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OPINION | THEATER REVIEW

'Amadeus' Review: Created Unequal

Syracuse Stage's webstream of Peter Shaffer's tale about the troubled relationship between Mozart and Salieri strikes all the right notes.



By
Terry

Teachout

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Mickey Rowe and Lisa Helmi Johanson in the Syracuse Stage production of 'Amadeus'

PHOTO: MIKE DAVIS

The list of American drama companies that have either live-streamed plays since the coronavirus closed their theaters or are preparing to do so grows longer by the hour. The latest such show to be released on the web is a triumphant demonstration—the best I've seen to date—of how soul-satisfying a theatrical webcast can be.

Syracuse Stage's revival of Peter Shaffer's "Amadeus," directed by Robert Hupp, is a thrilling staging of one of the finest English-language plays of the 20th century, and it comes across online with exhilarating clarity. You'll have to move fast to see it: Online "tickets" are available only through Sunday. Once you purchase a ticket, though, you can view "Amadeus" at any time

during the next two weeks, so I suggest you buy your ticket *now*, then come back and finish reading this review.

Amadeus

Syracuse Stage, Syracuse, N.Y.

Viewable online via live streaming only, \$35. For electronic "tickets," go to syracusestage.org.

Tickets are on sale through March 29 but can be used through April 12

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Mr. Shaffer's best-remembered play, first performed by London's National Theatre in 1979, tells the story of the troubled relationship between Antonio Salieri, a now-forgotten 18th-century court musician, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, by common consent the greatest of all classical composers. It is not, however, a work of history but a profound, deeply unsettling parable of the mystery of human inequality. Mr. Shaffer's Salieri, a successful but mediocre composer, cannot bear to live in the same universe as Mozart, a prodigy who is (in Mr. Shaffer's heavily fictionalized rendering) ill-mannered, grossly vulgar and unworthy of his transcendent gift. As the tortured Salieri recalls of his first encounter with Mozart's music, "It seemed to me that I had heard the voice of God—and that it issued from a creature whose own voice I had also heard—and that it was the voice of an obscene child!"

"Amadeus" was a colossal success when it transferred to Broadway, running for 1,181 performances and winning five Tonys. Since then, though, U.S. revivals have been rare to the point of invisibility, partly because the play calls for a big, costly cast (Syracuse Stage fielded 19 actors) and partly because Miloš Forman's Oscar-winning 1984 screen version—in which F. Murray Abraham brilliantly replaced Paul Scofield, who created the role of Salieri—was so memorable. I've reviewed only one production in the past decade and a half, an impressive one presented by the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in 2009.

This version, jointly mounted by Syracuse Stage and the drama department of Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts, whose students cover the smaller ensemble parts, is artistically successful in every way, above all because of Jason O'Connell's

performance as Salieri. Mr. O'Connell, familiar from his appearances with Bedlam and the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, is a burly stand-up comedian turned classical actor who is best known for his comic roles. He's always had more in him, though—the excellence of his performance as Don Juan in the Phoenix Theatre Ensemble's 2013 off-Broadway production of George Bernard Shaw's "Don Juan in Hell" staggered me—and his Salieri is a heartbreaking study in malignant envy, one whose pathos is heightened by the comic energy with which he charges the role.

The supporting cast is marvelous, with Mickey Rowe giving a madly zany performance as Mozart. He reminded me at times of the young Jerry Lewis (and yes, I mean that as a compliment!). Lisa Helmi Johanson is touching as Constanze, the hapless, uncomprehending wife of God's "preferred creature," and the poignancy of her acting is enhanced by our ability to see her beautifully expressive face shot in close-up. Mr. Hupp's staging, which underlines the play's humor without diminishing its seriousness, is a model of its kind—he deploys his large cast with a keen eye for composition—and Misha Kachman's chocolate-box set creates the illusion of elaborate elegance through means of the utmost simplicity.

Syracuse Stage was able to give only one public performance of "Amadeus" before being shut down by the coronavirus, but it enlisted the services of WCNY, the local public-TV station, to tape that performance with a four-camera crew. The results, shot on the fly, are not merely professional-looking but well-nigh ideal. The live audience in the company's 499-seat Archbold Theatre is very much a part of the show, and its visible (and audible) presence adds an exciting touch of immediacy. All things considered, I don't know that I've ever seen a better small-screen version of a live stage performance.

Of course I wish I'd been there, but I can't imagine that I missed much by viewing this "Amadeus" on my MacBook. If you doubt the ability of live-streamed webcasting to convey the throat-catching sensation of watching a play in the theater, boot up, tune in and prepare to be converted.

—*Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Satchmo at the Waldorf." Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.*

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