

## **AMADEUS**

**Presented by:** Lindsay Street Players

**Venue:** Young People's Theatre, Hamilton (phone 4961 4895)

**Season:** Ends January 29

PETER Shaffer's *Amadeus* uses the relationship between two composers in Vienna in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the largely forgotten Antonio Salieri, to examine the timeless issues of generational and personal conflicts.

The strength of the play is that it never comes across as a period piece, despite the excellent costumes in this production. Rather, it has elements of a detective yarn as the older and less gifted Salieri intimates from the first moments that there might be truth to a belief that persists to this day that he poisoned Mozart.

Certainly, Salieri becomes an increasingly unsettling figure as he gradually reveals the tactics he used to try to destroy his younger rival. And there is a contemporary feel to the contrasts in the two men's language, with Salieri's narrow focus on being a musical genius reflected in the formality of his words, while Mozart is a wild child with decidedly juvenile behaviour and talk as he jovially threatens to bite in half with his "fangs-wangs" a pretty young thing he is pursuing.

The fact that the play is so well written poses challenges for actors and the production team in trying to ensure that the tensions are maintained throughout a performance. This staging certainly does that.

Steven McLean's Salieri has an old man's stoop and voice when first seen on what he declares is the last day of his life. But once the story goes into flashback to show the course of his dealings with Mozart he is a more assured, albeit decidedly methodical, figure.

There is something both pitiable and awe-inspiring as he promises God in a church that he will maintain chastity if given the gift of musical genius. And the look on his face, as he peruses one of Mozart's musical manuscripts, tells the audience before he states it verbally that he has encountered real genius and been forced to acknowledge his own mediocrity.

Matthew Bevan's Mozart makes it clear why Salieri can justify his subsequent moves to undermine the 25-year-old prodigy. His behaviour and language border on the gross and his seeming ease in writing outstanding music belies the older man's belief that faith in God is essential for creativity.

But Bevan, who also directed the production, makes Mozart so human in his weaknesses and strengths that the young composer is a likable figure except for the scenes in which his actions border on outright cruelty.

There is a strong supporting cast, including Rachel Aspinall as Constanze, the woman who becomes Mozart's wife, and Brian Wark as Austrian emperor Joseph II who bucks his horrified music staff's insistence that opera should be Italian and on classical themes by commissioning Mozart to write something that's both contemporary and in German.

Shaffer makes excellent use of characters who remain silent, with Julia Koller-Smith, as Salieri's prize singing pupil who is seduced by both Mozart and her teacher, saying much with her demeanour and smiles.

And while there is no on-stage music, Shaffer's use of sections of Mozart's work in the background reinforce why he is indeed regarded as one of the greatest composers.

The technical work, including Philip Paterson's lighting, which helps to delineate the settings as the action moves from burnished palaces to dark slums, is first-class.

**Ken Longworth**

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