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FOR A FULL two hours, *Amadeus* is by and large a splendid film, lavish, exuberant, full of spectacle and vitality. But intoxicated by its own success, it unwisely chooses to go on and on, overstaying its welcome by a good half hour. The added time diminishes the grandeur that came before by accentuating weaknesses that might otherwise have gone undetected and further debilitates a curious ending that is the film's most vulnerable point.

*Amadeus*'s source is the stage hit, winner of five Tonys, that playwright Peter Shaffer, who also wrote the screenplay, calls "a fantasia on themes from Mozart's life." Intrigued by the repeated rumors that Antonio Salieri—one of the most popular composers of the late eighteenth century but now nearly forgotten—confessed to having poisoned Wolfgang Amadeus, his younger, more talented and more impecunious rival, Shaffer constructed a drama of creative jealousy and revenge that hinged on the clever notion that it was only Salieri out of all Vienna who recognized the extent of Mozart's prodigious genius.

Though *Amadeus* won all those Tonys, it had considerable weakness as a play, including a thinness of plot and an emphasis on the childishly scatological nature of Mozart's personality, his delight in obscene rhyming games and nonsense verse, that while historically accurate was nonetheless wearing to sit through. The film version's greatest success is in how it solves those difficulties and gives the movie a feeling of fullness and substance that the play could not manage.

Since Vienna no longer looks as it did in Mozart's time, *Amadeus* was shot in Prague, and working in his native Czechoslovakia for the first time in nearly twenty years seems to have energized director Milos Forman. He moves the film right along, refusing to give in to the lethargy that sometimes besets costume dramas, and is not at all flustered by the boastfully epic nature of the production, which features, press material dutifully proclaims, the burning of 27,000 candles and "one of the largest wig budgets in film history."

Though some of *Amadeus*'s self-consciously elaborate preparations fall flat—we see precious little of exterior Prague, and Twyla Tharp's months of toil on authentically Mozartian opera dances is barely visible—other parts work exceedingly well. The Czech government was prevailed upon to let Forman use a half-dozen vintage palaces whose mint-condition interiors were stuffed with state-owned antiquities, and the result is that this is one period picture that feels throbbingly authentic and whose actors look like they actually

live in their costumes, not rent them for the duration. Even though screenwriter Shaffer has added new characters and expanded the parts of others—Jeffrey Jones makes an especially witty impression as Emperor Joseph II—it is the glories of *Amadeus*'s physical setting, lovingly photographed by longtime Forman collaborator Miroslav Ondricek, as well as Mozart's nonpareil music, provided by the protean Neville Marriner and his Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Orchestra, that gives the film a needed boost whenever the drama falters.

Feeling that star physiognomies would be a distraction, Forman insisted on casting unfamiliar faces for the primary roles, each of which presents its particular difficulties. The challenge for Mozart is to make a colossal wit bearable, to take a character who posterity views as a genius but who appeared to his contemporaries as an "unprincipled, spoiled, conceited brat," with an idiotic braying laugh thrown into the bargain, and show him as a sympathetic human being. Helped by Shaffer's rewriting of the role—"In the film he is a more ordinary, rather childish man. . . . We had to humanize him and make him a more rounded character"—Tom Hulce, one of the younger members of the *Animal House* cast, manages the task so well that what we remember most are not the asinine moments but the quieter ones, as when Mozart apologizes to the emperor with a quiet "Majesty, I am a vulgar man but my music is not."

For F. Murray Abraham, a nasty drug dealer in *Scarface*, the task of portraying Antonio Salieri is equally daunting. He is the film's narrator, telling, 30 years after the fact, his version of the decade-long rivalry with Mozart that ended with the latter's premature death in 1791. Abraham is especially good at delineating the angst that motivated the conniving Salieri, his anger at an obtuse deity who would "choose a childish idiot to be his instrument," and his subsequent vow to take revenge on god by destroying the man.

The push-pull between these two antagonists works quite well for a couple of hours, as does the interaction between the drama and the spectacle, but by postponing the climax for an additional 38 minutes to superfluously chronicle the genesis of *The Magic Flute*, *Amadeus* brings its weaknesses into sharper relief. A lingering theatricality hangs over the picture, and the dialogue can never quite make up its mind whether to be conventionally archaic, as when Mozart says of his wife, "She is tired, poor creature," or jarringly modern, as when she says of him, "He really needs this job." By the time the finale is allowed to appear, something highly dramatic is badly needed, but Shaffer has written a closing segment that is different from the play's and puny to boot. A movie that tries so hard and so successfully for verisimilitude owes itself an ending more convincing and less attenuated.