

Rewriting Amadeus

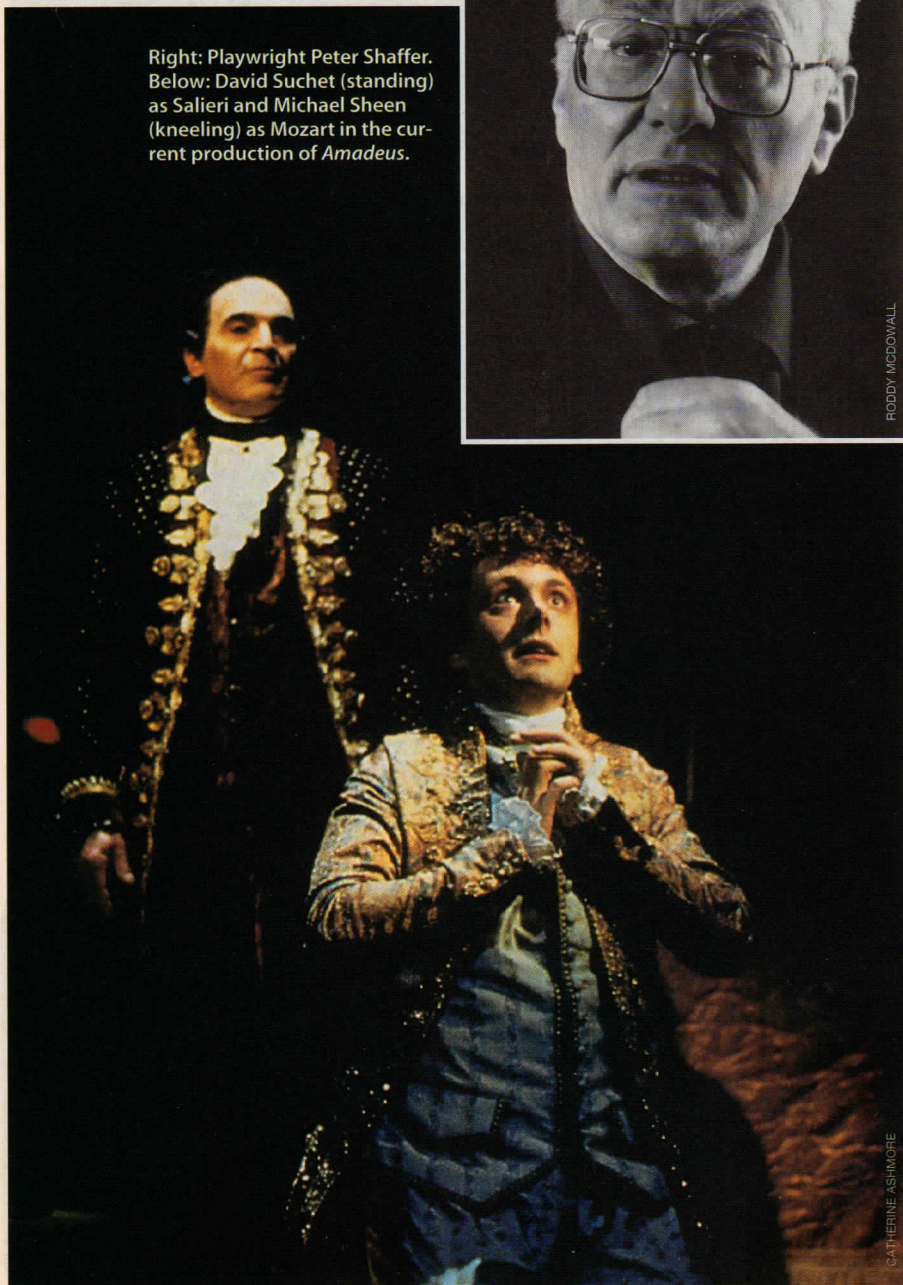
Acclaimed playwright Peter Shaffer revisits his 1979 hit

by Gerard Raymond

Right: Playwright Peter Shaffer.
Below: David Suchet (standing)
as Salieri and Michael Sheen
(kneeling) as Mozart in the current
production of *Amadeus*.



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Glory in my work being theatrical," says Peter Shaffer. Writing for the stage offers the playwright the opportunity to blend vigorous debate with grand theatrical gesture and spectacle. "I love the idea of my dialogue and my arguments finding fulfillment in gesture," says the dramatist. Just consider the Spanish army's rape and plunder of the Inca kingdom in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, the blinding of six horses by the sexually anguished Alan Strang in *Equus*, or, in a lighter vein, the exuberant theatricality of Lettice Douffet, the tour guide *extraordinaire* created by Maggie Smith in *Lettice and Lovage*.

Small wonder then, anticipating the 20th-anniversary revival of *Amadeus*, Shaffer's hit drama about the composers Mozart and Salieri, that the playwright expresses some concern that audiences might attempt to compare the production currently at Los Angeles' Ahmanson Theatre with the wider-known 1984 Oscar-winning film version of his play. "People will be getting it the wrong way round if they regard it as the play of the film," says Shaffer. "It began entirely in theatrical terms, and I want them to experience it as the original work." As Sir Peter Hall — director of the original 1979 production as well as the current revival — once described it, *Amadeus*, structurally and emotionally, is grand operatic theater. It belongs on the stage.

"Plays of debate of one kind or another have always fascinated me," says Shaffer. And it may not be a coincidence that his plays often emerge as debates with God. The young Shaffer was brought up in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, and his divine questing has a certain Talmudic quality to it. The playwright shrugs, saying he hasn't really pursued the orthodox way very much as an adult; nonetheless his most famous plays — *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus* — all feature central protagonists who question the

nature of God. "The interesting thing is not the conflict between what is clear right and wrong to me, but between two different kinds of right," says the playwright.

According to Shaffer, *Amadeus* had a difficult birth some 22 years ago. The English playwright says he spent nearly a year in his New York apartment working on different openings for the play. "I finally decided to concentrate on the last ten years of Mozart's life (1781-1791), when he moved to Vienna, and I settled on Salieri as the narrator." Shaffer's Salieri — played in this production by David Suchet, famous on this side of the Atlantic for his television portrayal of Agatha Christie's sleuth Hercule Poirot — has been justifiably described as one of the great roles of the modern repertory. (Paul Scofield and Ian McKellen walked away with the top acting honors in London and New York respectively when the play premiered two decades ago, and F. Murray Abraham won an Oscar for the movie version.) The Salieri of *Amadeus* has dedicated his life to serving God with his music, only to discover that the divine gift for music has been bestowed instead upon Mozart (played by Michael Sheen), who, by all appearances, scarcely deserves it. Shaffer's story once again becomes a tussle between man and God. The enraged Salieri resolves to destroy the gifted composer who, in Salieri's mind, is God's protégé on earth.

By now many will be familiar with Shaffer's portrait of the genius Mozart — a spoiled "obscene child" with a penchant for scatological humor and baby-talk. Shaffer didn't entirely invent this portrait. Mozart's letters and contemporary accounts bear witness to the infantile side of the sublime composer. Shaffer laughs recalling then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher's outrage after attending a performance of *Amadeus* at Britain's National Theatre. "She didn't go very much to the theater and the first time she came to the National was to see *Amadeus*. She was very shocked. She turned to Peter Hall and said, 'I'm sure he wasn't a bit like that.' Peter explained that the author had taken a long time over the research and offered to send her copies of Mozart's letters. She just turned those glacial eyes upon Peter and said, 'I think I said he was not a bit like that!'"

The image of Mozart as a porcelain child seated at a porcelain harpsichord, Shaffer explains, is a 19th-century conceit. "He was always called the divine cherub. But that's a way of trivializing him. I think that Mozart was much too serious to




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for the first time? "Any sen-
tence ending in Mozart —
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'Have you had a nice
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appear serious, if you know what I mean." For Shaffer, Mozart's great appeal as a character was the "difference between the man who would revel in endless jokes about farting and very possibly the same day write the slow movement of the Clarinet Concerto."

One of the problems he faced when he started writing the play, Shaffer continues, was the question of how to bring Mozart onstage for the first time. "Any sentence ending in Mozart — 'Good morning, Mozart' or 'Have you had a nice breakfast, Mozart?' — seemed ridiculous. In a moment of impulse I decided to have him come on as a cat chasing a mouse. The mouse is Constanze [who became his wife]. She goes 'squeak, squeak' and he runs after her on all fours. And of course, his first word is 'meow.' So it is only later in the scene that Salieri [who is watching unobserved] realizes who it is. I wanted to have all the scatology — the real shock of it — all there at the beginning, so you could follow it immediately with Salieri hearing that beautiful third movement from the Serenade for Winds."

Subsequently, reading a memoir by Karoline Pichler, one of Mozart's contemporaries, Shaffer says he was struck by a passage in which the author describes how Mozart sat down at the piano and played a wonderful set of variations holding everyone in thrall like a "German Orpheus." But then, Pichler writes, "he suddenly tired of it, jumped up, and in the mad mood which so often came over him, he began to leap over tables and chairs, meow like a cat, and turn somersaults like an unruly boy."

Shaffer, who was born in Liverpool in 1926, started his career writing detective novels pseudonymously and jointly with his twin brother Anthony (author of the hit thriller *Sleuth*). After writing for both radio and television he scored a success in 1958 with his first stage play, *Five Finger Exercises*, which was directed on both sides of the Atlantic by Sir John Gielgud. Shaffer's reputation was cemented six years later in 1964 with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* — an epic drama that pits the Spanish conquistador Pizarro

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against the Inca sun-god Atahualpa.

Shaffer's next two plays, *Black Comedy* and *Equus*, both directed by John Dexter, called for equally striking visuals. Shaffer's thriller *Equus*, in which a self-doubting psychiatrist winds up envying his patient's primitive passion, staged by Dexter with stylized horses and a frank nude scene, proved Shaffer's biggest box-office hit.

It is *Amadeus*, however, a hit onstage as well as on screen, which has stood the test of time and, in its current incarnation, is establishing itself as a modern classic. When the idea of a revival with David Suchet was first presented to him, Shaffer first asked Hall if he would be interested in directing the play again. "Peter said he couldn't remember most of what he did in the original production, and was excited to work on it again. So it was lovely to work on the play with the same director, both of us fired with a new enthusiasm."

Ever since the original London production in 1979, Shaffer has been reworking the text of *Amadeus*. By the time the play arrived on Broadway, one year later, Shaffer had refashioned the part of Salieri, moving the character into the "wicked center" of the action. For the movie, Shaffer adapted the play to suit the demands of the medium, even writing a completely different ending. Revisiting *Amadeus* for its current revival, Shaffer has once more worked on his script, making changes to the final scenes which he hopes will bring more humanity to help Salieri's character. "I was never happy with the melodrama — with capes and masks and things — and I have been trying to find a much more human climax," says Shaffer. "I think now it moves away from melodrama into a kind of tragedy."

Some of the other changes in the 1999 edition of *Amadeus* are subtle and may be simply a matter of emphasis, Shaffer explains. The current production, he remarks, could be viewed as a set of transparencies — the 20th-century (the audience) looking at the 19th-century (Salieri who died in 1825) recalling the 18th-century. "I just want to give the play a new lease on life, a new vivacity, and a new theatricality." □

Gerard Raymond is a freelance writer living in New York City.

Amadeus runs at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles through November 28. For tickets, call (213) 628-2772.



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