

Inside the  
**ROYAL  
SHAKESPEARE  
COMPANY**



**Colin Chambers**

## INSIDE THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

This is the inside story of the Royal Shakespeare Company – a running historical critique of a major national institution and its location within British culture, as related by a writer who is uniquely placed to tell the tale.

It describes what happened to a radical theatrical vision and explores British society's inability to sustain that vision. Spanning four decades and four artistic directors, *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company* is a multi-layered chronicle that traces the company's history, offers investigation into its working methods, its repertoire, its people and its politics, and considers what the future holds for this bastion of high culture now in crisis.

*Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company* is compelling reading for anyone who wishes to explore behind the scenes and consider the changing role of theatre in modern cultural life. It offers a timely analysis of the fight for creative expression within any artistic or cultural organisation, and is a vital document of our times.

**Colin Chambers** is Senior Research Fellow in Theatre at De Montfort University. A former journalist and critic, he was Literary Manager of the Royal Shakespeare Company from 1981 to 1997. His books include the award-winning *Peggy: The Life of Margaret Ramsay*, *Play Agent* (1997) and he is the editor of *The Continuum Guide to Twentieth Century Theatre* (2002).

# INSIDE THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Creativity and the Institution



COLIN CHAMBERS

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To the memory of my mother  
Margaret (1915–1999)  
who supported my dreaming

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## INTRODUCTION

My association with the Royal Shakespeare Company began, as is the case for many, when I was taken to see one of its productions while at school. By good luck, that 1963 production at the Aldwych Theatre happened to be *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook with the mesmeric Paul Scofield appearing in the title role. The RSC caught my imagination and I eagerly followed its fortunes for the rest of the decade. Through the 1970s I saw the company's work in my role as drama critic and in 1979, by one of those curious twists of fate, I came to run its play department, employed on a short-term contract. I graduated in 1981 to the post of literary manager, which I held until I left in 1997. My work there brought me into contact with a vast range of the people who are needed to put RSC productions before the public, from the artistic director and senior management to heads of various artistic, administrative and production departments, actors, stage managers, designers and, naturally, playwrights. Looking back on those years after I had moved on, I realised that much of my time had been spent, as had theirs, in trying to resolve the inevitable tension between creativity and the institution. It is a tension that exists throughout all the processes required to find organisational forms for artistic expression, and it is a tension that persists because the impulse to challenge, to push the boundaries, to refuse the constraints of the institution is endemic in any creative project. It is a problem with which anyone working in a cultural organisation, especially a large one, will be familiar and it lies at the root of this book.

The following chapters trace this dialectic between creativity and the institution as it evolved at the RSC across four decades and four artistic directors. In the opening part of the book, the story unfolds chronologically with an emphasis on the early formative years, which provided a template for much of the remainder of the RSC's life. It is as much a political as an artistic story and begins with Peter Hall's creation of the RSC, Britain's first large-scale, permanent repertoire company, its background in the 1950s and his initial seasons from 1960–62 when the



company was finding its identity and fighting for public subsidy. The story continues with the establishment of the company as a socially engaged, vibrant national institution, mainly through the *Wars of the Roses* trilogy in 1963, Hall's final years at the head of the company and Trevor Nunn's succession in 1968. The next chapter looks at Nunn's refinement, renewal and expansion of the organisation to a four-theatre operation, and his making Terry Hands joint artistic director in 1978 as the company enjoyed a remarkable run of productions in both the classical and contemporary repertoire that concluded in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. Important changes occur with the move to the Barbican in 1982, the further growth of the company following the opening of the Swan Theatre in 1986, and, with Hands now running the company alone, its loss of direction and the temporary closure of its two Barbican theatres. Finally in this section there is a view of the modernisation of the RSC in the 1990s under Adrian Noble, which leads to the unpicking of Hall's legacy through withdrawal from the company's London base and the abandonment of the RSC's hitherto accepted idea of company.

Part Two of the book offers a more general survey of themes: the RSC's repertoire, both Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean, the company's training, research and development work – an area that Britain is singularly poor at supporting – and its strategies for gaining public legitimacy through exploitation of its image and transactions with the audience.<sup>1</sup> The concluding chapter looks at the issue of company and the future of the RSC under Michael Boyd, who became artistic director in 2003.

The book is neither a memoir nor a catalogue of individual productions, many of which are well documented elsewhere and are among the most analysed in modern theatre studies. Rather, the book offers an account of cultural production at the RSC. It is a many-layered chronicle, which moves back and forth at different tempos across a complex field of inter-related artistic, organisational and economic matters.<sup>2</sup> This reflects the reality of the company as a boundless series of shifting relationships, formal and informal. It is a composite of daily negotiations that depend on interactions between individual character and the particular company context, influenced by a vast assortment of intangible factors such as gender, status, timing and location, the effects of which it is difficult to tidy into a neat mould. Necessarily, however, a book attempts to outline a pattern, even while acknowledging the limitations of the venture. Each participant in the story, myself included, will have a unique and personal experience of the events and a different memory of them. Just as no production can exhaust the potential of a text, no one can offer a complete or

definitive account. Hopefully this version will at least be recognisable to those who were there and illuminating to those who were not.

The curve of the RSC's fortunes followed those of theatre in general and was embedded in the enormous social shifts of the latter part of the twentieth century. A child of that fabled decade the 1960s, the RSC was born in a moment of rare British expansion within a period of general imperial decline following the Second World War. It was also the time of a reawakening of politics and of a BBC that could host the most celebrated of television series *The Wednesday Play* and the groundbreaking satirical programme *That Was The Week That Was*. The RSC lasted into the new millennium through the 1960s and 1970s when state patronage of the arts was in the ascendant as well as through the next two decades of monetarism and the rolling back of that patronage. They were years of exceptional technological change and social disintegration. Post-war social democracy had failed and the contradiction between the feel-good ideologies attached to advancing globalisation and the lived experiences of individuals became increasingly fraught. Grand national narratives, which had held sway despite their narrow reading of history, fell apart and were not replaced by convincing alternatives. Culture consolidated its role as the central site for the making of meaning in the secularised society both at the individual and the national level but was subject to even greater commercial penetration and fragmentation. Manufacture was overtaken as the nation's motor by service industries, and culture became a vital business sector. This was not surprising, as capitalism had extended its reach to previously unthinkable domains like genetic identity; even space had become a commodity.

Nor was it a surprise that the public service ethos of the subsidised theatre was worn away under the advancing embrace of marketplace entertainment. Having missed an opportunity for transformation at the end of the war, British theatre had gathered momentum for renovation ten years later in the mid-1950s. Set against a background of wider cultural change, this had occurred through a confluence of influences: Brecht, Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd, American realism, Theatre Workshop and new indigenous playwrighting at the Royal Court. The RSC gave added impetus to this process, which reshaped Britain's theatrical landscape. The company offered a new prototype of what a Shakespearean company could be – a large-scale ensemble presenting in repertoire a classical and contemporary programme relevant to its society. Art theatre was reconnecting with social issues, creating a theatre of national debate that was to become more vivid and diverse than any since Shakespeare's day. This was the theatre John Osborne described as a

minority art with a majority influence, yet it was unable to hold on to bright talents such as Joan Littlewood and Peter Brook, who were ushered overseas.

In the 1980s, as part of its broader attack on society, government stirred the national undertow of philistinism and fuelled populist resentment against funding the so-called high arts as represented by the RSC. The demand for public grants for this kind of art was interpreted as an index of financial mismanagement and lack of public support. If the art were any good, ran the argument, it would be popular enough to pay for itself. State funding was thereby characterised as a means by which the less well-off paid for the arcane pleasures of a privileged section of the much better-off. Their very enjoyment of these pleasures, such as Shakespeare, reinforced the feeling of superiority they already possessed. The type of theatre associated with this privilege was further undermined by the multiplicity of performance practices that burst through conventional classifications and forced a redefinition of theatre. The RSC had once been in the forefront of this questioning but it had subsequently abandoned the experiment. Its irreverent image was confounded when it moved into the Barbican centre, a modern temple to culture, and found itself cast as an ambassador of officially sanctioned art.

When New Labour came to power in the late 1990s, seemingly in tune with what the RSC stood for, the visual arts, pop music and fashion were courted instead of what were seen as minority arts like theatre. A muddled debate about 'dumbing down' pushed serious discussion on the role and future of the art to the margins. A target-driven mentality deepened the confusion between value and value for money and completed the replacement of artistic excellence as the yardstick for support with social validation in the form of buzzwords like 'access' and 'outreach'. Theatre had fallen from its high national perch. With Shakespeare coming under attack from a vocal faction of the cultural and academic industries as an antiquated relic of an outmoded cottage industry, the charge of obsolescence was added to that of elitism. No wonder, then, that by the end of the century the RSC was in trouble. In this it was not alone. Public life had been devalued during the monetarist years and, despite being part of a culture that prefers institutions to individuals, all national organisations were in the firing line. None was safe, from the BBC and *The Times* to the monarchy and parliament.

The RSC's natural constituency, the middle class, had turned in upon itself. The arts policy-makers remained fickle, the finances remained uncertain. Long-term growth, therefore, was still impossible to plan. Yet the RSC could not escape responsibility for its own destiny. Whilst still

adhering to the notion of company, the reality was becoming that of a corporation. The RSC had lost its leading role in the theatre profession and, in trying to adjust to new times, had become too inward looking. The contradictions at its heart – invention versus tradition, spontaneity versus planning, art versus tourism, and the rebellious versus the establishment – had slipped seriously out of kilter and its future was in question.

This decline of the RSC as a creative force may mark the end of the era of the charismatically led, large-scale company and of the notion of culture that lay behind its institutionalisation in flagship centres of excellence. The RSC was seen atop the pyramid, spreading its beneficence outwards and downwards. The gradual shift towards a more diversified view of culture and cultural provision by the end of the twentieth century offered new possibilities in the twenty-first for what might constitute a national theatrical institution. As it entered a rebuilding phase under Michael Boyd, the company faced the task of reinventing itself once again in order to avoid returning to the star-centred museum theatre the RSC had been established to replace.

Theatre is intrinsically social; the story of a major theatre company is, therefore, also a story as well as a metaphor of its society. As a national institution the RSC reflected the wider historical confusions clustered around the loss of a secure national identity and the evident insecurity in finding new consensual definitions. Having achieved nationhood early, the unravelling was all the more complex and involved many inter-connecting layers: end of empire, the Irish war, devolution, the tug between the US and Europe, the rise of identity politics, multiculturalism, the atrophy of democracy, and globalisation. The problematic role of Englishness was a central theme, and the RSC echoed this. Indeed, Peter Brook once described the aim of the RSC as the aim of liberal England – to do things well.<sup>3</sup> The RSC was a very English project, yet, at least at the outset, was simultaneously not very English at all. It was animated by ideas, but was always pragmatic. Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare were archetypally English, linking the present to a defining moment from the national past, the first Elizabethan age. Yet the core inspiration – to create an ensemble – was decidedly un-English, as was the means to secure it – state patronage. Peter Hall, who was neither part of the fusty ‘old boy network’ that ran the arts nor the commercial theatre’s ruling elite, was very un-English in his celebrity and upstart habit of public noise making. But this outsider and his own network came to dominate the English theatre with the RSC in the van. He, however, remained at odds with the political and arts establishment, which dismissed his din, very Englishly, as whingeing.

Culture and economics in their own ways conspired to make the RSC's extraordinary achievements a distinctly English success story: the miserly state gave the company just enough subsidy to keep it alive but not enough to allow it to flourish as it wished, and, when its commitment and collective accomplishment thrived in adversity, the best traditions of heroic English amateurism were seemingly endorsed. The public triumph of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* epitomised this national paradigm. Created as an imaginative response to the serious financial straits in which the company found itself, its sheer theatrical verve stood in marked contrast to the sombre national mood. While the recently elected Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in the name of a return to Victorian values, was to use unemployment and poverty as tools of social engineering in her destruction of the nation's social culture, the RSC production set a different Victorian portrait against hers and offered a pertinent reminder of the cruelty of that age. It was a reminder also of the value of the nation's culture and, in what had become a familiar RSC style, its social criticism was expressed as a celebratory event. It lauded the humane capitalism of moneyed philanthropy, which appealed to English liberal sensibilities – an echo of the story of the Stratford theatre itself, established as a self-financing gift to the nation in the late 1800s. And it affirmed a view of the nation and national characteristics as decent and even noble, operating independent of particular social conditions, inherently linked to a disappearing society and yet enduring as an aspirational ideal.

**PART ONE**

**A Short History  
of Four Decades**

# ONE

## ALL IN A STATE OF FINDING



When the Royal Shakespeare Company was founded in 1961, it was not conjured out of the sky. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon already enjoyed a national and international presence, with its own eighty years of history, culture, values and internal arrangements. The RSC was both bolstered and burdened by this history, which it made anew under the impetus of innovations borrowed from elsewhere in Britain and abroad. In examining the background to the formation and first years of the new company, it is clear the old Stratford model no longer served. A fresh model was required to release resourcefulness and the imagination. But how to achieve this dream? The context in which the seemingly impossible occurred, a context that was social, economic, theatrical and personal, shaped not only the immediate dispensation but also the nature of the institution for the decades to come.

### Stratford-upon-Avon

At the time of the RSC's birth, Stratford was a craft market town of some 17,000 people, geographically and politically the heart of conservative middle England.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it was the repository of much theatrical knowledge of, and expertise in, Shakespearean production yet its theatre was also drenched in the 'bardolatry' of the town, a brand of reverential remembrance given rein by the absence of a national theatre. The location of its theatre on the banks of a swan-rich river and the town's Tudor

beam image supported the illusion there of an eternal shrine to Stratford's most famous son. However, this tradition of a particularly English rural idyll, which bears scant connection to the world of Shakespeare's plays, was, like many seemingly perpetual English traditions, an invention of the nineteenth century. In fact it took until 1769 – 150 years after Shakespeare's death – for Stratford to host a celebration to him, but even then no play of his was presented, and it was not until Shakespeare's house was bought for the nation nearly 100 years later, in 1847, that calls were made for the creation of a permanent monument to him in the shape of a theatre. During the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth in 1864, a festival sponsored and organised by Edward Fordham Flower, the town's mayor and founder of the brewery that bears the family name, did include performances of Shakespeare's plays. This festival began the long association between that family and the commemoration of Shakespeare, a tradition of Victorian philanthropy that laid the seeds for the commercial festival theatre operation that was both inherited and supplanted by the RSC.

Flower's son Charles offered a site and some money towards building a theatre dedicated to Shakespeare and launched a national public subscription to raise the remainder. The response was so derisory that he was forced virtually to fund the project himself. The neo-Gothic theatre that opened in 1879 was unpopular, and commentators were concerned to promote the nation's capital as the only location fit for such a place of pilgrimage. Critics made unfavourable comparisons between the prospects of a self-financed theatre in Stratford and those of Bayreuth, likewise small and removed from its capital but which enjoyed royal patronage for its temple to Wagner. This bias was the product of typical London-centred snobbery rather than a justifiable wariness of the curious quasi-religious approach that links a birthplace with the spirit of its celebrated offspring. The Stratford theatre survived the sneers, and in the shape of Frank Benson's touring company, noted almost as much for its cricketing prowess as its acting abilities, it earned itself a national profile. By way of recognition, in 1925 the theatre was granted a royal charter. However, following a fire, another public subscription to build a new theatre for the nation barely managed to raise half the sum required; the rest came from America. After the Second World War, Stratford took the crown for Shakespearean production from the Old Vic, thanks largely to a string of performances there by Old Vic alumni, and Stratford thus consolidated an international as well as a national reputation. Yet, despite a handful of iconoclastic productions, the Stratford festival seasons soon revealed their own artistic limitations. As the new decade of the 1960s approached, it



became clear to the chair of the theatre's governors that radical change was required.

Fordham Flower had become chair in 1944, the fourth member of the family to hold the position in an unbroken line. Head of the brewery and a Sandhurst-trained ex-officer who once considered standing as a Tory parliamentary candidate, he proved to be an adept theatre supervisor and a good listener with a sound understanding of how theatre people worked. His first artistic director, Robert Atkins (1944–45), tried to introduce staggered and longer rehearsals but found this difficult as he was not in overall control of the theatre, which was run by a general manager. His radical if aloof successor, Barry Jackson, confronted this problem head-on, sacking heads of departments, re-organising the workshops and backstage facilities, and refusing to employ anyone who had acted at Stratford before. Jackson wanted to create a permanent company, but he and Flower had a difficult relationship and Jackson left after only two seasons, a missed opportunity for change. His successor in 1948, Anthony Quayle, a plain-speaking military man, did have a rapport with Flower and was able to build on Jackson's progress. He made significant changes to the theatre building, notably reducing the stage/audience distance by bringing the circle nearer. He brought in Glen Byam Shaw and – briefly – George Devine, who together were able to attract artists of the highest calibre. Quayle consolidated Stratford's prestige by persuading Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont, the most powerful London manager, to join the governing body and help him transform Stratford by means of a West End type of star system. Quayle reduced the number of new productions, brought successful ones back with cast changes, and introduced a two-company strategy, one at Stratford (under Byam Shaw) and one on tour (under him). Quayle was dissatisfied with the constraints of the festival system, and agreed with a critic who wrote in 1956 that the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre needed a common acting style and a studio school open all the year round, where novices and veterans would have time and opportunity to apply and develop the lessons of the repertoire. Without a permanent company this would be impossible, yet Quayle was anxious lest a permanent company narrowed the actors' range by concentrating on one playwright's work. It was also too expensive because 'great stars, essential to a first class performance', as he put it, would not absent themselves from the West End.<sup>2</sup>

Quayle and Flower discussed the obvious solution to Stratford's dilemma: public money supporting a base in London. This would allow for a broader repertoire and would satisfy the needs of the stars. Neither man, however, had much time for state aid, which, they believed, would

undermine Stratford's independence. There was also little evidence that it would be forthcoming even if sought. The London idea had surfaced before, not surprisingly, given the excessive grip the capital exerted in a small country like Britain. An earlier Stratford director, William Bridges-Adams, had sought a London outlet in the 1930s but the then chair Archibald Flower had blocked the plan, which involved an association with the Old Vic. Quayle tried again. He looked at the Royal Court and the Embassy theatres as venues for a possible London outpost, and asked Devine if he would run it. Instead, Devine went his own way at the former location with the English Stage Company and thereby entered the history books as the pioneer of the playwrights' theatre that revitalised British drama. Quayle dropped the London idea, and, keen to expand his acting career and tired of politicking, he resigned in 1956, leaving Byam Shaw in charge as a holding operation. In 1958 Byam Shaw duly proposed Peter Hall as his successor. Hall, then aged twenty-seven, had directed twice at Stratford and, as far as can be determined, was the only candidate.

### Peter Hall

A teenager in the war (he was born in 1930), Hall was representative of a new upwardly mobile breed of ebullient 'scholarship boy' determined to make the most of whatever opportunities the post-war settlement offered. He reached his majority at the time of nationalisation and the introduction of the welfare state, and by background and inclination voted Labour but was not of the radical left.<sup>3</sup> Apart from a moment when he was briefly engaged to a woman he had met in the RAF, he had only one resolve: to be a theatre director. The power position in the theatre lay with this relatively new role of director, which had unseated that of the actor-manager. Hall was influenced by the example of Edward Gordon Craig, who believed in the director as superman and who had become an icon for Hall through his book *On the Art of the Theatre*. The survival of the major pre-war reps such as Birmingham, Liverpool and the Old Vic, and the establishment after the war of the Bristol Old Vic, meant that it was not entirely fanciful to crave the notion of a career as a director, let alone for someone who had not also first been an actor (as had major pioneers of the modern theatre like Stanislavsky or Reinhardt, and in the UK, Granville-Barker). The directorial success of non-acting university graduates, such as Hugh Hunt and Peter Brook, made the dream plausible if not obvious for students like Hall.

Although the theatre was still widely regarded as a risqué profession, the curious admixture at his university, Cambridge, of the 'puritan'

F.R. Leavis and the 'cavalier' George Rylands conferred upon him not only an intellectual and ethical justification of such a choice but also a sense of missionary intent. Leavis despised as effete both the theatre and the Rylands Bloomsbury set, yet his notions of textual scrutiny and the moral gravitas of art provided powerful analytical tools and the urgency of an evangelical spirit: good art was not only good for society but essential to its well-being. Rylands, a link to the influential Renaissance revivalist William Poel as well as to Granville-Barker, offered the sensual satisfaction of practising the art with a rigour equal to that of Leavis but with glamour as well. There was the additional allure of Rylands' connections at the highest level of the theatrical profession. The hot-house Cambridge environment in which Hall found himself was famously the seedbed of many who became leading theatrical figures, such as Derek Jacobi, Ian McKellen and Trevor Nunn. As founder of the RSC and later artistic director of the National Theatre, Hall himself was to become the exemplar of the modern artistic director, a defining figure in the shaping of modern British theatre.

Negotiating the student drama jungle was superb training for weathering the vicissitudes of the commercial theatre, and during his twenty student productions, Hall displayed qualities and formed a persona that were to become familiar to those who worked with him at the RSC. He was ambitious (he decided as a fifteen-year-old to run Stratford), could pretend convincingly, easily went over budget, took well-calculated risks and had a huge appetite for work. He enjoyed self-promotion, being in charge and the politics of the theatre. He showed a flair for organisation, was single-minded and usually obtained what he desired with disarming charm. After Cambridge, he moved quickly off the treadmill of the regional reps through the short-lived Elizabethan Theatre Company to running things: the Oxford Playhouse, the Arts Theatre, London, where he made a considerable name for himself directing the English-language première of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and his own company, International Playwrights Theatre. His reputation was bolstered by having three productions in the West End at the age of twenty-five, including British premières of two plays by Tennessee Williams, *Camino Real* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Hall was energetic, articulate, pragmatic, successful and becoming increasingly well connected at the apex of the profession. He was the coming man.

It was the Beckett production that triggered the invitation to direct at Stratford, which Hall had longed for. His debut was not auspicious but he was invited back the following year. He was already a celebrity without being an *enfant terrible* in the Peter Brook mould. The press reported his

love of fast cars and his marriage in 1956 to French film star Leslie Caron, which impressed the Stratford governors. Hall says she begged him not to take the RSC job but he was never going to let personal relationships stand in the way, and the marriage did not survive very long after he took up the post. He officially became director of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre on 1 January 1960, aged twenty-nine, a potent symbol of the new decade, which his youth, liberal views and vigour epitomised.

Hall was seen in the 1950s as uncharacteristically young for such a responsibility, though Hugh Hunt before the war had run the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre, aged only twenty-three. The Stratford governors' anxieties concerning Hall's age were mollified by the appointment at the same time of a new general manager, Patrick Donnell, whom Byam Shaw thought an admirable link between the old and new regimes. Although the governors endorsed Hall's selection, the post was in the gift of Fordham Flower; there were no advertisements or formal interviews. Hall and Flower, the Labour meritocrat and the philanthropic Tory businessman, went on to form what became an unlikely yet remarkable partnership, one of the most important in post-war British theatre. The relationship between chair of governors and chief executive, who at the RSC was the artistic director, is always crucial to the health of a theatre. Too much interference by the chair inhibits the creativity of the institution; too little threatens its capacity to endure. Hall and Flower agreed on the separation of the governors from the artistic management of the company, a division that was followed within the company between the administrative and artistic wings. Future alliances between chair and chief executive officer were similarly vital to the stability of the ever-threatened RSC – there were only three more chairs to the end of the century and three more artistic directors – although it was not until the pairing of Geoffrey Cass and Adrian Noble in the 1990s that a similarly close relationship became central to the direction of the institution itself.

### The plan

Hall impressed Flower with his practical arguments. Hall had lectured on business finance and management in the RAF (by the necessity of accident, as it was not his chief subject), and early in his career had appreciated the importance of the economics and administration of theatre. His time in national service in Germany had introduced him to the concept of public subsidy and his reading, particularly books such as Norman Marshall's *The Other Theatre*, supported the concept persuasively. His hero Craig in 1910 had asked for a five-year subsidy for a

standing company of 100, two theatres, and a school for theatre workers. It was an early blueprint for the RSC. Hall argued to Flower that for Stratford to prosper as anything other than a provincial heritage theatre, it had to be transformed into a publicly funded, permanent or semi-permanent company performing classical and contemporary work, built around a core of artists, with a base in London as well as in Stratford. There were signs that British theatre was beginning to reconnect to its society, having previously failed, in Hall's words, 'to take into account the fact that we have had a World War . . . and that everything in the world has changed – values, ways of living, ideals, hopes and fears'.<sup>4</sup> Theatre was staking its claim as a cultural force of significance and a new Stratford–London company could add its considerable voice to this clamour.

Specifically, his aim was to emulate the great art theatre ensembles but without their institutional drawbacks. Hall understood and sympathised with the British caution concerning bureaucratic intervention in the arts and was not seeking the introduction of cultural commissars or artistic jobs for life. On a trip to the Soviet Union in 1958 with the Stratford company, during which time he had the decisive conversation with Flower regarding the future Stratford operation, he saw much that was wrong with the Soviet theatre system. Soon afterwards he met Helene Weigel, Brecht's widow and head of the Berliner Ensemble, who stunned him with her criticism of its spoilt, lazy actors. Hall did not want to replicate a civil service theatre, which he believed quickly became artistically sclerotic, and gave rise to what he characterised as an 'official' Puck syndrome whereby an actor takes a role by right of seniority, not aptness. He recognised that subsidy could make theatre complacent, yet, without it, the experiment could not happen or be sustained. He sought to balance the best of both systems: the collective discovery over time of the subsidised ensemble without its rigidities and the fleetness of the commercial system without its waste.

Flower was familiar with all the elements of Hall's plans to revitalise Stratford except one, and it was critical. The new company had to win public subsidy, and to achieve this it had to gamble everything. The Treasury could not be persuaded to grant Stratford a substantial subvention unless it merited an award on both artistic and economic grounds. The measure of the former would require the company to operate at a level and breadth of activity expected of a major ensemble. The measure of the latter would require Stratford's reserves to have disappeared. Hall's idea was to achieve the former through the latter and vice versa. In other words, Stratford would have to become bankrupt in order to receive state

aid, but it would go bankrupt by supporting the vastly expanded work of the new company.

There was a further imperative. Hall and Flower were aware that the putative National Theatre, a shadow that had hung over Stratford since the 1949 National Theatre Act had promised its creation, now really looked like coming into existence. If the challenge presented by a national theatre were not met, Stratford faced a substantial reduction in its appeal, both to audiences and to artists. The climate concerning state aid would change once the NT was launched, and a Stratford–London company could mount a strong argument for similar treatment if it were so ambitious that it could not be ignored. Hall's was a high-risk, 'all or nothing' strategy, but he convinced Flower that it was necessary and practicable.<sup>5</sup> Hall's own personality – a curious mix of the public servant and the pirate – and his appetite for the committee meetings and political manoeuvrings his scheme would entail were important factors in winning Flower's support.

Flower recognised that Stratford faced a clear choice; to continue as before, finding it increasingly difficult to maintain standards, or to expend every effort to become one of the top art theatres of the world, which required a complete alteration in attitude. Accepted commercial notions would have to be abandoned and a new world embraced, in which 'a large annual deficit was part of life'.<sup>6</sup> He expected and received tough resistance from the governors, who were very Tory with a distinctly Midlands flavour. They objected to the shift to London, interpreted as an urban snub to rural Stratford's festival role as guardian of Shakespeare's spirit. Stratford, they feared, would lose its unique character. Opposition to the London move also came from a different angle. Beaumont, the figurehead of the old commercial system Hall wanted to overthrow, saw Hall's London plan as a Trojan horse. By coming to London, Beaumont feared Hall would be attacking the commercial system from within in order to establish the national profile of a publicly backed company. This opposition was ironic, as Beaumont had successfully won government subsidy in wartime to support his commercial operation by presenting classics as educational productions via a separate, non-profit company. Beaumont shared Hall's belief that without subsidy the venture would fail and ruin Stratford, but thought that, with subsidy, the company would offer unfair competition, and would corner the best actors and the best new plays. Beaumont told Hall he would have to resign as a governor, not from personal animus – he had hired Hall himself in the commercial theatre and they admired each other – but to avoid possible conflict of interests. He subsequently stayed true to his word.

The proposed financial strategy, to which the London base was integral, caused the greatest and widespread consternation among the governors. Given the parsimonious level of grant to drama as a whole, this was an audacious, possibly foolhardy plan based on a reversal of the good management upon which Stratford had always prided itself. Flower and Hall won the day but criticism from within the governing body continued throughout the early years of the company.

### The new company

In order to implement his plan, Hall had to fight on several fronts at once in an extraordinary pinball game of frenetic activity – a chaotic creativity as an impresario reflected in the sprawling creativity of the institution he founded. He was not expecting absolute solutions because nothing would ever be settled; the institution would be constantly readjusted. It was being created ‘all in a state of finding’.<sup>7</sup>

Upon taking charge at Stratford, Hall was immediately involved in choosing plays, directors, casts and other artists for his first season, commissioning playwrights, implementing institutional changes at Stratford, making various practical changes, such as altering the Stratford stage, searching for his London theatre, lobbying Buckingham Palace to agree to a change of name for the company – which was agreed in March 1961 – and battling for subsidy.

The most pressing issue was to form the new company. The differences in nuance and usage between ‘company’ and ‘ensemble’ bothered Hall less than the practicalities. The concept of the ensemble was drawn from music and the ideal of seamless playing. It existed within the theatre as a description of excellent collective work on stage but, despite the efforts of early repertory theatres and smaller utopian projects such as the Group Theatre in London, or the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich, which he had visited in 1951, there was little tradition of ensembles as such in Britain, which lacked the necessary patronage to support them. Notwithstanding the commonwealth of actors known in Shakespeare’s day, the modern version of ‘company’ was seen as foreign. Foreigners at Glyndebourne had transformed opera in Britain, but opera was seen as foreign in any case. Theatre, especially where Shakespeare was concerned, was different. British theatre and the society of which it was a part had not embraced the idea of ‘company’ in the sense of a continuing association of people, though the notion featured in many a theatrical debate. Indeed, since the late 1800s when both the Comédie Française and the Saxe-Meiningen troupe visited London, the example of the European ensemble

illuminated the arguments of those in favour of a serious theatre. Most notably this was found in the idea of a national theatre to be funded by the state in order to ensure the necessary coherence and stability that would allow it to act as a yardstick of excellence. Charles Flower, the founder of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, was inspired by this European model to dream of creating in Stratford an ensemble free from the demands of the box office and supported by an endowment instead. Hall was attempting to make Flower's dream come true.

Hall had been thinking about the merits of the company ideal for some time. As a schoolboy he had been impressed by the fine ensemble playing of the Old Vic company at the New Theatre led by Olivier and Richardson and by the Gielgud repertory of classics at the Haymarket Theatre. Hall had read, if not fully absorbed, books by and about Stanislavsky and the celebrated Moscow Art Theatre, and he had seen the work of ensembles during his national service in Germany. He paid tribute to the impact of the 1956 London visit of the most famous of these, the Berliner Ensemble, as 'the greatest single influence on the English theatre since the war', and the effect of Brecht on all aspects of the RSC's work, from the acting to the scenography, was profound.<sup>8</sup> Hall also said he had an obsession with the Théâtre National Populaire and Barrault/Renaud Company in France, and it was always part of his vision to have such companies performing in the RSC's theatres. He achieved this through the World Theatre Seasons at the Aldwych Theatre, frequently the highpoint of the London theatre and inestimably important in opening up the cloistered world of homegrown drama. His time spent with the Elizabethan Theatre Company (ETC) gained him practical experience, albeit on a different scale to what he would have to confront at Stratford. ETC aimed to maintain a permanent core of actors who would develop a distinctive style of performing. In 1955 he had bemoaned the fact that the Old Vic company changed every season and concluded: 'There is still no company in this country where definite styles of acting can be seen, and where our classics can be played as they ought to be.'<sup>9</sup> One such company that offered a 'definite style' was Theatre Workshop, an acknowledged influence on Hall. He even invited – unsuccessfully – its artistic director Joan Littlewood to direct at the RSC. Theatre Workshop was briefly an ensemble, bound together through dedication, but it fragmented by having to play in the West End due to inadequate state support. Although better publicly funded than Littlewood, George Devine was defeated in his attempts to create an ensemble at the Royal Court for similar lack of public financial patronage.

Hall believed that building a company was the prerequisite for creating a vibrant theatre of reanimated Shakespeare and vital new and modern



plays presented in an invigorating symbiosis. Most urgently, a company would provide the conditions for an unprecedented examination of the plays of Shakespeare. Despite his pronounced views on the correct way to speak verse and his immediate introduction of verse classes at Stratford, for Hall a company style – either in a particular production or even more intangibly for the company as a whole – was not a matter of doctrine. It had to be rooted in the choices made by actors, hence the necessity for new ways of working. Freedom in rehearsal to achieve this would be almost impossible outside of a company structure. Related questions such as how a company style that was developed to perform Shakespeare could also serve the different styles of modern work were also to be addressed pragmatically. The motto would be: ‘Keep open, keep critical’.<sup>10</sup> The company would be a world of experiment, which Hall recognised would be more consuming of time, energy and patience than following conventional theatre practice. Whatever became identified as the company style – at its strongest, a passionate Puritanism that eschewed individual dazzle for the brilliance of individuals acting impeccably as a group – would be achieved by determined and inventive trial and error. The RSC was not searching for one particular style but, in the process of refining its work within certain common aesthetic guidelines determined by Hall, it produced a recognisable style as a consequence.

Hall had to construct a practical framework that would suit the situation in which he found himself. Ensemble playing would take time to develop, and while there would always be a turnover of actors within the company, he needed to secure a reasonable degree of continuity through the presence of important personnel and adherence to shared beliefs and aims. Peggy Ashcroft was the key to forming Hall’s first company of actors. Aside from her own standing as an actress, excelling in both classic and modern plays, she had radical sympathies and had believed in the company ideal since falling in love with the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s. She was a link to John Gielgud’s attempts in the 1930s to create a company within the commercial system in seasons at the New Theatre and Queen’s Theatre, attempts that laid many of the foundations of the post-war Stratford developments. She was also a link to one of the most important of the contemporary theatres, the Royal Court – she served on the artistic committee and had appeared there in Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. To Hall she had been a heroine since boyhood, thanks to her 1945 performance in *The Duchess of Malfi*. They first met in 1957 when he cast her as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, his second Stratford production. The following year he directed her in the West End in *Shadow of Heroes*, and, during its run, he asked her to lead the new company. She

agreed, and came to be emblematic of the RSC, serving as a member of its Direction. The company subsequently named a rehearsal room above the Swan Theatre in her honour.

The institutional key to Hall's plan was the introduction of what became known as the three-year contract, which was unique in the British theatre. In fact, it was a three-year commitment that in formal terms was made up of three successive one-year contracts, each of which allowed re-negotiation of pay and casting. This reflected the position of Equity, the actors' union, which sought to protect its members' remuneration against inflation as well as their artistic interests by not agreeing to a contract that ran for more than fifty-two weeks. Offering a combination of security and flexibility, the three-year system was designed to gather together a loose nucleus of actors who would regard the company as their permanent home. It gave the company first call on an actor's services for three years but, if the company did not wish to cast an actor, then that actor was free to seek work elsewhere. Provision was made for actors to leave the company on occasion in order to benefit financially and professionally from working in films and television. Hall subsequently sought to provide such opportunities with the RSC itself through TV and film deals. The contract also provided for holidays with pay. In the absence of any public money, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation gave £5,000 a year for three years to underwrite the costs of the contracts. Hugh Jenkins, at the time assistant general secretary of Equity (later the Arts Minister), hailed their introduction as a 'revolutionary scheme'.<sup>11</sup>

In the age of the commercial theatre, and to a lesser though still considerable extent afterwards, classical theatre in Britain had survived courtesy of the hidden subsidy derived from poor remuneration of the actors who performed it. Hall was able to offer pay roughly comparable to that of Old Vic, with a few receiving higher rates, but he was not able to match West End levels. The 'trade-off' was the attraction of more and varied work, better conditions and earnings guaranteed for a definite period. The problem of persuading actors to live in Stratford for many months was addressed by the promise of a London transfer for a few Stratford productions along with the presentation of new work there, and by the artistic dividends of the enterprise itself, resulting from longer rehearsals – on average six weeks for each production – and new ways of working.

These represented a major transformation of conventional theatre practice. In the late 1870s, four plays were seen at Stratford in ten days; in the following decade, and for the next thirty years, the season lasted two weeks. In the 1930s eight plays were rehearsed in eight weeks, all of which

opened within a fortnight. This was possible because actors already knew the plays, just as opera singers know the opera canon. If a Mercutio fell ill, at least twenty actors were ready to replace him at a moment's notice. In 1946 Barry Jackson changed the Stratford system by allowing four weeks' rehearsal for each play, and a separate director directed each. This allowed Jackson to open the season in April with three plays and add another five at monthly intervals. At the same time, the boundary between the classical and the modern actor was becoming blurred, a process aided by film. Laurence Olivier, for instance, was known as Heathcliff as well as Henry V, and in the 1950s he completed the journey by playing the seedy music hall artiste Archie Rice in *The Entertainer*.

Hall hoped to stimulate the development of a different type of actor who could make that journey at will, but he recognised the reality of the British theatre lacking a formal ensemble tradition. To many actors, the proposed six-week rehearsal period – a luxury elsewhere – simply meant not having to learn your lines as quickly as before. 'Team spirit' was evident and constituted a willingness to work collectively but defensiveness about craft limited the benefits. A healthy mistrust of doctrine was often mixed with an unhealthy anti-intellectualism, and the emphasis on verse work smacked to some of dogma and the university while to others it was a refreshing chance to develop their skills. Verse speaking came under the tutelage of John Barton, Lay Dean of King's College, Cambridge and Hall's long-time artistic colleague from university days. An eccentric, irreverent, razor blade chewing magus with a fertile mind, he joined the company as Hall's lieutenant and was sufficiently important to Hall for Hall to insist he attend all governors' meetings alongside him.

### First seasons

Setting up the initial seasons without knowing if the company would survive released a surge of adrenalin that saw Hall and his colleagues through difficult and uncharted territory as well as through the problems that can face any theatrical management. The enterprise was carried along by the excitement of creating a new theatre company unlike any that had been seen in Britain before.

As artistic directors had done before and were to continue to do afterwards, Hall unsuccessfully tackled the recalcitrant layout of the Stratford auditorium, which was of proscenium design rather than the open stage of Shakespeare's day. He wanted the audience to feel more as if they were sharing the same space as the actors rather than inhabiting a separate arena. The focal point for the stage was remote for a theatre of its capacity and,

from the back of the balcony, further than the normal distance for discerning details of the face. Hall extended the stage to bring it closer to the audience and cut it away at both sides to allow two rows of angled seats to be added to the front stalls. He also added a rake or slope, a platform-like feature that was to become symbolic of the RSC as a theatre of public debate. He set the tone for the future practice of the RSC by leading from the rehearsal floor. He decided to direct three of the six productions in a themed season of comedies, chosen because he did not believe the young company would be able to give a good account of the more mature plays. The first set-back was that Britain's two outstanding directors, Tyrone Guthrie and Peter Brook, were unavailable. Hall turned to university friends, Barton and Peter Wood, leaving only one director from outside the Cambridge circle, Michael Langham.

In choosing the actors who would create his company, Hall immediately paid the price for his pragmatism. He had no interest in being trapped in an esoteric sideshow. He loved celebrity and believed in star quality, if not the star system. Hall wanted star actors who could play within an ensemble alongside the core company actors.<sup>12</sup> No sooner had he secured the services of the stars Rex Harrison and Kay Kendall than he learnt they were withdrawing. He suffered a further blow when, having moved on from Harrison and cast his lead actor Paul Scofield as Shylock, Petruchio and Thersites, he received a shattering letter from the actor a few weeks before rehearsals began, saying he could not face coming to Stratford. Hall held his nerve and gambled. He approached a young actor, Peter O'Toole, whom he had seen playing Hamlet at the Bristol Old Vic the year before. He turned out to be the 'find' of the first season, but in November that year he announced he was to play the lead in David Lean's film *Lawrence of Arabia* and would not be available for London where he had agreed to play Henry II in *Becket*. The company issued an injunction but lost on the grounds that O'Toole had not been contracted to play that specific role. O'Toole's withdrawal threatened the success Hall needed in London in order to persuade the Arts Council to subsidise the company. Not only did Hall want to play O'Toole's Stratford productions in London, he had also won the rights for *Becket* against competition from Beaumont and needed a star to carry it off.

The company he formed was forty-eight strong, with an emphasis on youth, and drew on actors new to Shakespeare who had worked in the committed theatre of the Arts, the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop in addition to those with previous experience of Stratford. The opening production by Hall of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was greeted as a disaster. Unrest among senior actors in the next production, *The Taming*