

# The SHAKESPEARE Theatre of New Jersey

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a study guide

compiled and arranged by  
the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre of  
New Jersey

# AMADEUS

a support packet for studying the play and attending The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Main Stage production

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The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is an independent, professional theatre located on the Drew University campus.

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## Amadeus: A Brief Introduction

Peter Shaffer's acclaimed and award-winning 1979 drama *Amadeus* blends history and legend to explore classic, universal themes of the struggle between genius and mediocrity, the corrosive power of envy, and the artist's desire to live beyond his or her time. Salieri spends the duration of the play seeking understanding if not forgiveness, telling his story in flashbacks that reveal what he did in pursuit of fame and his personal battle with the God who he feels betrayed him by bestowing him with talent, but not genius.

Antonio Salieri begins his story on the last day of his life, in 1823, telling the audience about how, as a child, he made a bargain with God: in return for living a pious and virtuous life, he asked God for the talent to create divine music. After a series of fortunate events—a family friend paying for his musical education, being offered a position as the court composer to the Austrian emperor, and so on, Salieri believes that God has accepted his bargain.

Then he meets Mozart, an immature and obnoxious child prodigy whose love of crude humor and mischief is only equalled by his seemingly infinite musical talents. Salieri can only conclude that, although he is the more virtuous man, God has instead chosen his rival Mozart to create divine and eternal artwork. Unable to reconcile the grace and genius of Mozart's compositions with the boorishness of the composer, Salieri decides that God has inexplicably chosen to work through Mozart to torment him. Salieri abandons his former vow of virtue and dedicates the remainder of his life to waging war against this unjust God by attempting to undermine and destroy Mozart. In realizing that he has just enough talent to be successful, but not enough to be immortal, Salieri becomes consumed with envy and bitterness.

Peter Shaffer based *Amadeus* on the legend that the historical Antonio Salieri confessed to poisoning Mozart on his deathbed. Whether there is any truth to this, we cannot know, although there is no real empirical evidence of it—Salieri's family and the two nurses who attended him in his old age denied hearing any such confession, and it is generally believed that Mozart died of a simple illness.

It is certainly true that, throughout the two composers' lifetimes, they interacted personally and professionally. Some sources say that they got along well and even collaborated on a piano concerto, while others say that they were very competitive, perhaps giving rise to the poisoning legend. Salieri was chosen over Mozart more than once, for the position of Imperial *Kapellmeister* and as the music tutor to the Princess Elizabeth, which could easily have become a cause of friction between the composers. The poisoning legend was also enhanced by its use in Aleksandr Pushkin's short play *Mozart and Salieri*, which was adapted into an opera by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

From its first production in 1979 until the latest Broadway revival in 1998, *Amadeus* has been a theatrical work-in-progress. The climactic scene of Mozart and Salieri's final meeting has been rewritten by Shaffer more than five times, along with many other revisions. The first production at London's National Theatre in 1979 was directed by Sir Peter Hall and starred Paul Scofield as Salieri and Simon Callow as Mozart. This production was a enormous box office success, with audience members lining up to purchase tickets at 6:30 in the morning to be sure that they could get seats. It later moved to London's West End, with Frank Finlay taking the role of Salieri. In 1980, *Amadeus* transferred to Broadway, starring Ian McKellen as Salieri and Tim Curry as Mozart and ran for 1,

181 performances. This production earned seven Tony Award nominations, winning five, including Best Actor for McKellen. The play was revived on Broadway with a revised script in 1998 and ran until 2000, receiving Tony nominations for Best Revival and Best Actor. In addition, there was a major movie adaptation in 1984, starring F. Murray Abraham as Salieri and Tom Hulce as Mozart. The screenplay was completely reworked from the play by Peter Shaffer and the film's director, Milos Forman, and new scenes were added to make the story more cinematic. In 1985, the film version of *Amadeus* was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, winning eight, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor (F. Murray Abraham), Costume Design, Adapted Screenplay (Shaffer), Art Direction, Best Make-up, and Best Sound.

Since its debut nearly thirty years ago, *Amadeus*, has been produced in theatres across the English-speaking world and has become one of Shaffer's most highly-acclaimed and best-known plays. Its central themes are universal and resonant. As the play's first director, Sir Peter Hall, explains, *Amadeus* "looks unblinkingly at the rest of us, who are neither blessed nor cursed (like Mozart) with genius. It analyzes with compassion and wit how desperately ordinary most of us are. For however talented we may secretly believe ourselves to be, we remain in the great scheme of things, relative mediocrities. Only genius goes on creating whatever the circumstances; it needs neither success nor recognition to sustain it: van Gogh never sold a painting. Only genius makes its own rules."



Mozart, played by Jordan Coughtry, conducts his opera as the other characters, including Salieri (Robert Cucciolli) look on in the 2008 Main Stage production of *Amadeus*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein.

## Amadeus: A Brief Synopsis

The first act opens in 1823 with the citizens of Vienna whispering “Salieri” and “assassin” as Antonio Salieri himself appears, a sick old man in a wheelchair. The Venticelli, (“little winds”) who serve as the gossipy narrators throughout the play, explain that Salieri has just confessed to poisoning his rival Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart some 32 years ago. Salieri then makes his confession to the audience, and explains how his lifelong desire for musical greatness led to his hatred and jealousy of Mozart.

Flashing back to 1781, the play introduces Salieri’s younger self, his wife Teresa, and his pupil Katherina. At this time, Salieri’s goal was to become “First Royal *Kappellmeister*,” the music master to the Austrian court, but the *Kappellmeister* at the time, *Kapellmeister* Bonno, was seventy years old and “apparently immortal.” Soon after, we are introduced to Mozart and his wife-to-be, Constanze. When Mozart mentions marriage, Constanze says that Mozart’s father will never agree to the match. He asks her to defy his father and marry him anyway.

Shortly afterward, the Austrian Emperor excitedly awaits Mozart’s arrival at the palace. Salieri asks permission to play a March of Welcome that he has composed in Mozart’s honor, and the Emperor agrees. Mozart’s overly effusive, hand-kissing greeting of the Emperor only confirms Salieri’s suspicions about his character. When the two men are left alone, Mozart tells Salieri that he plans to cast Katherina as the lead in the opera which the Emperor has commissioned from him, and Salieri seethes at the thought of his pupil being stolen from him. Unwittingly, Mozart rubs more salt in the wound, calling Salieri’s march a “jolly little thing,” then sitting down and playing it from memory, adding improvements and flourishes of his own on the spot.

The new opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, fails to please the taste of the Emperor and his officials, and Mozart finds himself forced to awkwardly (and rudely) seek Salieri’s advice. While acting as Mozart’s friend, Salieri begins to maneuver behind the scenes to hold the young composer back. Having married Constanze, Mozart finds himself in dire financial straits, with a wife to support and very little money coming in as no one will trust him with young female students from good families.

At a musical evening, an argument erupts between Mozart comes in and Constanze, with each accusing the other of infidelity. Although they make up, when Mozart leaves the room, Constanze tells Salieri that she and Mozart are desperate for money, and asks him to help get Mozart a job at court. Salieri, hoping to pay Mozart back for wooing Katherina away from him, asks Constanze to meet with him alone at his home the next day.

Although Constanze refuses and runs away, the next day she shows up at Salieri’s apartment to show him some of Mozart’s manuscripts in hopes of convincing him that Mozart’s talents merit a “royal appointment.” He asks Constanze for a kiss as recompense for his assistance, but when she realizes his true objective, the seduction falls apart. Salieri realizes that far from remaining a virtuous man of God, he has nearly turned into an adulterer because of his envy of Mozart. After Constanze leaves, Salieri tears open the scores and leafs through them, realizing to his dismay that they are “perfect,” far beyond his own ability. Collapsing, he curses God for choosing Mozart, “a giggling child,” to be his divine mouthpiece, and declares war on God in the person of his messenger, Mozart.

As act two begins, in 1823 yet again, the elderly Salieri describes the

opening salvo of his war on God. When Constanze returns ready to sleep with him if it will get her husband a job, he pushes her from the apartment. Instead, as he reveals, he seduces Katherina and has her as his mistress for several years, even as he thwarts Mozart’s career by spreading the rumor that Mozart cannot be left alone with young women.

Mozart has begun work on a new Italian opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, based on a French stage comedy. Salieri secretly teams up with Orsini-Rosenberg, the director of the Viennese Royal Opera, to prevent the “vulgar farce” from being produced. Although Salieri recognizes it as a masterpiece, he eventually gets it cancelled, telling Mozart that the public response was poor.

A despairing Mozart plans to leave Vienna for England, but is unable to get his father to agree to support his family while he is abroad. Soon after, the Venticelli arrive with the news that Mozart’s father has died, further devastating the composer. Even as Mozart sinks into illness and poverty, Salieri rises (despite his malicious deeds), achieving his long-desired post as *Kapellmeister*.

Meeting Salieri on the street, Mozart tells him he can’t sleep at night because he has nightmares of a mysterious ghostly figure in a grey cloak who has commissioned him to write a requiem (funeral) mass. The Venticelli comment that Mozart’s sanity seems to be failing. While he frantically composes, Constanze leaves with their children and his health continues to deteriorate. Salieri resolves to steer Mozart into offending the powerful social organization, the Masons, by writing an opera that includes secret Masonic rituals.

As Salieri suspects, *The Magic Flute* infuriates the Masons. The Imperial librarian (and censor) Van Swieten tells Mozart that his career is now ruined. Salieri resolves to push Mozart over the brink of madness, disguising himself as the “figure in grey,” and visiting Mozart’s house, urging the exhausted composer to finish his requiem while he still has time. At last, with Mozart on the point of collapse, Salieri reveals himself, and the desperately ill Mozart dies, bewildered that his “friend” has betrayed him.

The elderly Salieri reveals that he lived on for 32 years and experienced God’s revenge, as Mozart’s growing fame slowly but steadily pushed him into obscurity. Even in claiming to have poisoned Mozart, he has failed to achieve the fame he always wanted, for no one believes him. In the end, he is nothing but “Antonio Salieri, patron saint of Mediocrities,” and in that bitter knowledge, he “blesses” the audience before his death: “mediocrities everywhere — now and to come — I absolve you all. Amen!”

# Peter Shaffer: A Biography

Sir Peter Shaffer was born May 15, 1926, in Liverpool, England. His family moved to London when Peter and his twin brother Anthony (who also became a writer) were ten. Peter attended Hall School and St. Paul's School in his youth, and in 1944 he joined the World War II National Service, working in the Chislet coal mine as one of the "Bevin Boys," a group organized by Ernest Bevin, Churchill's Minister of Labour. Shaffer then attended Trinity College at Cambridge, where he received a B.A. in History. Following their graduation, Shaffer and his brother co-wrote several detective novels under the pseudonym Peter Anthony, including *The Woman in the Wardrobe* (1951), *How Doth the Little Crocodile?* (1952), and *Withered Murder* (1955).

From 1951 to 1954, Shaffer lived in New York and worked various jobs: at the Doubleday bookstore, an airline terminal, Grand Central Station, Lord and Taylor department store, and the New York Public Library. During this difficult period, he struggled with the perception that his passion for the theatre could never be more than a hobby, and that he needed a more "respectable" profession. Finally, after he went back to London to work at the music publishing house Boosey and Hawkes, Shaffer resolved to make playwriting his career.

His first television play, in 1955, *The Salt Land*, was successful enough that he quit his job and decided to "live now on [his] literary wits." Over the next few years, Shaffer worked as a literary critic for the weekly review *Truth*, while his *Balance of Terror* appeared on television, and *The Prodigal Father* was broadcast on the radio. Shaffer's first stage play, *Five Finger Exercise*, was produced in 1968, with very successful runs in both London and New York City. The play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best foreign play of the 1959-60 season.

In 1962, a double-bill of Shaffer's comedies *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye* was staged in London, and the next year he wrote a screenplay for William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* with British director Peter Brook. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* premiered at the Chicaster Festival in 1964 before moving to London's National Theatre; Sir Laurence Olivier then commissioned *Black Comedy* for the National Theatre's 1965 repertoire. At this time, Shaffer began dividing his time between living in Manhattan and England, and in 1967 *White Lies* (one year later revised as *White Liars*) opened along with the U. S. premiere of *Black Comedy* in New York.

Shaffer wrote three major stage plays in the 1970s: *The Battle of Shrivings* (1970), *Equus* (1973), and *Amadeus* (1979). *Equus*, in which a young man with a dangerous spiritual obsession with horses is treated by a psychiatrist struggling to find meaning and greatness in his life, won the 1975 Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play. He would repeat this success with *Amadeus* in 1981. The film adaptation of the play, in collaboration with director Milos Forman, won the 1984 Oscar for Best Picture, and Shaffer's reputation as a major writer was cemented.

Following the success of *Amadeus*, Shaffer's biblical epic *Yonadab* premiered at London's National Theatre in 1985. Shaffer wrote the commercial comedy *Lettice and Lovage* for actress Maggie Smith in 1987; a revised version was produced in London in 1988 and New York in 1990, and it remains one of his greatest box office successes. His most recent stage play was *The Gift of the Gorgon*, produced in London in 1992, the same year in which he won the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre.

He was appointed Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University in 1994, and awarded a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II in 2001.

Most of Shaffer's plays explore the Nietzschean dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian: which is to say, the intellectual and the emotional aspects of artistic genius. Commonly, the more violent and mysterious Dionysian aspects of art demonstrate their superiority in Shaffer's plays. Benedict Nightingale of *The New York Times* has summarized Shaffer's work as follows: "His plays traverse the centuries and the globe, raising questions that have perplexed minds from Job to Samuel Beckett." The variety of his work and its spirit of probing inquiry on universal themes mean have ensured that Shaffer remains one of the most important playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Salieri (Robert Cuccioli) watches as his rival Mozart (Jordan Coughtry) sinks into despair and madness in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2008 Main Stage production of *Amadeus*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein.

# Commentary and Criticism

“*Amadeus* is a marvelously engrossing and often amusing costume thriller, a feast for the eye and the ear, a vehicle for immense acting performances, and a pretty fair introduction to the musical genius, if not the personal charms, of W.A. Mozart.”

Steve Grant  
Review in *The Observer*, Nov. 11, 1979

“Lovers of Mozart... should be profoundly grateful to Peter Shaffer for the courage with which he has faced an eternal mystery, and the humility and grace with which he has offered a tentatively eternal solution to it.”

Bernard Levin  
*The Times* of London, Dec. 6, 1979

“*Amadeus* has been dismissed as a costume piece set in the sumptuous decor of eighteenth-century Prague and, alternatively, as a yuppie dose of ‘heavy’ culture and Music Appreciation. I find, on the contrary, that Shaffer has tried to ask some penetratingly eternal and personal questions about the position of the artist in the world, the relationship of success to true worth, and the vagaries, not to say the inaccuracies, of our artistic judgments.”

Peter V. Conroy, Jr.  
“*Amadeus* on Stage and Screen”  
*Postscript: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, Fall 1989

“Myths will continue to pursue Mozart. *Amadeus*, play and film, has already created another, and it may prove difficult to dissuade the public from the current Shafferian view of the composer as a divinely gifted drunken lout.”

H.C. Robbins Landon  
*1791: Mozart's Last Year*

“I am more and more interested in the fact that Mozart was not a revolutionary *artist*, but a *social* revolutionary in a feudal world. In many respects he was the first star, the first freelance... Artists at that time were servants... But Mozart wanted to be a star, wanted to be recognized for his uniqueness... He was revolutionary in that.”

Peter Hall  
*Diaries*, 1983

“Shaffer merely reinterprets the confused rambling of an old man in decline as an ingenious ploy in the chess game of posthumous reputation. In that way, the motif of the poison legend is maintained, and Salieri remains a minor musician obsessed by jealousy, envy and revenge, and never inspired to create anything remarkable. And by a remarkable ironic twist, the composer Antonio Salieri, once almost forgotten and even ignored by musicologists, is now enjoying a revival and new performances of his works.”

Volkmar Braunbehrens  
*Maligned Master: The Real Story of Antonio Salieri*

## The Author Speaks

“The legend of the gray messenger... for me came to signify... Envy, glued in place like a sentinel outside the dwelling of Genius, a macabre and yet pitiable icon of consuming artistic jealousy.”

“I tried to write a play, not history... But there are certain facts... All the elements of the play are as near to the facts as I could verify. Then I tried to work them into a dramatic climax.”

“The conflict between virtuous mediocrity and feckless genius took hold of my imagination and would not leave me alone.”

“To me, there is something pure about Salieri's pursuit of an eternal Absolute through music, just as there is something irredeemably impure about his simultaneous pursuit of eternal fame.”

“My own apprehension of the divine is very largely aesthetic... The creation of the *C minor Mass* or the final act of *Antony and Cleopatra* seem to me to give a point to evolution; most human activities do not.”

Peter Shaffer



This portrait of Mozart was made by Jean-Baptiste Greuze while the musical prodigy, then about 7 or 8, was on a concert tour of Europe with his father and his sister Nannerl. From the collection of Yale University's Collection of Musical Instruments.

# Mozart: The Man Behind the Music

Born Johann Chrysostom Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart on January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart began playing the clavier (a type of keyboard) and composing his own pieces before the age of five, to the delight of his father, who was himself a musician and teacher. Mozart and his older sister, Nannerl, toured Europe for much of their childhood, giving concerts as child prodigies. Eventually Mozart and his father, Leopold, began touring by themselves and showcasing the teenage Mozart's incredible skills at performance and composition.

In 1733, he became a court musician in Salzburg, where he enjoyed considerable freedom with the range of works he was able to compose, from symphonies to concertos. Still, he was discontented with his low salary and the limited opportunities for composing opera, although a 1775 trip to Munich led to a production of the then-18-year-old's opera, *The Phony Gardener*.

He continued to travel throughout Europe in search of a more fulfilling (and lucrative) job, and it was on one of these trips that Mozart's mother fell ill and died in 1778 while in Paris. Discouraged by his mother's death and disheartened by a young soprano named Aloysia Weber, who did not return his affections, Mozart left Salzburg for Vienna, where he began to work as a freelance composer, breaking with both his father's wishes and the tradition of composing only for a single aristocratic patron. His career began to blossom with successful operatic compositions such as *The Abduction From the Seraglio*, and in 1782 he married Aloysia's younger sister, Constanze Weber.

By 1787 Mozart had become a major composer of opera, with two of his most famous works: *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) and *Don*

*Giovanni* (1787). He finally obtained a steady post under Emperor Joseph II, but he remained dissatisfied, lamenting to his wife that the pay was "too much for what I do, too little for what I could do."

Mozart's final great opera, *The Magic Flute*, premiered in 1791, and quickly became very popular. His financial situation was finally improving, but he fell ill while in Prague, obsessed with composing his *Requiem*. It is unknown precisely what illness he contracted, but it is extremely unlikely that he was actually poisoned by Salieri. Mozart died on December 5, 1791, and was quickly buried in a simple grave according to Viennese health policies for persons dying of disease. There were few mourners at the burial (again typical of the situation): his life was instead celebrated with memorial services and concerts which were widely attended.

Mozart is heralded today as one of the greatest musical geniuses the world has ever known, and his compositions continue to enjoy great popularity with performers and listeners alike. In part due to his early death, the man himself remains something of an enigma, which has only contributed to his appeal. Audiences have enjoyed Mozart's delicate yet complex music for over two hundred years, and it is certain that his pieces will remain just as popular in the future.

The best of Mozart's works cannot be even slightly rewritten without diminishment.

-Peter Shaffer

## Salieri: A Man Overlooked

Born on August 18, 1750, Antonio Salieri was raised in a wealthy family of merchants in Legnago, Italy. In his youth he studied violin and harpsichord with his brother Francesco, a student of Guiseppe Tartini. As a child, Salieri would follow his brother to neighboring towns to hear him perform, often without his parents' permission. After the untimely death of his parents, Salieri moved to Padua, then to Venice, where he studied thoroughbass with Giovanni Battista Pescetti.

In Venice, he met Florian Leopold Gassmann in 1766, who invited him to attend the court of Vienna. There he was trained by Gassmann based on Johann Joseph Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*. Antonio Salieri would remain in Vienna for the rest of his life. After Gassmann's death in 1774, Salieri was appointed court composer by Emperor Joseph II. He met Therese von Helfferstorfer that year, and in the same year they were married. They went on to have eight children. In 1788, Salieri became Royal and Imperial *Kapellmeister* (the director of music at the royal court, responsible for supervising musicians in the emperor's service), a position he held until 1824. Salieri was president of the Austrian *Tonkünstler-Societät* (society of musical artists) from 1788 to 1795, vice president after 1795, and in charge of its concerts until 1818, and was clearly a respected figure among his fellow composers and musicians.

In his prime, Salieri was among the most famous and socially prominent composers in Europe. As a renowned teacher of orchestral music and composition, his students included Ludwig van Beethoven,

Carl Czerny, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Franz Liszt, Giacomo Myerbeer, Ignaz Moscheles, Franz Schubert, and Franz Xaver Sussmayer. Mozart's young son, Franz Xaver Mozart, was himself a student of Salieri some year's after his famous father's death. Beyond his own output as a composer, Salieri made many contributions to the development of late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century music.

There is some evidence that Mozart felt that his upward trajectory was thwarted by Salieri's prestige in the Viennese court, but no real evidence of a feud between the men. Mozart's letters to his wife describe the two composers traveling together to the opera with every appearance of amity.

Nonetheless, by the time of Mozart's death, his brilliance was rapidly eclipsing Salieri's modest operas, and by the time Salieri died, his work had been largely forgotten. Only in the last decade has there been a major resurgence of interest in Salieri's work, with significant recordings.

In 1825, after a lengthy hospitalization, the 75-year-old Salieri died and was buried in the Matzleinsdorfer Friedhof (his remains were later transferred to the Zentralfriedhof) in Vienna. Preceding his death, Salieri suffered a physical and mental breakdown, but there is nothing else to substantiate the rumors that he accused himself of being responsible for Mozart's death as he lay on his own deathbed.

# Amadeus and the End of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment refers to a philosophical movement in early-to-mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe and the Americas during which values shifted from a centuries-old tradition that privileged order, continuity and an individual's subjection to God and the monarch towards new values of independent thought, logical reasoning, creativity, and innovation.

The essential feature of Enlightenment thinking was *critical questioning*— critical questioning applied rigorously and systematically to all traditional institutions, customs, and morals. Enlightenment philosophers believed that logical reasoning could clarify and reorganize all areas of human activity, personal and political. Not just medieval traditions, but in particular the savage religious wars that ravaged Europe in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had convinced many that progress was being thwarted by a tyranny of irrational superstition. The Enlightenment was dedicated to the proposition that the clear, cool light of reason would ultimately sweep away these customs and prejudices, and lead to the establishment of a just, peaceful and thoroughly rational society across Europe and its colonies.

Where medieval philosophy had generally acknowledged mysticism and revelation to be the primary sources of knowledge, the Enlightenment strove to establish new standards for truth. Indeed, thinkers like Michel de Montaigne and René Descartes began to develop a new science of thought, epistemology, the study of knowledge itself.

Starting from a position of extreme skepticism, these philosophers attempted to strip the term “knowledge,” from any proposition that was not grounded in absolute logic and self-evident axioms. Just as physical scientists like Isaac Newton were demonstrating the extraordinary power of mathematical logic to describe the natural world, other Enlightenment thinkers saw the possibility of creating a corresponding mathematical language for morality, justice and truth itself. This movement perhaps reached its pinnacle with Baruch Spinoza's 1677 *Ethics*: structured like a geometric proof in a series of axioms and propositions, it aimed to be a truly complete and rigorously logical “theory of everything.”

This heady sense that one man, armed with sufficient discipline and logic, could comprehend the whole structure of the universe helps explain why the Enlightenment had such a potent effect on every aspect of human life. The possibilities of scientific inquiry seemed truly infinite. Since before the fall of Rome, major institutions of both Church and State had been sheltered from change by a sense of their “sacredness.” With the spread of Enlightenment thought, it was only a matter of time before skeptical inquiry spilled over into politics. Thinkers like Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau and Paine began to argue that the political rights of the individual trumped the authority of the State, indeed that governments only existed for the benefit of, and at the will of, the person.

The Enlightenment was an age of optimism— the very name was coined by the creators of the idea, convinced that they were emerging

from centuries of ignorance and darkness into a new age of reason, science and respect for humanity. The Enlightenment was profoundly reform-oriented, believing that one had only to supply the right set of ideas and guidelines for human society to rectify itself.

Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* takes place in both 1781-91, with the Enlightenment in full bloom, and in 1823, by which time the world of Western thought had undergone a sea change. In many ways, it is a story not just about the uneasy relationship between two men, but about Europe's struggle to come to terms with the consequences of the new Enlightenment ideals. Between the Enlightenment's eagerness to liberate the individual in every sphere of life and its single-minded faith in reason, there was a kind of contradiction which the late 18<sup>th</sup> century— the period of *Amadeus*— exposed.

The young Salieri, with his sensible moral code, his loyal service to the Imperial court, and his pact with God, is in many ways a man of the Enlightenment. The very idea of morality as a kind of contract, an economic exchange in which he hopes to barter good deeds for artistic genius, is a quintessentially Enlightenment concept. It was, after all, also the age that invented capitalism. Salieri believes that his art is a kind of science, to be pursued according to rules, to be progressed in according to dutiful study.

“The place throughout is Vienna. The year— to begin with—1781. The age still that of the Enlightenment: that clear time before the guillotine fell in France and cut all our lives in half.”

*Amadeus*, Act I, Scene 3

Mozart exists outside of Salieri's rules precisely because he seems to compose in a way that has no logical connection with his personality. The contradiction between the crude, lascivious, giggling man and the incomparable grace and harmony of his music is so great that it shatters Salieri's rational faith. There can be

no pact with God to achieve the progress he desires, and at this point he plunges into violence.

In the same way, Europe's Enlightenment idealism, at least among the ruling classes, was broken by the political upheavals it generated, especially the escalating violence of the French Revolution. The Jacobins who led that Revolution hoped to establish an entirely rational, progressive, Enlightenment society in France. Their attempt to *implement* their rational system in daily life instead became a “reign of terror.” This in turn gave way to a political “superstar,” a charismatic, eccentrically gifted individual who reshaped the political fabric of Europe. The parallels with *Amadeus* are clear.

Mozart— peculiar, inexplicable, uncanny— seems to represent the leading edge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Romanticism, a movement which would explore the degree to which every individual is governed as much by irrational desires and intuitive leaps as by the serene logic of the Enlightenment. In his suffering and descent into madness, Shaffer's Salieri tragically enacts the Enlightenment's limits.



# The Times of Salieri and Mozart: an *Amadeus* Chronology

1750: Antonio Salieri born in Legnago, Italy.

1756: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart born in Salzburg, Austria.

1761: The 5-year-old Mozart shows his first composition, *Allegro in F*, to his father.

1762: Mozart and his sister Nannerl begin touring Europe, giving concerts as child prodigies.

1763: Salieri's parents die, and he moves in with his older brother.

1764: Mozart, now 8, composes his first full symphony, *Symphony in E flat*.

1765: The teenaged Salieri moves to Venice, where he is taken in by a wealthy friend of his family, and continues his musical studies.

1766: Salieri is invited to continue his studies at the Viennese court, where he will ultimately spend the remainder of his life. The major German composer Christoph Gluck becomes his mentor and friend.

1768: Mozart completes his first major opera, *La finta semplice*. He is barely 12. The boy becomes music director of the Archbishop of Salzburg's orchestra.

1771: Salieri, now 21, composes his first grand opera, *Armida*.

1774: Upon the death of Salieri's mentor Florian Gassmann, Emperor Joseph II appoints Salieri to the post of *Kammerkomponist*, music director for the Viennese court. He also serves as music director for the Italian opera in Vienna. Salieri marries Theresa von Helferstorfer.

1775: The American Revolution begins. France, Holland, Spain and other European countries aid the colonists to curb the global dominance of the British navy and merchant marine.

1777: Mozart is dismissed by the Archbishop of Salzburg, and begins traveling Europe with his mother in search of a job.

1778: While in Paris, Mozart's mother falls ill and dies.

1779: Salieri establishes himself with the composition of several operas and liturgical pieces. Mozart returns to Salzburg, still seeking lasting employment.

1781: Mozart arrives in Vienna and competes in a pianoforte contest before Joseph II.

1782: Mozart composes his *Symphony in D* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and marries Constanze Weber.

1784: Mozart's first son to survive infancy, Karl Thomas Mozart, is born.

1786: Mozart composes the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*.

1787: Joseph II commissions Salieri to compose an Italian version of his successful French opera *Tarare*. The opera, *Axur, Re*

*d'Ormus*, premieres the following year.

Mozart composes *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (*A Little Night Music*), and *Don Giovanni*, and is appointed *Kammermusicus*, Imperial Chamber Composer. His father, Leopold Mozart, dies.

1788: Salieri is appointed Imperial *Hofkappelmeister*, the highest musical position in the Viennese court, succeeding Giuseppe Bonno. He will hold the position until 1824. Food riots erupt in France.

1789: The French Revolution begins as mobs storm the Bastille and liberate political prisoners.

1790: Mozart composes *Così fan tutte*. Emperor Joseph II dies.

Thomas Paine publishes *The Rights of Man*.

1791: Mozart's other surviving child, Franz Xaver Wolfgang Mozart, is born. Mozart composes *The Magic Flute* and *Requiem in D minor*. On December 5, Mozart dies in Vienna.

1792: Salieri attends rehearsals for the first performance of Mozart's *Requiem*.

In France, the Reign of Terror begins as aristocrats and, ultimately, all those believed to be "counterrevolutionaries," are arrested and sent to the guillotine.

1793: With the execution of Joseph II's sister, Queen Marie Antoinette of France, hostilities erupt between France and Austria.

1794-95: Salieri composes his greatest operatic successes, including *Palmira*. Both his daughters die.

1799: Salieri composes his *Mass in C* and a *Te Deum*. His piece *Liberasti nos Domine* will become a staple of church music. His former student, Beethoven, completes his *Symphony #1*.

1800: Napoleon Bonaparte, now controlling the French army, crosses the Alps and crushes the Austrian army at Marengo, effectively breaking Austria's hold on Italy. Schlegel completes a manifesto for the German Romantic movement.

1804: Salieri composes his last opera, *Die Neger*, as well as a *Requiem* which he intends for his own funeral.

1805: Salieri's son Alois dies. Napoleon's army invades Austria.

1807: Salieri's wife Theresa dies. He plays the piano for the premiere of Handel's *The Creation*. Beethoven composes his famous *Symphony #5*.

1815: Salieri produces and directs the music for the Congress of Vienna, the diplomatic conference which negotiates the map of post-Napoleonic Europe.

1823: Salieri is hospitalized for the remainder of his life. Beethoven composes his ninth and final symphony.

1825: Salieri dies in Vienna.

## Useful Terminology for Reading or Viewing the Play:

**amici cari:** Italian: ‘Dear friends’. “*Amici cari*, I was born a pair of ears, and nothing else.” (Act II, scene 19)

**aria:** A vocal piece for a soloist in an opera. “I was stumbling about the fields of Lombardy humming my arias and anthems to the Lord.” (Act I, scene 2)

**arpeggio:** playing the notes of a chord one after the other in rapid succession rather than simultaneously. “I think I shall write a Grand Fantasia for Billiard Balls! ... Whole arpeggios in ivory!” (Act I, scene 10)

**avellanati:** Italian: ‘poisoned’. “[Savagely he tears off with his teeth a piece of the manuscript and chews it fiercely—then spits it out.] AVELLANATI!” (Act II, scene 16)

**buona fortuna:** Italian: ‘Good luck’.

**capisco:** Italian: ‘I understand’. “*Capisco!* I know my fate.” (Act I, scene 12)

**cattivo:** Italian: ‘bad, naughty’. “You are being *cattivo*, court composer.” (Act I, scene 7)

**coloratura:** a passage or piece of vocal music characterized by florid and demanding ornamentation, usually consisting of rapid successions of notes. Commonly used in 18th and 19th century operatic arias. “Nowadays all cats appreciate is coloratura.” (Act II, scene 1)

**evviva:** Italian: ‘Long live—!’ “*Evviva*, Salieri!” (Act II, scene 10)

**La Generosa:** Italian: ‘the Generous One’. “I shall rechristen her *Generosa*. *La Generosa*.” (Act I, scene 11)

**libertine:** a person characterized by a lack of traditional morality,

especially pertaining to religion, sexuality, and behavior. “So rose the figure of a guilty libertine, cast into Hell!” (Act II, scene 9)

**motet:** a vocal composition, usually on a sacred text and meant to be performed in Roman Catholic services. “More motets and anthems to God’s glory.” (Act I, scene 6)

**nemico eterno:** Italian: ‘eternal Nemesis; everlasting enemy’. “I name Thee now—*Nemico eterno!*” (Act I, scene 12)

**per sempre:** Italian: ‘forever’ (Act II, scene 16)

**pietà:** Italian: ‘pity’. “*Pietà*, Mozart!... Mozart *pietà*” (Act I, scene 1)

**Requiem Mass:** in the Roman Catholic rite, a votive Mass on behalf of the dead. It is celebrated also in memory of the faithful departed on All Souls’ Day, November 2. The name derives from the first word of the liturgy for such occasions: *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*; “Grant us eternal rest, Lord.” “...you are required now by my Master to write a Requiem Mass.” (Act II, scene 13)

**salons:** the regular practice amongst France’s cultural elite (also adopted in Austria) of opening their household to invited guests to discuss various popular topics and to “be seen.” The events were usually led or hosted by the lady of the house. “I was not a sophisticate of the salons.” (Act II, scene 1)

**sforzando:** a note or chord that is played with a sudden strong accent, or a musical sign indicating this. “*Sforzando* shows excitement!” (Act I, scene 9)

**Venticelli:** Italian: literally ‘little winds.’ “[These are the two VENTICELLI: purveyors of fact, rumor and gossip throughout the play.]” (Act I, scene 1, stage directions)



Mozart (Jordan Coughtry) is haunted by a ghostly figure in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s 2008 Main Stage production of *Amadeus*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein.

## Additional Topics for Discussion

### About the Play

1. As a narrator, Salieri directly addresses the audience at many points. Compare this to other plays you may have read that employ “direct address,” in which characters speak to the audience. Why might Peter Shaffer have chosen this technique? Is Salieri a reliable narrator? What if the story had been told by Mozart? By Constanze? Entirely by the Venticelli?
2. The script specifies that many pieces of music by Mozart and Salieri be played throughout. In what ways is the music of the two composers an integral part of their story? How do the specific pieces of music enhance your understanding of the play?
3. Is Salieri, as depicted in this play, a villain? A tragic hero? Does he inspire sympathy or contempt? Does he experience any growth or enlightenment in the course of the play? Although the play is titled *Amadeus*, it seems to be Salieri’s story. Why do you think Peter Shaffer chose to tell it in this way?
4. Mozart’s middle name, Amadeus, which gives the play its title, means “beloved of God.” How is religion, or at least spirituality, an issue in this play? In what ways do Salieri and Mozart view music and religion similarly? In what ways do they view music and religion differently? How do the characters and/or the playwright equate (or at least relate) music to religion?
5. *Amadeus* is a play about real people of the 18th and 19th centuries, written by an author of the late 20th century. In what ways is it historical? In what ways is it contemporary? What is the responsibility of the playwright to historical facts when writing a play involving characters who were real people? Is the play truly about Salieri and Mozart, or is the plot only a vehicle for another message? Does a broader knowledge of history enhance your viewing of a play like this, or are its themes sufficiently universal that anyone can appreciate them?
6. What does the play imply about the concepts of genius and mediocrity? What is genius? How is it defined in the play?

### About this Production

1. Peter Shaffer’s script calls for many specific lighting and sound cues. Why do you think this he felt this specificity to be necessary in this play? The director of this production, Joe Discher, and his design team have added some new elements of their own: for example, the use of house lights and the “light box” upstage. How do these function?
2. In this production, how do the costumes and colors reflect the inner state of the characters? Why might the designer have made certain choices about Mozart and Salieri’s clothing, as well as the differences among the three women?
3. In the course of the play, Salieri (played by Robert Cuccioli) transforms several times from an old man to his younger self, and from a narrator to a participant in the action. How are these transitions achieved, and what is their effect on the audience? Did you find these changes clear and convincing?

## Follow-up Activities

1. Write a review of this production of *Amadeus*. Be sure to include specific information and your own reactions to both the acting and the design elements (lights, set, costumes and sound). Explain what you liked and disliked, and support your opinions. Then submit your review to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s Education Department, or see if it can be published in your school newspaper.
2. **Alternate Perspective.** *Amadeus* is strongly colored by the perspective of its narrator, Salieri. Rewrite a scene from the play from the perspective of another character, such as Mozart, Constanze, Theresa Salieri, or the Emperor. How does the choice of a narrative voice change the story that you tell?
3. **“Alert the media!”** Plenty of scandalous things happen in *Amadeus*— the Venticelli are a bit like a walking 24-hour news network in helping the audience stay abreast of them. Imagine how the events of this play would unfold as covered by a tabloid newspaper, cable news network, or perhaps a show like TMZ. Create appropriate media coverage, staying true to the facts of the play. An alternative to this for theatre classes is to improvise talk-show interviews with the characters of the play.
4. **“I learn by this letter...”** Write a letter from the point of view of one of the characters, discussing an event or situation in the play, for example a letter from Mozart to his father, from Salieri to his wife, or from Salieri to Constanze after Mozart’s death. Try to accurately reflect the plot of the play and the character’s motivations.
5. **Mixed Media.** Listen to one or more of the musical works referenced in the play, such as *Don Giovanni* or *The Magic Flute*, and respond to it in a different medium, such as poetry, dance, drawing or tableaux. Discuss how the medium you choose influences your response to the work. What aesthetic characteristics do they share? How did your response capture (or fail to capture) essential aspects of the music?

### Teachers:

*Do you have activities or exercises to suggest for this play? We are always looking for new ideas to inspire students (and teachers). Send your suggestions to [info@ShakespeareNJ.org](mailto:info@ShakespeareNJ.org) and we will share them with other teachers, and maybe even include them in future study guides.*

**Test Your Understanding**

1. What or who is Salieri most jealous of?
  - a) Kappellmeister Bonno
  - b) The fact that God gave Mozart talent
  - c) Mozart's wife Constanze
  - d) The fact that Mozart slept with Katherina
  
2. What are the Venticelli?
  - a) Narrators of the story
  - b) The names of Salieri's pupils
  - c) Musical terms
  - d) Italian desserts
  
3. Who is "Wolferl"?
  - a) Constanze's father
  - b) Mozart's father
  - c) Salieri's father
  - d) Mozart's nickname
  
4. During a game with Constanze, the Venticelli force her into letting them:
  - a) Feed her candy
  - b) Cook dinner for her
  - c) Style her hair
  - d) Measure her calves
  
5. Katherina Cavallieri is:
  - a) Mozart's sister, and later, student
  - b) Mozart's sister, and the Emperor's mistress
  - c) Salieri's student, and later, Mozart's wife
  - d) Salieri's student, and later, mistress
  
6. Constanze first goes to Salieri's house in order to:
  - a) Borrow money from him
  - b) Eat his candy
  - c) Show him Mozart's manuscripts
  - d) Have an affair with him
  
7. Van Swieten feels that it would be a waste of talent for Mozart to write an Italian opera because:
  - a) He had just written one himself
  - b) Mozart can't speak Italian
  - c) It would be a "vulgar farce"
  - d) Salieri's operas are better
  
8. *Amadeus* is set in:
  - a) Verona
  - b) Vienna
  - c) Versailles
  - d) Venice
  
9. In *Amadeus*, Mozart dies from:
  - a) Syphilis
  - b) Exhaustion brought on by Salieri's schemes
  - c) Poison
  - d) Old age
  
10. What does Mozart say makes him hear the "voice of God"?
  - a) Listening to his music
  - b) Eating sorbetto
  - c) Playing with his children
  - d) Looking into Constanze's eyes
  
11. *Amadeus* takes place in:
  - a) 1923 and 1881-1889
  - b) 1823 and 1781-1789
  - c) 1723 and 1681-1689
  - d) 1623 and 1581-1589
  
12. Throughout the play, this character declares "fêtes and fireworks!"
  - a) Rosenberg
  - b) Van Swieten
  - c) Strack
  - d) The Emperor
  
13. In the final scene, Salieri declares himself to be the patron saint of what?
  - a) Genius
  - b) Music
  - c) Gluttony
  - d) Mediocrity
  
14. Who is the inspiration for the shadowy figure in the large hat in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*?
  - a) Orsini-Rosenberg
  - b) Salieri
  - c) The commissioner of the *Requiem*
  - d) The Emperor
  
15. What alienates Mozart from the Freemasons?
  - a) The fact that he's poor
  - b) He reveals their secret rituals in one of his operas
  - c) They don't understand his music
  - d) Salieri bribes them

## About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (formerly called “New Jersey Shakespeare Festival”) is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving nearly 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. Through its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the east coast, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 46th season in 2008.

In addition to producing and presenting classic theatre, the Theatre’s mission places an equal focus on education— both for young artists and audiences of all ages. The Theatre nurtures emerging new talent for the American stage and cultivates future audiences by providing extensive student outreach opportunities. Through our work, we endeavor to promote literacy, civilization, community, cultural awareness, the theatrical tradition, and a more enlightened view of the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting “new” theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association of America, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

### Test Your Understanding Answer Key

1. b    2. a    3. d    4. d    5. d    6. c  
 7. c    8. b    9. b    10. a    11. b    12. d  
 13. d    14. c    15. b

### Sources for this study guide:

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 The New York City Opera Project: *Don Giovanni* website  
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Portrait engraving by Joseph Lange (Mozart’s brother-in-law) of Constanze Mozart in 1783, at the age of 19 or 20, shortly after her marriage to the composer.