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Theater review: Russell's Bravura Work Anchors Elegant 'Amadeus'

03/09/2013 by [Evans Donnell](#) (Edit)



Actors from the great **Paul Scofield** forward have found the challenges of playing a fictionalized version of real-life composer **Antonio Salieri** in **Peter Shaffer's Amadeus** daunting. And no wonder – the actor playing **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's** envious rival is onstage throughout and delivers most of the dialogue; he must also be as believable charming other characters onstage as he is when removing his courteous mask and revealing the brutal man beneath to audiences.

In **Blackbird Theater's** presentation **Brian Webb Russell** confronts those challenges and emerges victorious. He gives us a profoundly moving portrait of the "patron saint of mediocrities" which anchors their elegant and highly entertaining production.

Russell sounds so many clear notes with his performance, such as when Salieri defiantly observes "What use, after all, is Man, if not to



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teach God His lessons?" or acknowledges with despair that "...I looked on astounded as from his ordinary life he made his art. We were both ordinary men, he and I. Yet from the ordinary he created legends – and I from legends created only the ordinary." When he cries out, it pierces the heart; when he shakes his fist at an Almighty he considers unfair the energy produced sends a shock down the spine.



That's not to say Director **Wes Driver** helms a one-man show, of course. Russell's fellow actors are virtuosos as well, starting with the man who plays the title role: **Brent Maddox** has much more than a great high-pitched giggle going for him as Mozart. Sure, he enjoyably reveals his character's vulgar childishness, but the genius – and heart – that propel the composer's timelessly beautiful music comes through too.

Amanda Card is just as engaging as Constanze. She takes us on her character's roller-coaster ride with Mozart and displays as great a penchant for light-hearted moments as she does for serious conflicts in adding yet another fine performance to her impressive list of credits.

As the gossipy Venticelli ("My little winds as I call them" Salieri says) **Evelyn O'Neal Brush** and **Brad Oxnam** are a dirt-dishing delight; soprano **Katherine Sandoval Taylor** handles the characterization of ambitious young singer Katherina Cavalieri and her "scales and ornaments" with zest; **Robyn Berg** (Teresa Salieri), **Kay Ayers** (Cook) and **John Mauldin** (Valet) convey volumes with looks alone. And the time-honed talents of **Ronnie Meek** (Count Franz Orsini-Rosenberg), **Billy Rosenberg** (Kapellmeister Bonno), **Phil Perry** (Count Johann Kilian von Strack) and **Brad Forrister** (Baron Gottfried van Swieten) flesh out the socially and politically savvy courtiers that surround **Emperor Joseph II's** throne.

When you take your theater seat just before the curtain goes up, but instead of lights dimming and opening music starting the actors come out, jump off the stage, hand you a slip of paper and tell you to write down your favorite teacher's name, you quickly realize this probably isn't like any play you've [...]

Once Upon a Time in Nashville: Casey Pierce's New West

By **Joe Nolan**

This review was originally published by Nashville Arts Magazine. That piece was edited for length. The following version restores the review to its original word count. Nashville painter Casey Pierce's new series of large narrative paintings depicts scenes from the Old West. But, while these canvases are loaded with badmen, bullets and buttes, they're also [...]

Brahms leads off a fabulous week of free classical music in Nashville

By **John Pitcher**

Nashville's classical music scene shifts into high gear this week, with great concerts taking place just about every day. All of these concerts, by the way, are free. Wednesday, Sept. 25. The most compelling reason to attend violist Kathryn Plummer and pianist Amy Dorfman's concert is the chance to hear Brahms' magnificent valedictory chamber piece, [...]

John Chaffin's 'Ghost Story' Comedy Now Materializing at the Barn

By **ArtsNash**

A golfer lands a winning drive in the after-life rough in John Chaffin's Ghost Story. The comedy is now playing at Chaffin's Barn Dinner Theatre through March 31. When a "playboy" with money troubles is killed in an unfortunate golf cart accident, it seems his misfortunes are finally over. But when all three of his [...]

Belmont inaugurates McAfee Concert Hall with gala concert

By **John Pitcher**

When architects with Earl Swensson Associates began renovating the old Belmont Heights Baptist Church a few years ago, they made a remarkable discovery. The dimensions of the church's



Playing the drama's superficial sire superbly is **Michael Slayton** (he's also the show's music consultant). Those who've seen the 1984 film version of *Amadeus* will recall the perfectly detached and droll delivery of **Jeffrey Jones**; Slayton's "There it is" and "Too many notes" pronouncements (among others) are just as funny as Jones or anyone else could likely ever make them.

The remaining ensemble – **Austin Hunt, Will Miranne, John Silvestro, Emory Colvin, Andrew Johnson and Leslie Marberry** – serve vital functions as various characters and (along with their fellow actors) are instrumental in keeping *Amadeus* moving by bringing various pieces as well as period props by **Ericka Hunter** onto and off of **Andy Bleiler's** marvelous split-level set.

That set features plastic sheets hung upstage which resemble giant hand-written pages of musical composition. Yes, music certainly matters in this play, but those sheets (credit Bleiler and **Jacob Street**) also help to underscore the inner workings of Salieri's seeking-greatness-he-cannot-have mind.



sanctuary were identical to those of the famed Tonhalle in Zurich, Switzerland. It's no surprise, then, that Belmont University's new McAfee Concert Hall, located in the church's [...]

Nashville Stagecraft Has Dust Bowl Cinderella Twist in 'Cindy & Ella'

By **ArtsNash**

While it's based on the pan-cultural fairy tale of Cinderella, Nashville Stagecraft's adaptation of the ancient tale is a far cry from the classic 1950 Disney animated film version. *Cindy & Ella*, premiering Friday at the 4th Story Theater, follows three women coping with life in an isolated Oklahoma farming community at the height of the Dust Bowl. [...]

Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Roadies triumph at the Schermerhorn

By **John Pitcher**

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the musicians of his Silk Road Ensemble are like master chefs: They really know how to cook. Ma his Silk Roadies were at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center on Saturday night, dishing up some hot international fare. The entire program was arranged for an unusual mix of Western and non-Western instruments. Naturally, [...]

Amun Ra Theatre's End Begins New Chapter for carr, Colleagues

By **Evans Donnell**

Amun Ra Theatre is ending an 11-year run on the Nashville theater scene. But for founder jeff obafemi carr and his colleagues there is much to celebrate as a new chapter in their artistic lives begins. "When we started it, there was the idea that we would expose the hidden light of African-American culture through [...]

Pressure Cooker Winner 'City of Light' This Weekend at BRT

By **ArtsNash**

Get over to Boiler Room Theatre this weekend to see *City of Light*, the Franklin troupe's 2012 Pressure Cooker Festival winner. The light opera with libretto by Michael McFaden and music by Sir Arthur Sullivan takes place in the Spiritualist village of Lily Dale, N.Y. at the turn of the 20th century. All the music is [...]

Other top-notch contributions come from **D.L. Freeman's** seamless sound design, which allows the exquisite recorded play of pianist **Shelby June Flowers** to sound as if it's being performed by the actors onstage; beautifully-detailed costumes for this story that primarily takes place in the late 18th Century from **Hannah Schmidt** which are complemented by **Sondra Nottingham's** excellent wigs; and **David Hardy's** mood-shifting lighting design.

"Goodness is nothing in the furnace of art," Salieri cynically states during *Amadeus*. That view doesn't hold for Blackbird Theater's current show since there is plenty of goodness – starting but not ending with Russell's bravura performance – in the cast-and-crew contributions to this fascinating production.

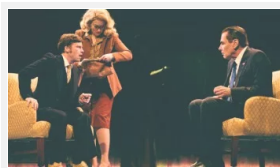
The Blackbird Theater production of Peter Shaffer's Amadeus runs at 7 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays – and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 17 – through March 23 at Lipscomb University's Shamblin Theatre (3901 Granny White Pk.) and kicks off Mozart in Music City. The city-wide celebration of the composer in March and April also features productions of The Magic Flute by Nashville Opera and Mozart's Piano Masterpiece by the Nashville Symphony as well as free concerts hosted by the Lipscomb University Department of Music and FiftyForward Music for Seniors. Full event listings are available at MozartInMusicCity.com, which is powered by NowPlayingNashville.com. To buy tickets (\$20-\$25 with discounts for seniors, students and faculty) to the play [click here](#).

*Photos by **Reed Hummell** courtesy Blackbird Theater.

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Music Review: Gateway Chamber Orchestra opens its 2014-15 season with a Mozartean masterpiece

By **John Pitcher**

There are undoubtedly times when musicians in a small, local orchestra wonder if there will ever be as many people in the audience as on the stage. At one time, such thoughts must have gone through the minds of musicians in the Gateway Chamber Orchestra. This terrific ensemble had a loyal following in its hometown [...]

Music/Film: Vijay Iyer

By **ArtsNash**

Mutations I-X RADHE RADHE: Rites of Holi November 8 & 9 Saturday at 8pm, Sunday at 2pm OZ, 6172 Cockrill Bend Circle The Guardian UK has called Vijay Iyer "one of the world's most inventive new-generation jazz pianists." His most recent honors include a MacArthur fellowship, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, an unprecedented "quintuple [...]"

Music Preview: Guitarist John Johns performs with a little help from his friends

By **John Pitcher**

Just about the only thing I like more than guitarist John Johns playing Paganini is Johns playing Paganini with violinist Christian Teal. So I was thrilled to hear about Johns' concert on Thursday night at Ingram Hall, which will feature the veteran guitarist performing Paganini's Concertata for Violin and Guitar with Teal – the first [...]

Classical review: From world premieres to cartoon music, Alias plays it all

By **John Pitcher**

Nashville's Alias Chamber Ensemble has premiered more than a dozen works since its first concert in 2002. On Saturday night at Turner Recital Hall, Alias was at it again, presenting the world premiere of West Coast composer John Marvin's terrific new Sonata for Oboe and Piano. The ensemble also gave its first-ever performance of a [...]

Film review: Gentle 'Museum Hours' a Crucible for Connections

By **Evans Donnell**

Blackbird Adds Mamet's 'Oleanna' to New Season Slate

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About Evans Donnell

Evans Donnell is the chief theater, film and opera critic as well as co-founder of ArtsNash. He wrote reviews and features about theater, opera and classical music for *The Tennessean* from 2002 to 2011. He was the theater, film and opera critic for ArtNowNashville.com from 2011 to 2012. Donnell has also contributed to The Sondheim Review,

Back Stage, *The City Paper* (Nashville), the *Nashville Banner*, *The* (Bowling Green, Ky.) *Daily News* and several other publications since beginning his professional journalism career in 1985 with *The Lebanon* (Tenn.) *Democrat*. He was selected as a fellow for the 2004 National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and for National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) arts journalism institutes for theater and musical theater at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism in 2006 and classical music and opera at the Columbia University School of Journalism in 2009. He has also been an actor (member of Actors Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA), founding and running AthensSouth Theatre from 1996 to 2001 and appearing in Milos Forman's "The People vs Larry Flynt" among other credits. Donnell is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association (www.americantheatre critics.org).

Comments



Greg Greene says:

03/09/2013 at 10:35 AM (Edit)

Thanks for this terrific review, Evans!



Evans Donnell says:

03/09/2013 at 1:49 PM (Edit)

Thank you!



John Pitcher says:

03/09/2013 at 12:13 PM (Edit)

Brian Webb Russell is the perfect choice for the role. And the depiction in the play notwithstanding, Salieri was not mediocre! Like everyone else who has ever lived, he was just no Mozart.



Evans Donnell says:

03/09/2013 at 1:54 PM (Edit)

Yes indeed! He views himself as that in the play, but certainly wasn't that in reality. In fact, after I got home last night and turned on the Light Classical channel on my cable TV they were playing a concerto for piano and orchestra in B flat by him that was rather lovely!

Jem Cohen's gently flowing Museum Hours is set in Vienna, but its leisurely and subtle storyline could be placed anywhere – the feature is ultimately about the need we have to connect with others, particularly in a time of crisis or transition, and how the art that reflects, inspires and engages us can provide a [...]

Music Review: Cliburn medalist wows the crowd at McAfee Concert Hall

By [John Pitcher](#)

The well-coiffed one was in Nashville on Thursday night. I'm talking about pianist Sean Chen, who was in town to present Belmont University's annual Woods Piano Concert Series at McAfee Concert Hall. A 24-year-old California native, Chen made news in June, when he became the first American pianist in 16 years to advance to the [...]

'Opera At' Series at Dyer Observatory Saturday

By [ArtsNash](#)

The latest event in Nashville Opera's Opera @ Series is Saturday. That's when the region's leading opera company and Vanderbilt Dyer Observatory present Opera on the Mountain, a special evening of music and star-gazing. Stuart Holt, Nashville Opera's Director of Education and Outreach, will serve as the master of ceremonies. "Opera on the Mountain promises [...]"

Homeless Portraits Focus on People, not Poverty

By [Joe Nolan](#)

Samuel Lester's Nostos art gallery debuted at November's First Saturday Art Crawl, hosting a grand opening exhibition of photography by Contributor founder Tasha French Lemley. Lemley's portraits of Nashville's homeless reach beyond her seven years of heading the street newspaper to include more than a decade of documenting our neighbors on Nashville's streets. The photographs [...]"

Music Preview: Organ phenom Christopher Houlihan will perform at Christ Church Cathedral

By [John Pitcher](#)

"People have a lot of misconceptions about the organ," says organ virtuoso Christopher Houlihan, who was on the phone during one of his rare breaks in concertizing. "They think of it as either a



carolponderandrobertykief says:

03/09/2013 at 12:39 PM (Edit)

Can't wait to see it – thanks for the window into the work.



Evans Donnell says:

03/09/2013 at 1:54 PM (Edit)

Thank you!

spooky instrument or a boring church instrument. My mission is to change people's attitudes." Houlihan, a 26-year-old organ phenom who has [...]

Renée Fleming, Ben Folds, Vince Gill and Amy Grant headline newly announced Nashville Symphony Season

By **John Pitcher**

Nashville will be awash in great music next season, courtesy of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. The NSO's 2013-14 season, which is being announced today, will include an opening gala with soprano Renée Fleming and the world premiere of a new piano concerto by pop star Ben Folds. In what will likely be remembered as the [...]

'The Rotten Core' gives TN Rep Interns Chance to Shine

By **Evans Donnell**

The folks at Tennessee Repertory Theatre make their shows look so good. I've often written about the vets on the front line like Producing Artistic Director René Copeland that make that happen. Sunday and Monday, though, it's about some of the folks you don't get to see at TPAC as you sit there marveling at the [...]