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The Rivals

AMADEUS. Directed by Milos Forman. Produced by Saul Zaentz. Written by Peter Shaffer. Choreography by Twyla Tharp. Music conducted by Neville Marriner. With Tom Hulce and F. Murray Abraham. At the Piedmont.

By George Paul Csicsery

This week's nationwide release of *Amadeus* is being watched with more than a tinge of expectation in Berkeley. The film happens to be a product of the Berkeley-based Saul Zaentz Company. Its completion and release are the climax of a three-and-a-half year effort by producer Saul Zaentz and director Milos Forman to turn Peter Shaffer's successful play about Mozart into a major motion picture.

Zaentz and Forman decided very early on not to cast name actors in the lead parts. As a result, W.A. Mozart is played by an unknown named Tom Hulce, and the part of Antonio Salieri is played by F. Murray Abraham, who is perhaps best remembered as a villain in last year's goriest picture, *Scarface*.

Amadeus required over six months of cinematography in Milos Forman's native Czechoslovakia. Ironically, Forman, who made his international reputation with his early Czech films, had not been home since 1969. But the city of Prague turned out to be the perfect place in which to recreate Mozart's 18th century Vienna. The *Amadeus* crew were given access to palaces in Prague, as well as furniture from museums to decorate their sets. The most spectacular coup came when Forman was given permission to use the Tyl Theater, the 18th century wooden theater where Mozart had actually conducted the world premiere of his opera "Don Giovanni."

The authentic period look of the film is reason enough to see it. There are shots taken in the Kromeriz Palace that beg to be freeze-framed. There are also dozens of musical sequences, several involving staged performances from operas. The prerecorded music was conducted by Neville Marriner and the St. Martin in the Fields orchestra in England. Ballet performances in the opera sequences were choreographed by Twyla Tharp. But beyond the lavish costumes and sets is an unusual story presented in an even more unusual way.

The production values in *Amadeus* hint at a major studio style, but happily the film avoids the common peril of major studio productions: upbeat stories about success, the



victory of the good, and all of the unbearable sugary themes that guarantee the widest possible audience acceptance. Even a biographical masterpiece like *Gandhi* lapses into a pretentious deifi-

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cation of its subject. *Amadeus* takes a much riskier approach, diving headlong into the murky philosophical and ethical dilemmas posed by Peter Shaffer in his original play. Films about artists often dwell on how poorly they're treated, how often they're misunderstood.

Usually, the point of view is sympathetic to the artist, going overboard to show his sensitivity versus the unfeeling wretches around him. American films are particularly keen on this theme, and not only with regard to artists. In last year's *The Right Stuff*, for instance, it was astronauts who were being misunderstood by unfeeling space scientists and NASA administrators, as well as by LBJ and a whole world of politicians. Mozart should have been so lucky... but that's another point. In *Amadeus*, Mozart is not simply a victim of his society's insensitivities—although these abound. While Mozart endures plenty of mistreatment, he's not such a nice guy himself. (His arrogance and pomposity alone would be sufficient to generate a dozen new Phil Kaufman villains.)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) is considered by many to be the world's greatest composer. He also happened to live in a period of unparalleled cultural creativity and social grandeur. Mozart was a child prodigy. His father recognized his talent and cultivated it. By the age of seven Mozart had composed violin sonatas. Although he lived only 35 years, the list of his works runs to 626 distinct compositions. Among them are 23 operas, 20 masses, 27 piano concertos, and 49 symphonies. He is unmatched as a prolific genius. Mozart's tragedy was that he was a spoiled *wunderkind* who never recovered from being pampered at all the royal courts of Europe. As an adult he became a conceited, lecherous, alcoholic gambler with no respect for decorum. Tom Hulce, who portrays

Mozart in *Amadeus*, makes him look like any of a dozen big name rock stars who burned out and died during the last decade. There are some remarkable differences, however. The first is that while Mozart died at a young age, he worked until the very end. His music never went into decline, even when his body did. Another difference is that Mozart never reaped the huge rewards (money and recognition) of most burned-out rock stars. He was simply unable to fend for himself. His vulgar talk and lack of respect alienated his social betters, and he lacked the sophistication to be diplomatic on his own behalf. He died a pauper and was buried in a common grave outside the gates of Vienna.

So *Amadeus* is not a straightforward unveiling of the tragic life of a genius: as in Schaffer's play, the movie dramatizes the relationship between Mozart and Antonio Salieri, a contemporary of Mozart's employed by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II. *Amadeus* presents Mozart largely through Salieri's very prejudiced point of view, thereby superimposing a second tragedy over the story.

Salieri's internal turmoil enriches the film with another set of passions. His emotions confront the audience with its own mediocrity, its own sense of inadequacy in the face of genius. Because Mozart's story is told by a demented Salieri, it becomes impossible to enjoy Mozart's tragic life story vicariously. The Salieri jealousy motif cuts off that option, making us aware of the alternative to genius, which is mediocrity.

Salieri is a celibate cleric who has worked his way up to the job of Imperial Court Composer. He is a hard worker, observes all the rules, and his music is well liked. Unfortunately, Mozart waltzes into the office one day and makes mincemeat of Salieri's most prized efforts. Everything the irreverent brat comes up with is perfect, and Salieri is smart enough to appreciate it. He becomes obsessed with a deter-

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