

## ***Amadeus* – Musical Genius in Theater and Film**

Ana-Magdalena PETRARU\*

**Abstract** : This article aims to analyze the rendering of the musical genius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in Peter Shaffer’s dramaturgy (*Amadeus*) and on the big screen (Milos Forman), with methodological insights into adaptation studies (from the play to the film, from the written text to the performance) also illustrated in the version performed on the stage of the Iași Athenaeum.

**Keywords:** musical genius, adaptation, dramatic vs. theatrical.

### **Introduction**

Born in Liverpool on May 15, 1926, Peter Shaffer had a twin brother and moved with his family to London at the age of 10. He went to St. Paul where he developed his musical talent, a catalyst for the play *Amadeus*. He received his degree from Cambridge in 1950 and immigrated to New York where he worked as a librarian. Returning to London in 1954, he began writing for radio and television, his first play, *Five Finger Exercise* (1958), winning the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Foreign Play of 1960; his literary reputation was strengthened in 1964 with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, a play which dramatizes the Spanish conquest of the Incas, emphasizing success, humility and faith, themes also addressed in later works. He enjoyed more literary fame<sup>1</sup> with *Equus* (1973), which received two awards, and *Amadeus* - five Tony Awards along with play of the year by *Plays and Players*. In 1994, the author was in Oxford as Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre<sup>2</sup>.

The British author gained a leading position among contemporary playwrights through plays such as *Five Finger Exercise* (1958), *The Royal*

---

\* Lecturer PhD, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași.

1 The concept is understood in its critical acception, cf. Lorraine York, *Literary Celebrity in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 2007.

2 Elisabeth Thomason (ed.), “A Study Guide for Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus*”, *Drama for Students*, vol. 13, Gale Centage Learning, 2001, p. 7.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

*Hunt of the Sun* (1964), *Black Comedy* (1965) or *Equus* (1973) and although they did not revolutionize theater techniques as radically as Beckett or Ionesco before him or his compatriots Harold Pinter and Edward Bond, his method is more about evolution, and the works, taken together, achieve a fresh and virile version of the total theater, with surprising visual and sound qualities<sup>3</sup>. Despite the predilection of contemporary drama for depicting human relationships, it has been argued that Shaffer is especially indebted to Eugene O'Neill for his innovative ability to illustrate the relationships between man and the divine (on the stage, his predecessor borrowed, transformed, or invented a scenic grammar, combining expressionistic and naturalistic means and using various techniques – masks, mechanical sounds, pantomime, music, strong images alongside equally impactful visual elements – and a vast and flexible language, be it slang, poetic, choral, monologue, rhetorical persuasion and more<sup>4</sup>.

Peter Shaffer was considered unique for his 'dramatic' and 'theatrical' intelligence, his plays being built to escalate tension and produce shocks at key dramatic moments, the stage functioning as an arena where the lights, movements and sounds collaborate to intensify the expression of the drama, the combination of performance elements conspiring to create a memorable experience<sup>5</sup>. He has been critically acclaimed for his variety of dramatic genres, from comedy to domestic and historical dramas, for his subtle exploration of psychological themes<sup>6</sup>. Biblical elements were found in his main plays (*Amadeus*, *The Royal Hunt for the Sun* and *Equus*) due to protagonists metaphysically questioning existence, divine justice and the relationship between man and divinity. Salieri, for example, was compared to Cain, through his murderous resentment towards Amadeus, whom he saw as God's undeserved favorite<sup>7</sup>. In an article in the *London Observer*, the author argues that his main plays started from mental images: *The Royal Hunt of the*

---

3 C. J. Gianakaris, "A Playwright Looks at Mozart: Peter Shaffer's 'Amadeus'", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152928>. Retrieved on Oct 3, 2023.

4 Michael Hinden, "When Playwrights Talk to God: Peter Shaffer and the Legacy of O'Neill", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1982), p. 49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152986>. Retrieved on Oct 3, 2023.

5 M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh, *Peter Shaffer: Theatre and Drama*, Londra: MacMillan Press Limited, 1998, p. 16.

6 Elisabeth Thomason (ed.), *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

7 Nehama Aschkenasy, "The Biblical Intertext in Peter Shaffer's 'Amadeus' (Or, Saul and David in Eighteenth-Century Vienna)", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2010), p. 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23238675>. Retrieved on Sept. 28, 2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

*Sun* (1964) – from an image captured during a night vigil when the resurrection of Atahualpa was expected, *Equus* (1973) – from the vision of a young man savagely stabbing the horses in a stable, and *Amadeus* (1979) from the vision of Mozart dying in poverty, all three works, thus sharing the theme of the death of a god, of the Sun for the Incas, Alan Strang’s horse-shaped one, and the divine musical genius in *Amadeus*<sup>8</sup>.

### **On *Amadeus* – the play and film**

The play premiered in November 1979 at the National Theater of Great Britain and was enthusiastically received by audiences and critics, and a year later theatergoers were still queuing early in the morning for tickets. The popularity of the play also ensured the success of the 1984 film directed by Milos Forman and nominated for 11 Oscars, of which it won eight, including for best film, best director and best actor, being appreciated by viewers all over the world. In terms of adaptation criticism, the film version was not deemed inferior to the theatrical version<sup>9</sup> against the background of the palimpsest thesis that haunts the original<sup>10</sup>. The play explores the rivalry between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri, the late 18th century Austrian emperor’s court composer. Shaffer became interested in the relationship between the two composers after learning of the former’s suspicious death. Although he found no evidence to support a possible murder against Mozart by Salieri, the playwright confesses in an interview how he felt the court composer’s cold eyes staring at him and his imagination dominated by the conflict between mediocrity and genius, which contributed to the making of the play, the refined psychological study and the effects of success and failure in the quest for spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

The play in two acts opens with the ‘wild whispers’<sup>12</sup> of Viennese citizens in 1823 echoing through the theater (Salieri, assassin) while the Viennese court composer appears in a wheelchair with his back to the public.

---

8 Klein, Dennis A., “‘Amadeus’: The Third Part of Peter Shaffer’s Dramatic Trilogy”, *Modern Language Studies*, Winter, 1983, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3194316>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

9 Linda Hutcheon, , *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. xii.

10 Idem, p. 6.

11 Elisabeth Thomason, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

12 Probably different from the ones of a serial killer, *cf.* Alex North, *Omul șoaptă/ The Whisper Man*, translation from English by Ana-Magdalena Petraru and Speranța Doboș, Black Swan Publishing House, Iași, 2020.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Two *venticelli*, gossipy observers of the dramatic events rush in, circling the town as Salieri calls out to Mozart to forgive his murderer. The same *venticelli* offer the audience further explanations: more than thirty years before, Mozart was rumored to have been poisoned by Salieri, wondering why he would have done such a thing and why he would confess just now. Salieri asks the audience to be his confessor, speaking to them of his lifetime desire of enrichment through music, a divine art for which he would have asked God to help him become a composer, in exchange for a virtuous life and rewarding music to the Creator. God would have urged him to follow the path, to serve Him and humanity, blessing him, Salieri, committing himself as a Christian to be His humble servant. Providence caused a family friend to come by the next day and take him to Vienna, where he studied music and became a court composer. In the same year, the young prodigy Mozart was touring Europe, at which time the public was presented with Salieri's last composition, *The Death of Mozart, or Did I Do It?* dedicated to posterity, the night before his passing away. Taking off his nightgown, he changes into a young composer in elegant clothes from 1780, then the scene fast-forwards to 1781, at the Viennese court of Emperor Joseph II<sup>13</sup>. Aged 30, Salieri has a respectable wife, Teresa, and *venticelli* announce that Mozart is to give a concert at court. The former was eating sweets in the library of the Schönbrunn Palace, when Constanze Weber, the daughter of the owner of the house where Mozart was staying, ran into the room, squealing like a mouse, followed by Mozart meowing like a cat, teasing the girl and hitting on her. The young man's behavior annoys Salieri, but his musical talent leaves him speechless and breathless, as if he heard the voice of God and not of his obscene rival. The Italian composer prays to be penetrated by the divine voice, Mozart's failure in public leading him to conclude that the sublime music heard earlier had been a mere 'accident'. In honor of Mozart, Salieri composes a banal march that the genius transforms into something exceptional, and the ordinary musician wonders if it was not from that moment that he began to harbor murderous thoughts. But Mozart does not agree with the emperor on music, finds it difficult to get students to teach and, against his father's will, marries Constanze and they end up living in misery. She is the one who will ask for Salieri's help in order for Mozart to find work, an opportunity for revenge for the composer who invites her to his apartment with the intention of seducing her. She initially refuses, then starts teasing him, Salieri is disgusted by her

---

13 Elisabeth Thomason, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

behavior and throws her out. Studying the manuscript left by the woman, he discovers the same sounds he heard at the palace and turns against God whom he considers his enemy, vowing to thwart His plans on earth. The scene returns to the present, depicting an elderly Salieri promising to reveal to the audience details of his battle with divinity through Mozart, His favorite creature.<sup>14</sup>

Act two takes us back to the past where Mozart remains unappreciated by the public and is overcome with despair at the death of his father when he composes *The Magic Flute* to earn a living, he is abandoned by Constanze and the children and his health deteriorates. Haunted in nightmares by a figure in gray who urges him to write a requiem, Mozart also incurs the reproach of the emperor, being accused by a member of the court of Masonic rituals in *The Magic Flute*. He dies soon after, to the regret and relief of Salieri who confesses that he tried to convince the public of his guilt in the alleged poisoning of Mozart in order to be preserved in the infamous memory of mankind. He then tries to commit suicide<sup>15</sup>, similarly to the main character in *M. Butterfly*<sup>16</sup>, yet fails and the audience does not believe him guilty, the play ending with Salieri lamenting mediocrity, putting his hands on his chest as a sign of personal sanctification<sup>17</sup>.

From a Freudian viewpoint, the narrative consists of a troubled narrator who gives an account of his condition, with regressions to the original scenes, thus confronting or exorcising his demons. Through the double temporality, the structure of the play – an analytical delight – allows the present from 1823 to make observations on the past from 1781-1791 narrated and relived at the same time; the analyst Salieri brings to the fore scenes crucial to his mental state. The intertwining of the two temporal planes of the play dramatically brings the subconscious, with obvious jamming on chronological time, a relevant factor that allows the audience to receive important data, regardless of the historical sequence<sup>18</sup>.

Salieri (both Shaffer's and A. Pushkin's, published 150 years earlier) was recorded to have emerged from anonymity through jealousy of Mozart's genius and his perspective on things; the imagination of the two authors –

---

14Idem, p. 9.

15 Idem, pp. 9-10.

16 Cf. *M. Butterfly*, David Cronenberg, 1993,  
[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107468/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107468/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1).

17 Elisabeth Thomason, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

18 William J Sullivan, Peter Shaffer's "'Amadeus': The Making and Un-Making of the Fathers", *American Imago*, Spring 1988, Vol. 45, No. 1, p. 45,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303957>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

succinct of the Russian master who created more of a dramatic, tragic sketch in pentameter, expansive of the contemporary English playwright, rather tragicomic, in prose, endowed with dark humor and parody – converges on a central problem similar to Job’s dilemma, in the musical field of artistic creativity and faith, of its conflict with justice. Divine glory shows in artistic inspiration, received by Mozart and denied to Salieri who expresses his protest<sup>19</sup>. Although the relationship with the divine was an aesthetic one, Shaffer was compared to the theologian Karl Barth in his conceptions, for whom Mozart was almost a Father of the Church, as an instrument of the divine spirit<sup>20</sup>.

Musicologists speak of an international Mozart mania of the 1980s, with Shaffer’s *Amadeus* and its adaptation for the big screen leading to TV commercials, competition for original autographs, Mozart original music sheets selling for fabulous sums at auction houses<sup>21</sup>. As the common viewer finds it difficult to distinguish artistic license from reality, the specialists felt obliged to clarify the plausibility of some situations doubled by the surrealist distortion of court life and Mozart’s existence in the play and film<sup>22</sup>. If Salieri had really been so fierce towards Mozart, the genius would certainly not have composed some of the operas, and the two would not have collaborated. In addition, the witnesses of the time say that the court composer spoke with great respect of Amadeus. According to the film, the basis of Salieri’s envy would be the desire to become a great composer like Mozart, but in 1760, in his youth, we can think of him as the manipulator of an idea at least a century and a half ahead of its time, the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. Teutonic one. The truths about him do not exceed the respectable positions he held at the imperial court and the appetite for Viennese candies. If the possibly unfaithful Constance was depicted in a realistic manner<sup>23</sup>, Emperor Joseph II is treated condescendingly and both Shaffer and Forman portray him as naive and unschooled in music, although he has actually gone down in history as sophisticated in the matter

---

19 Martin Bidney, “Thinking about God and Mozart: The Salieris of Puškin and Peter Shaffer”, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 183-184, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/307595>. Retrieved on Sept. 28, 2023.

20 Patrick Sherry, “Mozart, Amadeus and Barth”, *New Blackfriars*, May 1986, Vol. 67, No. 791, p. 233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43247807>. Retrieved on Oct. 6, 2023.

21 A. Peter Brown, “Amadeus and Mozart: Setting the Record Straight”, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 50-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211976>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

22 A. Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

23 Idem, p. 58.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

and a music player, getting involved in the management of his theaters and listening to chamber music every evening, sometimes playing the piano or cello<sup>24</sup>.

Literary criticism recorded the extended phenomenon at the level of caricature, as well, gaining a place in the household<sup>25</sup> (Mozart's music could be listened anytime at the radio like any other hit). Even 25 years after the premiere, echoes of the film are still heard, both the play and the film being revised by the authors. Although the film, in its original version, had many detractors who found it banal or soap opera like, there were voices that praised it for the imagination shown by the director.<sup>26</sup>

### **On *Amadeus* – the staging in Iași**

On Mozart music and exceptional acting performances, with slight nervousness in young actors, the intrigue between the Habsburg court composer, Antonio Salieri, and the genius W.A. Mozart was staged at Iasi Atheneum in 2022. Mediocre in composition in *Amadeus*, overshadowed by the Salzburg genius, the former did not sell his soul to the devil, but made a promise to God, although in some places he comes close to Goethe's *Faust* or Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. The ordinary viewer, familiar with the taste of marzipan Mozart chocolate relates to the sweets playing the role of a Proustian madeleine, acknowledging Mozart's music echoing in the tram stop of the hometown philharmonic or as interpreted by contemporary artists<sup>27</sup>. Being a sweet tooth is Salieri's only vice allowed by himself through the vow of chastity for music, promise made to God in exchange for the success of his musical compositions.

Mozart is presented as a naughty womanizer, a capricious and obnoxious genius, according to the courtly entourage, and the emperor a parodic reply to the authority of the great monarch Joseph II. The setting, projections of Viennese architecture and baroque furniture of the era, support

---

24Idem, pp. 52-53.

25 C. J.Gianakaris, "Shaffer's Revisions in 'Amadeus'", *Theatre Journal*, Mar., 1983, Vol. 35, No. 1, *Aporia: Revision, Representation and Intertextual Theatre*, p. 89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3206704>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

26 Simon P.Keefe, "Beyond Fact and Fiction, Scholarly and Popular: Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman's 'Amadeus' at 25" *The Musical Times*, Vol. 150, No. 1906 (Spring, 2009), p. 45, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25597601>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

27 Evanescence or Therion, among the most known, cf. Hermione Lai, "Dragging Mozart into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", <https://interlude.hk/dragging-mozart-into-the-21st-century/>. Retrieved on May 23, 2022.



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

the play's characters like a music box with the ballerinas inside. Mozart hits on his disciples, one by one, arousing the jealousy of his wife, Constanze Weber, and the envy of Salieri, who hoped that at least his disciple, Caterina Cavalieri, would be spared. Under her big skirt rest illustrious characters, in a Tin Drum like scenario by Jean Claude Carriere based on Gunter Grass's masterpiece<sup>28</sup>; playing the drums by the adult in the body of a child and the meaning of protest this entails is translated in Amadeus by the percussion triangle that brings the world to order like a miniature gong.

At the bust of Caterina secrets are kept along with the sheets, torn off by Salieri one by one; the court composer turns hysteric, when he realizes he is no match to Mozart in music. In the mind of the genius the composition is born, the notes are transcribed without corrections, they flow like a river. The genius knows his value, yet contemporaneity refuses to acknowledge it. After the death of his father, forced by poverty to live in misery, Amadeus loses his job, his wife is desperate because they have nothing left to sell, the attempt to give herself to Salieri in exchange for some honors at court fails, the abstinent feels nauseous at her behavior and asks her to leave.

In a meditative stance on classical music, it may be argued that unprofessional viewers, (post)modern barbarians<sup>29</sup>, could not grasp all the intricacies at the Viennese court. From *The Marriage of Figaro* to Requiem, we witness the rise of a genius and his fall into despair and madness; if death came by Salieri's hand, we would never know as he apologizes at the end claiming that the vial given to Amadeus was not poisoned, but the world speaks and that is all that matters to destroy his reputation.

### Conclusions

*Amadeus* brought to the genius Mozart, through the play with its many versions and the director cuts in the film, a popularity that reached everyone's homes through mass reception (the music of the genius being played on the radio or included in television commercials). Furthermore, specialists considered it necessary to clarify some historical or musical details related to artistic license so as not to leave any doubt on the veracity of a remarkable personality and those around him. The various interpretations offered by

---

28 *Die Blechtroneel/ The Tin Drum*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff, 1979, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078875/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078875/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1)

29 As understood by Alessandro Baricco in *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture*, Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014.



# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

criticism, an opportunity for intertextual delight, testify to the inexhaustible meanings evoked by the opera, a true *opera aperta*.

## Bibliography

Aschkenasy, Nehama, "The Biblical Intertext in Peter Shaffer's "Amadeus" (Or, Saul and David in Eighteenth-Century Vienna)", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 45-62, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23238675>. Retrieved on Sept. 28, 2023.

Bidney, Martin, "Thinking about God and Mozart: The Salieris of Puškin and Peter Shaffer", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 183-195, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/307595>. Retrieved on Sept. 28, 2023.

Brown, A. Peter, "Amadeus and Mozart: Setting the Record Straight", *The American Scholar*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 49-66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211976>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Gianakaris, C. J., "Shaffer's Revisions in 'Amadeus'", *Theatre Journal*, Mar., 1983, Vol. 35, No. 1, *Aporia: Revision, Representation and Intertextual Theatre*, pp. 88-101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3206704>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Gianakaris, C. J., "A Playwright Looks at Mozart: Peter Shaffer's 'Amadeus'", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 37-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152928>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Hinden, Michael, "When Playwrights Talk To God: Peter Shaffer and the Legacy of O'Neill", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 49-63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152986>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

Keefe, Simon P., "Beyond Fact and Fiction, Scholarly and Popular: Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman's 'Amadeus' at 25" *The Musical Times*, Vol. 150, No. 1906 (Spring, 2009), pp. 45-53, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25597601>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Klein, Dennis A., "'Amadeus': The Third Part of Peter Shaffer's Dramatic Trilogy", *Modern Language Studies*, Winter, 1983, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 31-38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3194316>. Retrieved on Oct., 2023.

MacMuraugh-Kavanagh, M. K., *Peter Shaffer: Theatre and Drama*, Londra: MacMillan Press Limited, 1998.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Sherry, Patrick, "Mozart, Amadeus and Barth", *New Blackfriars*, May 1986, Vol. 67, No. 791, pp. 233-240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43247807>. Retrieved on Oct. 6, 2023.

Sullivan, William J., Peter Shaffer's "'Amadeus': The Making and Un-Making of the Fathers", *American Imago*, Spring 1988, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 45-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303957>. Retrieved on Oct. 3, 2023.

Thomason, Elisabeth (ed.), "A Study Guide for Peter Shaffer's Amadeus", *Drama for Students*, vol. 13, Gale Centage Learning, 2001.