri as the narrator. What biases are implicit there? How might the story have been told differently from the point of view of a different character? What might be the significance of the events as told by Constanze or Mozart himself?



PETER SHAFFER

QUESTIONS COURTESY OF GUTRIE THEATER, MINNEAPOLIS

•What does the play imply about the notions of genius and mediocrity? What do you believe constitutes genius? What definition is implied in the play? What do geniuses contribute to our society? Use examples from history as well as from the play to discuss the relationship of individual geniuses to the society in which they live.

•Today, Mozart's reputation as an artist far exceeds that of Salieri, yet when both men were alive, Salieri enjoyed more fame and honor than Mozart. If an artist is famous, does it follow that they are great? What factors bring about fame and recognition in any profession? What factors contribute to an artist's work surviving beyond the time in which it was created? In what way does Salieri claim to be punished by fame? How does the character propose to perpetuate his fame? Does this play achieve those ends?

The IRT Production

- Describe the performances of the actors in *Amadeus*. Which moments were especially powerful for you? What made them so?
- Describe the visual impression that *Amadeus* makes on the IRT stage. What elements of the design seem to reflect the eighteenth century? What elements seem to be more contemporary? What elements seem to reflect Salieri's point of view as the storyteller?
- Describe the costumes in *Amadeus* in terms of their color, texture, cut, decoration, and so on. Discuss the variations in costumes among the characters. What functions do costumes fulfill in a stage production?
- Consider the fluidity of the action, moving rapidly from one location to another, and from scenes with large groups of actors to intimate scenes with only one or two. What impact do these shifts in location and focus have on your experience of the play? What challenges does this structure present to director, designer, and actors? Comment on the effectiveness of the transitions in this production.
- Did you find any particular moments of this production to be memorable for you? Describe them and explain what made them so. Did you find yourself responding to certain aspects of the production more strongly than others? Text? Performance? Music? Visual design elements? Plot? How did your experience of this production compare to that of others? How do you explain the similarities or differences?

Indiana Repertory Theatre

140 West Washington Street
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-3465

Janet Allen, Artistic Director
Daniel Baker, Managing Director

Questions or comments?
Call the IRT Education Department at
317-635-5277, ext. 430 or 431

Study Guide written by Richard J Roberts.

Visit Our Website: www.indianarep.com
E-Mail: indianarep@indianarep.com

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