

All the world's

After several years of corporate drama, the Royal Shakespeare Company is reinventing itself. Matthew Stibbe treads the boards to see what's new. Photography Martin Burton



Vital statistics

Name Royal Shakespeare Company

Sector Arts

Founded 1879

Turnover: £33m

In their own words: "At its heart, it's very simple. We're here to present and produce the best interpretations of Shakespeare that we can. But we don't have a copyright over Shakespeare just because we're the RSC. Probably our best historic role, our great potential is in being the only true ensemble company in the country." (Michael Boyd, artistic director)

Employees: Around 700

Website www.rsc.org.uk

The Royal Shakespeare Company has been through something of a revolution. In recent years, the company quit its London base at the Barbican, restructured its management, slashed staff numbers, closed one of three theatres in Stratford and made plans to redevelop the other two. "Like a man who decides to leave his job, his wife and his house all on the same day," was how Michael Billington, the *Guardian's* theatre critic, described the changes. The result: chaos, a £2.8m deficit and the departure of artistic director Adrian Noble. If it were a public company—and with a world-famous brand and £33m in turnover it could be—the share price would be on the floor and investors would be baying for blood.

Difficult times for a new management team. Enter Michael Boyd, the new artistic director, in April 2003. In person, he seems an unlikely leader. His crumpled tweediness and measured delivery bring to mind an Oxford don who has spent more time with his subject than with the modern world.

Like any good turnaround specialist, he needed a compelling vision of the future. He says: "It was a fairly urgent task at the time—you might have been forgiven for thinking we'd lost our way." It's still a work in progress, but some themes have already emerged. First, getting a new, semi-permanent London base will increase revenues. Second, artistic ambition, evident this year in five plays from the Spanish golden age (spanning the 16th and the 17th centuries), which will be balanced by box-office stalwarts: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Third, Boyd is resurrecting the founding idea of the RSC, namely, a core

ensemble company that will work together over longer periods on several plays. This way of operating extends a rare promise of job security and professional development to permanent staff and contract actors and directors.

He draws inspiration and authority from Shakespeare himself, talking about the bard in the present tense as if he were alive; an awesome and remote personality, like Jack Welch would be to a GE salesman. "He insists that we marry the recognisable with the metaphysical," says Boyd, "he insists that we marry entertainment with high art, he insists that we move beyond naturalism into a kind of expressive style."

Boyd's sense of history is clearly important. The

a stage



"Our iconic moments historically have all emerged from the virtues of the collective—and quite often, the collective up against the wall"

Michael Boyd artistic director



RSC's past is driving his plan for an ensemble company. "I think our iconic moments historically have all emerged from the virtues of the collective—and quite often, the collective up against the wall."

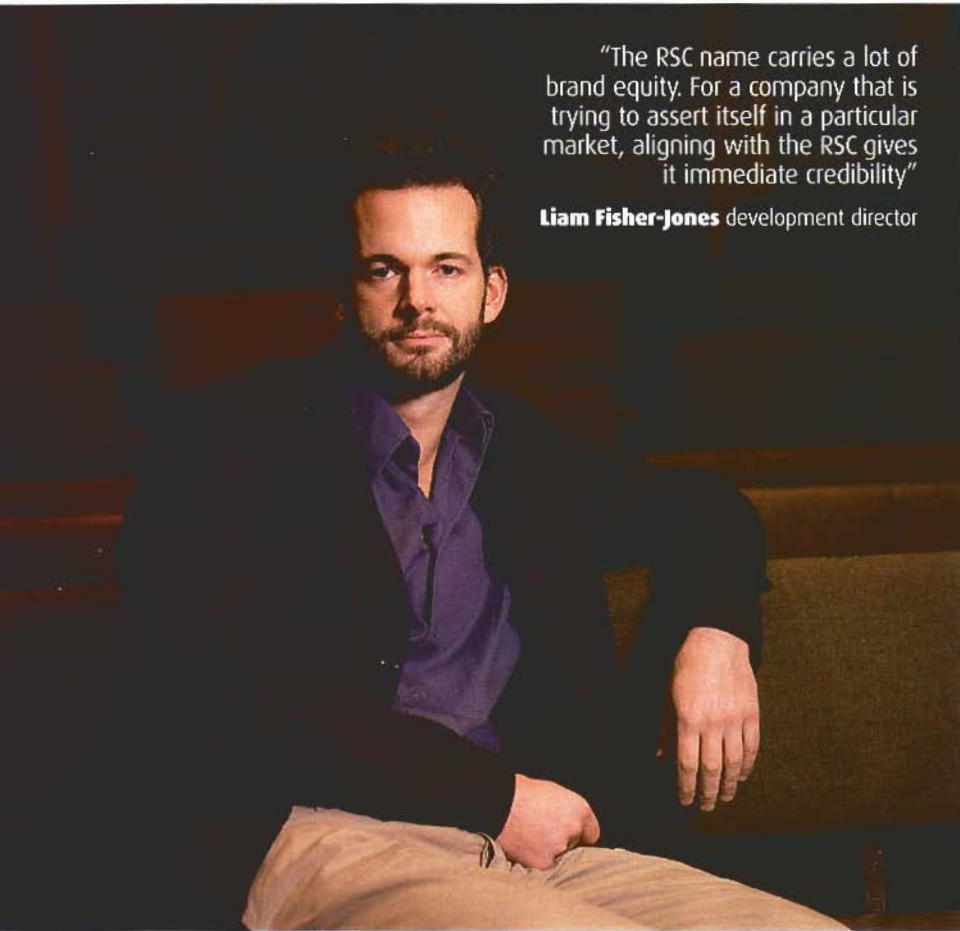
The skills of the rehearsal room are an important part of Boyd's management style, as he explains: "The kind of artistic director I am is entirely related to the kind of director I am." But he balances his "Pollyanna faith" in people's ability to contribute with a puritanical objection to waste. "My feeling about people on stage is that if they're not being creative and not contributing to the aesthetic whole, then don't have them," he says. "It's much cheaper to have a smaller cast. I feel the same about the organisation."

Where Boyd does the vision, it's interim managing director Vikki Heywood who sorts out the details. She took over from Chris Foy last September and she'll stay until the company can hire a permanent executive



"The RSC name carries a lot of brand equity. For a company that is trying to assert itself in a particular market, aligning with the RSC gives it immediate credibility"

Liam Fisher-Jones development director



director. More businesslike than Boyd, Heywood paces up and down as she speaks, showing no sign of distraction when our interview is repeatedly interrupted by lost Japanese tourists.

As an experienced outsider—she ran London's Royal Court Theatre for many years—without a long-term career to protect, Heywood has a unique and more-or-less objective viewpoint. She confirms that Boyd has been "getting a sense of control, coherence and confidence back into the organisation," but she is kinder to Adrian Noble than many critics. The RSC had become inflexible, she argues, and Noble opened it up but the process went too far.

Theatre is a calling, not just a job, for people who work at the RSC. They have a sense of ownership and commitment that many commercial businesses would die for, but it comes at a price. To sustain that work ethic, arts organisations have to be especially open and consultative and this may be where the previous regime at the RSC failed.

Heywood acknowledges that the RSC, with 700 staff, is an oil tanker compared to the Royal Court, a 200-person tugboat. The staff she inherited at the RSC were traumatised by job losses and too much change. Presenting the vision and winning hearts and minds have been priorities.

But in other ways, the RSC is just like any mature business. Boyd wrestles with innovation, struggles to cope with change, and tries to involve and motivate staff. And instead of shareholder relations, the

company has a development director, Liam Fisher-Jones, who is responsible for corporate sponsorship and private donations.

Box office receipts and government grants are insufficient to allow the RSC to achieve all its goals, so to make up the shortfall, Fisher-Jones raises between £1.5m and £3m annually. Having come from a fundraising role at the LSE, he is unashamedly commercial. "The RSC name carries a lot of brand equity. For a company that is trying to assert itself in a particular market or looking to launch a new product, aligning with the RSC gives it an immediate credibility. For instance, Accenture sponsored *All's Well that Ends Well* and that has given them some great opportunities, like being able to offer an invitation to a party with Dame Judi Dench."

The business comparison is harder when it comes to the bottom line. As Heywood explains, "the company has always wrestled with supporting the work and being commercially prudent." Getting bums on seats is important but Boyd argues that the





company should set its creative sights higher than commercial theatres. One reason is the £13m a year it receives in public subsidy. Another reason can be found in the company's own experience. Its best ever box office year was 1999—the very year when all the company's recent troubles began.

The RSC has parallels with an airline. Its most basic product—vacant seats at a specific time—can only be sold once and must be sold in advance. Marketing director Kate Horton acknowledges that the company, like the whole arts sector, has a way to go before it reaches the airlines' level of customer understanding and yield management, but the Accenture partnership may produce more sophisticated customer relationship management tools.

There are also useful analogies with the magazine business because of the need to marry a creative process with an insistent schedule. "People from other industries who see us in action get terribly over-excited about the way we are so project-focused and the way we work to deadlines," says Heywood. But unlike



"I'm a bit like a primary school teacher who is responsible for teaching all the subjects. In a typical day I'll go through PR, fundraising, HR issues, planning issues, redevelopment and finance"

Vikki Heywood interim managing director



9am-11am

Senior management team meeting which discusses expenses policy, production issues, and staff issues

11am-2pm

Wider meeting with middle managers to look at the annual plan for 2004/5

2pm-3pm

Director interview and photo shoot (and a hasty sandwich)

3pm-4pm

Technical director meeting about next summer's Stratford season, the Spanish golden age plays and transfers to London

4pm-5pm

Meet lead producer of the company to go through show production plan for the next 18 months: what are the clashes, confusions and complexities

5pm+

Dashing back to London

publishing, where there is a generally a Chinese wall between advertising (revenue) and editorial (production), Michael Boyd has made a virtue of integrating commercial and creative management. The marketing director is part of the artistic planning team.

Current shows such as *Othello* and *All's Well that Ends Well* have demonstrated a renewed confidence. More important, they have won critical acclaim and good box office sales in equal measure. "It's brilliant to have Tony [Sher] back. It's iconically crucial for us to have Judi [Dench] back and endorsing where we're going," said Boyd.

There's no doubting Boyd's commitment to Shakespeare, to the individuals that make up the company or to the financial health of the company. Actors, directors and backstage staff show a consistent, strong personal loyalty to Boyd. The company has made a real progress in the last six months but the story's not over. "I don't think the company is only as good as its last production," says Boyd, "but the aggregate of its last six is a product of the health of the company."

But Boyd also understands the need for patience. "You have to be confident in your gut that you can survive and have enough momentum and energy to keep going in the same direction. Meanwhile, you don't try to revolutionise your artists and your audience overnight. You have to be patient. If the company is being run properly, with the right ambitions and it is achieving the goals it sets itself, then the hit rate should go up." ■