

Telegraph.co.uk

March 18, 2011

RSC: How Stratford got its bite back

Vibrant, sexy and ensconced in a swish new home, as it reaches its 50th year the Royal Shakespeare Company is buzzing. But just a while ago, it looked doomed. Charles Spencer meets Michael Boyd, the man who pulled an institution back from the brink

Michael Boyd strikes me as one of the great unsung heroes of our cultural life. With dogged determination, the artistic director has pulled the Royal Shakespeare Company back to the commanding heights of British theatre.

As the company prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary season in Stratford, in a building that has been spectacularly transformed, I can't remember a time when it seemed in more exuberant form, or more sharply focused. The rise in its fortunes seems to be encapsulated by its joyous smash hit *Matilda*, based on the Roald Dahl story, which opened last December. It's the best new musical since *Billy Elliot* and will transfer to the West End this autumn, with Broadway almost certain to follow. Suddenly the RSC seems vibrant and sexy again.

Last week the critics were invited to see productions of *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the newly remodelled Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Very wisely, Boyd is opening the new building with shows that were already in the rep of the temporary Courtyard Theatre, a massive metal box that provided both a home, and the prototype for the new RST, during the three and a half years of the building project – which finished on time and on budget.

The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh have visited and expressed enthusiasm, and the Prince of Wales will soon be attending. And almost everyone is unanimous. The new theatre complex, incorporating both the RST auditorium and the existing Swan Theatre, is a triumph.

The public spaces are dramatic, there is a superb rooftop restaurant commanding spectacular views of Shakespeare's countryside, and the mixture of old and new is both atmospheric and stylish. The former RST was a depressing old barn of a place. The new one already has a tremendous buzz of life about it.

While Nicholas Hytner deservedly wins plaudits for the often spectacular success of the National Theatre, which seems to produce hit after hit and often plays to 100 per cent of capacity, Boyd is less often celebrated. That's partly because of the kind of man he is. Unlike the bubbly Hytner, Boyd, who is 55, can seem dour when you first meet him, and at times

abstracted. But what he has achieved as the boss of the RSC is in some ways even more of an achievement than Hytner's.

When Hytner took over the NT in 2003, he inherited an institution that was already a much-loved popular success. When Boyd assumed command of the RSC in the same year, he inherited a company in crisis. More than 40 years after its foundation in 1961 by Peter Hall, people were seriously beginning to wonder whether there was any point in the RSC any more.

The smart mix Hall established of Shakespeare and new plays, year round in Stratford and then in London, was taking a battering from a series of misjudged productions and policies, and the company seemed to drift from crisis to crisis. The doubts came to a head with the plans of Boyd's predecessor, Adrian Noble, to pull down the old Royal Shakespeare Theatre that first opened in Stratford in 1932 and construct something called a theatre village – plans that attracted protest.

Noble had also already taken what many saw as a disastrous decision to pull out of London, abandoning the Barbican Theatre, which had been built to the RSC's own specification. It looked as though he was running scared of the success of Shakespeare's Globe. And then, the day after the favourable Sunday reviews for his West End production of the musical *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, Noble announced his resignation.

It may well have been that all the flak he was receiving at the RSC had become intolerable. Sometimes the only way to preserve your sanity is to run. And he did stay on long enough for an orderly handover to Boyd, though the latter had to get his first season together in double-quick time.

I remember interviewing Boyd at that point, and while admiring his stoicism and determination to restore the long-term ensemble principle to the RSC, which had been one of the chief components of Peter Hall's original vision for the company, I still wondered whether he had the chutzpah and the charm to save it from the abyss. My misgivings proved misplaced.

When I spoke to Boyd the other week in a break from rehearsals, there was still a touch of Eeyore about him, though over the years I've come to relish the dry humour that underlies his lugubriousness. "We're not quite finished yet," he said. "There are teething problems with the lifts and there are bits of the lighting grid that we need to develop." But suddenly his face took on a broad grin. "But the auditorium is pretty good. Actually, it's not pretty good. It's absolutely gob-smackingly wonderful."

He's right. The new RST is at once intimate and epic, and the acoustics are superb. Peter Hall has expressed doubts over whether Shakespeare's language would be accessible on a thrust stage where actors often have their backs to some spectators, but in fact the clarity is amazing, and the audience – embracing the performers on three sides and at close range – are palpably involved with the action.

"The company is realising that they have far more vocal range available to them. It's so much easier to be more fluent and playful with the language when you don't have to turn up the volume all the time, as you did in the old RST. There is nowhere in the new theatre where it is difficult to hear and, even more important than that, there is a sense of complicity between performers and audience, and an extraordinary intimacy."

The 50th anniversary season of new productions in the RST begins previews on April 16. Leading from the front as ever, Boyd will direct the opening play and, with almost heroic cussedness, has chosen *Macbeth*, starring the superb Jonathan Slinger, who was brilliantly compelling as both Richard II and Richard III in Boyd's cycle of English history plays that put the RSC back on the map in 2007.

Responding to my suggestion that this notoriously unlucky play seemed a risky selection to open with, Boyd insisted that he has never found it unlucky himself and that it has the virtues of being relatively short and highly exciting. He also believes it will be a crucial test for the new theatre. The great productions of *Macbeth* – Trevor Nunn's with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench and Gregory Doran's with Antony Sher – have been in small spaces. "If we can create tension, pressure and claustrophobia in the new main house then we will be off to a flying start," he said.

Other productions in the RST (see box, left) will include a characteristically startling new take by Rupert Goold on the *Merchant of Venice*, starring Patrick Stewart as Shylock, and Nancy Meckler's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a key work for the RSC ever since Peter Brook's legendary circus-inspired white box production in 1970. Crucially, there will also be modern work in the smaller Swan Theatre, alongside curiosities such as Greg Doran's staging of Shakespeare's "lost play" *Cardenio*.

The company will also unveil an ambitious season of new writing at the Hampstead Theatre in London. It's great to see new writing and modern classics making a comeback at the RSC, for they have taken something of a back seat since the closure of the experimental studio *The Other Place*. Premieres have been an essential part of the company's work since Peter Hall's time: indeed, the RSC has staged the work of more than 200 living writers over the past 50 years. During the 50th anniversary season there will be rehearsed readings of many plays first seen at the RSC. And Boyd is determined to have *The Other Place* back in business soon.

The other priority is to find a permanent home for the company in London, so it has a presence in the theatre life of the capital and so its productions can transfer more quickly. Since its departure from the Barbican, the RSC has pitched up in the West End, at the Roundhouse and elsewhere, but it desperately needs a permanent London base. "It's absolutely crucial," said Boyd, with a gleam of determination in his eye. "It's axiomatic. But finding the right place and the money is not easy." Like Baldrick in *Blackadder*, however, he has a cunning plan.

The company has created a simulacrum of the new RST auditorium for its six-week season in the Park Avenue Armory in New York this summer, where it will present five plays to give eager American audiences a chance to see the productions in the kind of surroundings they could have enjoyed in Stratford-upon-Avon.

It is a typically radical idea on Boyd's part, and he is now taking it even further by planning to find a building in a decent London location where they can set up this transportable version of the theatre. Some money will be needed for the box office, bars and loos and but it will be a far cheaper option than starting from scratch. "My personal ideal would be to aim for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 1616, announcing it as a temporary home – and then just staying there!" said Boyd, with a visible sense of mischief.

At that point, the actors began drifting back to resume rehearsals for Macbeth. I took leave of Boyd convinced that the Royal Shakespeare Company is safe in his capable hands and that its future looks brighter than it has for many years.

A knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours would be richly deserved for the man who saved the RSC from the brink.



Harriet Walter as Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra at the RSC in 2006



Image 2 of 5

David Tennant as Hamlet at the RSC in 2008 Photo: Alastair Muir



Image 3 of 5

Pupils conduct a Hamlet workshop in the auditorium of the newly rebuilt Royal Shakespeare Theatre Photo: PA



Image 4 of 5

triumph: the newly designed Royal Shakespeare Theatre



Image 5 of 5

Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the auditorium of the newly rebuilt Royal Shakespeare and Swan Theatre Photo: PA