

The Film Amadeus

In the Romantic era, novels and plays based on long-past, often mythical events, mostly drawn from medieval tales and handled with untrammled poetic license, became very popular. But presently men of letters began to wonder whether real historical characters might not be more convincing than fictional ones, and whether, rather than being used as props upon which to hang a story, they might not serve as means of conjuring up a period's soul in a way that would transcend archeological minutiae. This concept is artistically challenging and potentially fruitful, but it places the author in a quandary. To what extent may actual events be modified for the sake of dramatic effect? At what point do historical persons become so changed as to be falsified, so that the very reason for calling on them—to provide new insight, sharper illumination, a clearer vision of history—is negated, and they become little more than easy devices to catch the attention of the audience? To pass that point may create a theatrical triumph at the cost of essential truth.

This is what happens in Peter Schaffer's sparkling *Amadeus*, which won a