

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • Theodore Herstand

Jogging, bicycle sprints and weightlifting sound like the regimen of an athlete, not an actor. For OU drama professor Theodore Herstand, however, these were just the first steps of preparation for his pivotal role of Antonio Salieri in "Amadeus."

Peter Shaffer's Tony Award-winning drama, staged in OU's Rupel Jones Theater in February, is written from the viewpoint of Salieri, a composer in the court of Austrian Emperor Joseph II whose jealousy of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's genius obsessed him to the point of madness and—some said—murder. The role of Salieri requires both mental and physical endurance comparable to that of Hamlet, requiring Herstand to be on stage during the entire playing time of two hours and 20 minutes.

"I had no exits, except for intermission," Herstand says, "and stood most of the time in heeled shoes on an inclined stage. I increased my workouts and weightlifting, and I ran five miles or more several times a week, bicycled 10- to 20-mile sprints and did breathing exercises. It took a great deal of strength to get through the role."

The physical preparation was just the beginning for Herstand, who appeared as a guest artist with the student cast. "In order to merge the technical and artistic aspects of the play, I read it approximately 150 times, letting the playwright talk to me. I continued to spend some four hours a day drilling on lines outside of rehearsal time."

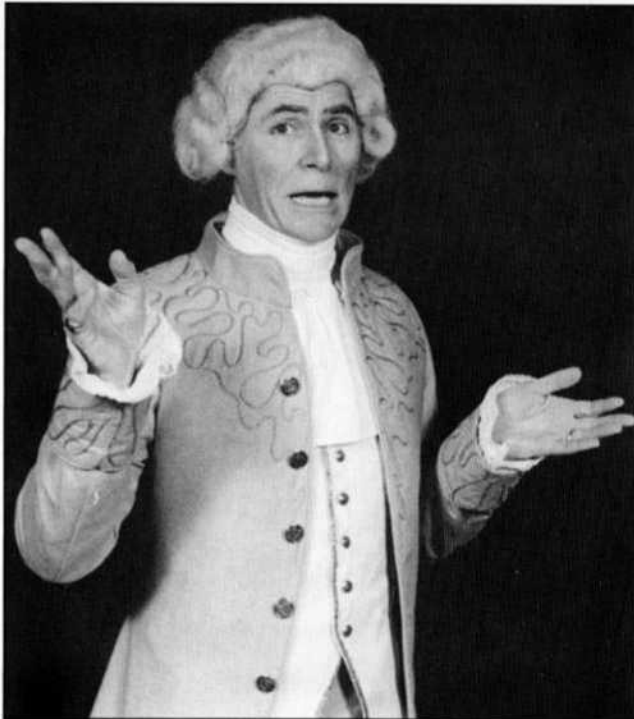
The guest artist program in OU productions allows drama students to experience firsthand the discipline, commitment and work habits required of the professional actor. The demands of "Amadeus" made it an ideal vehicle for this season's guest artist.

"This play would have been very difficult if I had not been working with good actors," Herstand insists. "There are a lot of intricate and important roles. However, the OU students are talented, well-trained and disciplined,

so it was the same as playing with good young professionals. They are a tribute to the faculty."

Seniors Tony Corneto of Tulsa and Katie Davis of McAlester played the roles of Mozart and his wife Constanze.

"The length of this play is easier to conquer than some because it is so well-written, and the lines are more logical," Herstand says. "The film 'Amadeus' was excellent, but the play script is brilliant."



OU's Theodore Herstand as Salieri in "Amadeus."

The 40-year time frame of "Amadeus" required Herstand to add and subtract 20 years from his actual age of 55 in full view of the audience and without makeup.

"This was not a major problem," Herstand says. "It's a matter of mindset. Also, the playwright helps because the lines, including the breathing spaces and phrasing, are different for the young Salieri than for the old man. One of the most difficult aspects of the role is to register the many subtle changes that occur in Salieri's attitudes toward God, the world and Mozart."

In the play, the youthful Salieri begs God to grant him the genius for composing, pledging his chastity in re-

turn. As he realizes that the gift denied him is bestowed on Mozart without any merit on the prodigy's part, he becomes increasingly obsessed with destroying the young rival. At the same time, Salieri is tormented by the fact that he alone has the musical sensibility to appreciate Mozart's gifts.

The production's director, OU drama professor David Rinear, felt extremely fortunate to have Herstand serve as guest artist in "Amadeus."

"This role demands a maturity in life experience that students don't have," Rinear explains. "He has worked as a professional actor on and off since he was a child and is extraordinarily well-disciplined, which serves as a model for all the students in the cast."

Herstand began his career as a professional actor in the Cleveland (Ohio) Play House in 1942. He continued as a juvenile and young leading man throughout the early 1940s and also worked in local, regional and national radio.

"I worked in New York in motion pictures and early television from 1948 through 1950, then returned to the Play House as a visiting artist," Herstand says. "Then, when I was over 20, I decided to go to college. By then I had done literally hundreds of performances on stage in the Cleveland Play House, the American Theater Wing in New York City and the Robin Hood Theater in Delaware. In college my emphasis gradually switched to playwriting and directing."

Herstand earned bachelor and master of arts degrees at the University of Iowa and the doctor of philosophy degree in theater at the University of Illinois. Since joining the OU faculty nine years ago, he has written six plays. One of the most recent, "The Emigration of Adam Czernak," won \$1,000 in a competition sponsored by the Foundation of Dramatists Guild/CBS New Plays Programs and was given a staged reading in the Arena Theater of Washington, D. C.

—PAULA BAKER