

# Tragedy of the clown genius

Michael Billington on a gender-bending Mozart And Salieri at the Almeida

ALEXANDER Pushkin, confined to his country estate at Boldino in 1830 for three months, wrote four Little Tragedies: a set of dramatic poems and sketches including *The Stone Guest*. Played together they would make a very intriguing evening but the Almeida (in conjunction with the Hebbel-Theater Berlin and the Burgtheater Vienna), a touch parsimoniously, does out one fifty-minute specimen: Mozart And Salieri chiefly remarkable for Tilda Swinton's performance as "the gormless skyraker".

That phrase belongs to Salieri, and the main theme of Pushkin's playlet is the destructive envy felt by mediocrity for genius. Salieri is outraged that effort, pedantry, self-sacrifice go unrewarded while an unjust heaven doles out free gifts to a joker like Mozart. Poisoning his fellow-composer over supper, Salieri justifies his action on the grounds that individual genius does nothing to advance the cause of music and leaves behind no heirs. But when Mozart plays him part of his Requiem, Salieri feels a thrill of remorse and is haunted both by his conscience and by

Mozart's pregnant observation that "Genius and villainy go not together."

It is a poignant fragment: a meditation on the nature of envy written only five years after Salieri's rambling, fabricating, deathbed confession. But it is a poem more than a play in that it doesn't so much dramatise ideas as present reverberating suggestions. It implies in particular that genius and immorality are incompatible: a shaky proposition when you consider the lives of great artists (Caravaggio, Wagner and Baudelaire will do for starters). In purely dramatic terms it also has less substance than Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* which adds to Pushkin the idea that Salieri himself was the grim "messenger in grey" who haunted Mozart's final days and that, in claiming to have killed Mozart, Salieri was challenging God himself. Shaffer's play might not have existed without Pushkin's: in the end it is more disturbing in that it treats envy as a universal condition and assumes there is a Salieri buried inside all of us.

Manfred Karge's production of the Pushkin, full of distorted perspectives matching Salieri's mental state, is chiefly notable

for an extraordinary comic performance from Tilda Swinton as Mozart that transcends the limitations of gender. Her face is a white clown-mask punctuated by black eyebrows like horizontal exclamation-marks. Her limbs are long and spidery and when she drapes one leg over the other it resembles a Daliesque folding-clock. And when, letting music ripple out of her fingers-ends at the piano, she turns and giggles at Salieri like a prankish loon you understand why she inspires murder. As Salieri, Lore Brunner exudes the right foursquare solidity but delivers her lines in a regular, metronomic beat and shifts uneasily from foot to the foot in a way that does little to convey the character's scorpion-filled mind.

It makes for a short, cryptic, mildly intriguing evening but one feature of it deserves unstinted praise. It is accompanied by a programme-book that includes the text in both German and English (the actresses themselves did the translation), sketches, pictures, background information. It is also conspicuously free of advertisements and makes you sigh for a world where the programme itself is regarded as an artistic publication.

● *Mozart and Salieri* is at the Almeida (01-359 4404) until April 15 and again from April 24 to May 6.



Tilda Swinton . . . 'you understand why she inspires murder'

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