

WEEKEND

ENTERTAINMENT

THEATER REVIEW

Pungent cast brings out the best in 'Mozart'

By Michael Phillips
Tribune theater critic

Peter Shaffer's comic melodrama "Amadeus" is big and fun and deeply shallow. The play's more fun than the film version. The music's pretty good in both.

For a sharper grade of inquiry, however, try Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Five years after the death of composer Antonio Salieri — the murderer, some say, of his aesthetic superior, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart — Pushkin wrote the brief "Mozart and Salieri," one of his so-called "little tragedies." A chamber opera followed, as did Shaffer's play decades later.

"Mozart and Salieri"

When: Through Feb. 15

Where: The Utopian Theatre Asylum at Chicago Dramatists, 1105 W. Chicago Ave.

Phone: 847-217-0691

Carefully wrought, not without its languorous side, the latest production of The Utopian Theatre Asylum (T.U.T.A.) takes Pushkin's 10-page examination of creative envy and cosmic injustice and fashions it into an hour-long piece. It is by turns beautiful and rather static and then beautiful again.

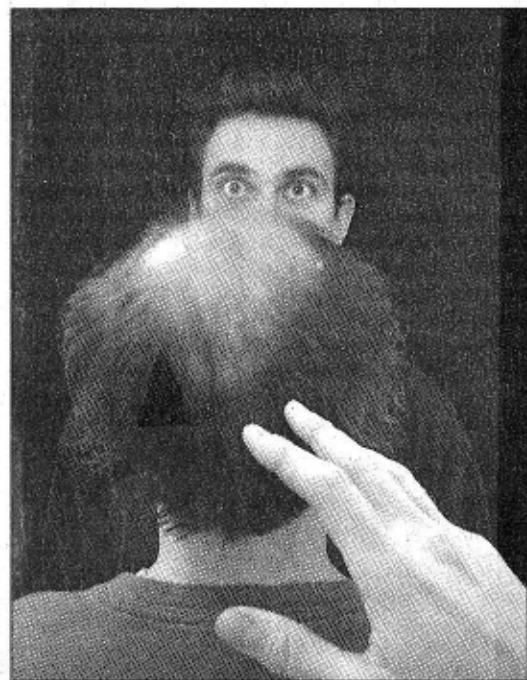
Pushkin wrote a mere two scenes. The first is set in Salieri's room. Mozart comes to call, with a blind violinist in tow. "Some Mozart, please!" exhorts Mozart, roaring with laughter. Salieri then listens to Mozart's recent composition. The lesser man is crushed anew, and resolves to rid the world of Mozart, exalted vessel, "the sooner now, the better." Scene two unfolds in a tavern, where Salieri makes good on his threat.

From the text the T.U.T.A. collaborators create a world of elegantly cheap theatrics. Like the Lewis Carroll riff "Alice," director Zeljko Djukic's previous production, "Mozart and Salieri" inhabits a consciously theatrical universe. The first sound we hear in the production is that of the actors doing vocal warm-ups offstage. A shadowy man in black (Mozart's tormentor, the man who commissions the "Requiem") tiptoes and plays hide-and-seek behind a series of elegant curtains, the focal point of scenic designer Natasha Vuchurovich Djukic's environment. There's a dumb-show quality to much of the evening.

The peak image is the climactic one: As confetti snow falls on the tavern scene, and a pendulumlike ceiling lamp swings above the stage, a giddy Salieri catches snow in his wine glass.

Kirk Anderson's Salieri is a solid enough portrayal, though lacking in wit; Bob Kulhan's Mozart is probably too comic, by contrast. The Man in Black is played by Matthew van Colton.

Throughout this sternly attractive show, guitarist Goran Ivanovic — a wonderful musician — plays sections of "The Magic Flute" and Mozart's "Requiem," as well as some seductive music of his own. The production overall has a somewhat defiant rhythm. It may be making a bit too much of a little thing. Its most pungent sights and sounds, however, are the work of some formidably talented people.



Bob Kulhan (facing) and Kirk Anderson provide solid acting in The Utopian Theatre Asylum's "Mozart and Salieri."