

How has Hollywood changed history to fit the movie? Does the depiction of the topic stay true to the fact of historical events? If you were the historical advisor to the movie what suggestions would you make to keep the movie accurate to the facts? Does the movie portray the event accurately?

“Mozart...Mozart!...I confess, I killed you!” screams Antonio Salieri in the opening scene of Milos Forman’s *Amadeus*, the 1984 academy award winning picture. His servants break into his chamber to find him lying on the floor, covered in blood, and gasping after attempting to cut his own throat with a razor. This haunted, anguished character cannot wait to unburden himself to the young priest who subsequently visits him in a lunatic asylum. He admits he believes he killed Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the genius, whose music haunted him and whose career and life he envied. However:

There is no evidence Salieri did anything of the kind, but he has long been portrayed - beginning with Pushkin¹ and culminating in Peter Shaffer's 1979 play *Amadeus* - as a mediocre musician insanely jealous of his prodigiously gifted contemporary.²

As this BBC Europe news story asserts, from the time when the citizens of Salieri’s birthplace in Italy wanted to commemorate their famous son, there is no proof to suggest that he murdered Mozart or even neglected to assist the composer when he was sick. Salieri was not with Mozart when he died. The question of a conspiracy to bring about Mozart’s destruction is the boldest assertion made by Forman’s film and originally in Shaffer’s play. It is the central element of artistic license used by the filmmakers. Without it there would be no inherent drama and conflict with which to engage the audience. However, Mozart and his contemporaries were not exempt from professional rivalries and competition. For example, he competed in a pianoforte competition against Muzio Clementi at Christmas in 1781, for Emperor Josef II.³

Other assertions are made in the film that are not historically accurate. The main timeline of the film follows Mozart’s years in Vienna, from 1781 to 1791. This period was marked by significant events, such as his marriage to Constanze, the births of their six children (four of whom died in infancy), the death of his father Leopold and the composition of his mature works and in particular his major operas. The operas are a consolidation of his skills and creativity, comprised of words, music, mise-en-scene and theatrical characterization. *Amadeus* shows Mozart develop his compositions for the stage starting with *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1781-82), followed by *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *The Magic Flute* (1791). The film skips over other major operas, for example *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791) and *Così fan tutte* (1790). It also excludes the detail of the events of Mozart’s life and his relationships such as his close connection with his sister and the deaths of his children.

The writer and director concentrate instead on the dramatic capital to be made from Mozart’s struggles with authority, censorship and his father, epitomized by the plots of these operas. In *Amadeus* he hopes to cause a scandal with the immoral subject matter of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. In fact Gottlieb Stephanie provided the libretto about the Turkish harem. He was a writer patronized by Emperor Josef and there is a suggestion from some historians that it was the emperor who proposed the work as material for Mozart’s first opera in Vienna.⁴ Similarly, the film depicts Mozart working alone on these operas, originating and adapting material as a solitary genius. In fact he collaborated with various librettists, notably Lorenzo da Ponte on *The Marriage of Figaro* and Emmanuel Schikaneder on *The Magic Flute*. The development of a new opera requires a range of collaborative efforts. However, for the purposes of the drama in the film it is preferable to depict Mozart as the genius who strives alone against the censorious and disapproving attitude of the Emperor and his advisers. When confronted with their disgust at the adaptation of Beaumarchais’s banned play *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart pleads ignorance about the political content and the prototypical revolutionary politics that it contains. In reality he was well aware of what it meant to stage such material.

Mozart was not the solitary artist the film sometimes expresses, exempting himself from responses and responsibilities to society. He was a Freemason and very active as a teacher of music, as well as his hugely prolific with his output of songs, cantatas, symphonies and concertos. In the film he is shown composing feverishly from time to time but it is nearly always a struggle for him to find the time and the privacy with which to work. Forman and Shaffer had to condense within the film’s timeframe the essential components of drama and conflict to generate a piece of work that moves with sufficient pace. It is more satisfying to think of the composer as the misunderstood and unappreciated genius, because then as a modern audience we can take more credit for appreciating the artistry and talent of such a p

erson. It makes us feel better.

The historical recreation of the events owes a huge amount to the work of the designers and musicians. This film is a landmark in that it brought together not only Forman and Shaffer for the direction and material but also Josef Svoboda, the noted theatre designer, Twyla Tharp, the distinguished choreographer, and Sir Neville Marriner the conductor. This team of contributing artists makes the theatrical and operatic episodes in the film really shine. The atmosphere, detail and portrayal of eighteenth century opera houses and performance are stunning. If I were to highlight one aspect that as a historical adviser I would retain it would be this, the strongest element of the film. The lavishness of the costumes, the intricacies of the stage sets and the recreation of the social scene are stunning and do real justice to the achievements of Mozart, and Salieri, on stage.

If the role of historical adviser were mine I would involve Mozart's collaborators in the artistic process and include the character of a librettist such as Da Ponte. The reason for this would be to show how the process of creativity in music is not always an isolated one and that for all his genius Mozart did not achieve all of his compositional masterpieces alone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cinema:

Amadeus, dir. Milos Forman, written by Peter Shaffer, 1984.

Online resources:

'Rehabilitating Mozart's "Murderer"', <http://news.bbc.co.uk> April, 2000.

<http://opera.stanford.edu>

<http://www.mozartproject.org>