

all together
a creative
approach to
organisational
change

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ALL TOGETHER: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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Executive summary

This report was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in February 2007. The RSC had embarked on a major programme of change in the way it is led and managed, to mirror the physical transformation of its home in Stratford-upon-Avon. The RSC wished to extend the principles of ensemble, as applied to the acting company, to the whole organisation, in both its internal management and external relations. This would be carried out by the management of the RSC, advised by the consultant Dr Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge. The cultural team at the think tank Demos was asked to follow this journey, observing the process and reporting back through this publication. The RSC hopes that the experiences recorded might be useful to other cultural organisations as well as the wider business community.

The concept of ensemble

Historically the RSC has described itself as an ensemble – a French word meaning ‘together’ or ‘viewed as a whole’. In the theatre, it has the specific meaning of a group of actors who work together in a collaborative fashion over a period of time. Over the last three years the leadership of the RSC has sought to extend what they describe as the ‘usefully ambiguous’ idea of ensemble beyond the rehearsal room and the acting company into the whole organisation. The principle has been used to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviours and practices.

Ensemble should be thought of not only as a management tool, but as a set of moral principles that remains constant as a guide to leadership decisions and administrative actions. Ensemble is a value, as well as a description of a

particular way of organising people: a way of being as much as a way of doing. It is also a moving target in that it can be rearticulated to meet changing needs and circumstances.

The principle of ensemble as an organisational practice

Organisations need to build systems that are not just optimally efficient in a specific set of circumstances, but capable of changing to meet new circumstances: in other words, organisations need internally generated resilience. In turn, that resilience is generated by creating shared terms of engagement – they cannot be imposed – that govern the relationships between different people and functions.

It is the job of leaders to develop both organisational interconnectedness, and the capacity of individuals and departments to work together. Instead of attempting the now impossible task of micromanaging specialised, knowledge-driven functions, leaders must pay attention to developing the norms of responsibility, honesty and trust within the organisation that enable people to work together.

Ensemble addresses exactly these questions of instilling behavioural norms through strong values, while reconciling the individual's needs for creative expression, reward, and liberty, with the need to be part of a social system that is efficient, responsive and liberating rather than conformist, restricting and inefficient.

Results of the application of the ensemble principle at the RSC

Organisational development, guided by ensemble principles has helped the RSC to achieve artistic success, improved financial performance and morale, and made operations and productions more efficient.

Leadership has played an essential role in aligning the values of ensemble with strategic objectives and organisational change. This has been achieved by employing rhetorical power

and judicious intervention, and by balancing organic evolution with an intentional programme of change.

Change is a continuous process, not an event. Most organisational change succeeds after five years, if at all (it is estimated that 75 per cent of attempts to change organisations fail).¹ At the RSC, significant progress has been observed after two and a half years, although the company still feels that there is more to learn and do, and wants to extend the principle of ensemble to its relationship with audiences.

Internal change processes need to align with external conditions. Creating a common understanding of external expectations of the organisation is one essential function of leadership.

Some of the organisational changes that have happened at the RSC are conventional, though not necessarily easy to achieve: improved communications; delegated responsibilities; more transparency; greater resilience; accessible leaders. Other aspects of the RSC's development are less conventional and offer useful lessons.

Distinctive lessons learned

Emotions are important - acknowledge them

A remarkable feature of the RSC's leadership and management style has been the regular and explicit reference to emotions. Very few leaders in government or the corporate sector speak openly about the emotions that everyone knows are a major feature of organisational life.

Leaders are at the heart of a network, not at the top of a pyramid

As Henry Mintzberg puts it, 'a robust community requires a form of leadership quite different from the models that have it driving transformation from the top. Community leaders see themselves as being in the centre, reaching out rather than down.'²

The realisation of creativity rests on collaboration

As a leading cultural organisation, the RSC lives and breathes artistic creativity. But every organisation has to adapt, innovate and be creative to some degree. The RSC's experience shows that creativity can only be realised through collective and collaborative endeavour, and the more that is facilitated – through good communications, a strong common culture, the creation of the right set of attitudes and so on – the more likely it is that an organisation will be able to experiment, and hence to innovate well, across its whole range of activities.

Conceptual simplicity is the best response to organisational and contextual complexity

Every large-scale organisation is complex, and every organisation exists within a changing and multifaceted context. Difficult and demanding tasks need to be underpinned by clear and comprehensible concepts that everyone understands and can feel part of, both intellectually and emotionally. The RSC is a compelling example of a complex organisation with a simple message: when asked what was the purpose of the RSC, our interviewees repeatedly expressed the same aspiration: to be the best theatre company for Shakespeare in the world.

1 Changes and challenges at the RSC

The value of the RSC's story is as an example of a company in turnaround.

Sir Christopher Bland, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the RSC, February 2009.

This chapter gives a brief description of the RSC and the crisis that prompted a change of leadership and strategic direction in 2002/03. It also outlines the changing social and technological context in which organisations have to operate. Internal and external changes have led to the process of organisational development described in this report.

The Royal Shakespeare Company

The Royal Shakespeare Company is the best-known theatre company in the world, and has a long and distinguished history. It traces its origins to the building of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1879. It became the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1961 under the direction of Peter Hall who in 1960 had established it as an 'ensemble' company, performing both in Stratford-upon-Avon and at the Aldwych Theatre in London. It rapidly became a flagship cultural organisation for the UK of major national and international importance, performing new plays as well as the classical repertoire. In 1977, having played in a number of additional, smaller venues in London, it established what is now the Donmar Warehouse as a second London stage, where the focus was on new plays and the modern repertoire. In 1982 it moved all its London work into the newly opened Barbican Theatre, where it remained until 2002. Under the successive artistic leadership of Hall, Trevor Nunn, Terry Hands, Adrian

Noble and now Michael Boyd, it has presented the works of Shakespeare as a living part of our cultural heritage, and been the training ground for at least three generations of theatre professionals including actors, directors and designers, many of whom have become household names.

The RSC is a charitable, not-for-profit organisation, with a Royal Charter. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales is President of a governing body of, at the time of writing, 37 Governors, but day-to-day oversight is exercised by the 16 members of the board, led by the Chairman, currently Sir Christopher Bland. Two members of the RSC's executive staff are on the board: Michael Boyd, the Artistic Director, and Vikki Heywood, the Executive Director. All board members are also Governors of the RSC.

As the name implies, the RSC exists to play Shakespeare, but always in a contemporary context. Shakespeare is presented alongside a classic canon, and the RSC has consistently performed modern plays and commissioned new work.

The RSC is based at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST) in Stratford-upon-Avon, a medium sized town in Warwickshire approximately 100 miles from London. At the time of writing in 2009, the RSC is reaching the end of a substantial remodelling of both the main stage and auditorium of the RST, and the public spaces that envelop them. Both before and after the current building programme the RSC would normally run three theatres in Stratford: the RST, The Swan and a third, smaller space, The Other Place.

The purpose of the RSC is to produce great work for the widest possible audience. Everything that it does is directed to this end. It brings to this task considerable strengths: royal patronage, an experienced and committed board, a proud history, an excellent reputation and dedicated staff, many with years of experience in the craft and skills of the theatre. The RSC has a valuable and respected brand name and enjoys considerable public support and affection. A recent brand audit commissioned by the RSC showed that it is the most recognised theatre name in the UK.

1999–2002: a period of crisis

The RSC began the twenty-first century facing serious challenges to its operating model, compounded by misguided leadership, internal dissension and low morale. Many of the conditions that led to this situation had been developing for years, and were exposed when, between 1999 and 2002, the RSC experienced a crisis that threatened to overwhelm it, and manifested itself in a number of areas.

Governance

The governance structure had become outmoded and inefficient. Before 1999 there had been no board between the management and a large group of Governors. A board was put in place in 1999 but the relationship between it and the organisation had yet to mature.

Management

The RSC was managed on strictly hierarchical lines. Artistic decisions were taken by a small group of senior creatives around the Artistic Director, and operational decisions focused at this time on the Managing Director. The Finance Director closely controlled all budgets, and under the direction of the Managing Director, the Human Resources Department managed the staff centrally. Emblematically, the row of offices occupied by senior management was known as ‘the corridor of power’. An Arts Council appraisal carried out in 1990 had warned that the management of the RSC was unusually centralised, and that communications within the organisation were poor.⁴ At a board meeting in 2003, the newly appointed Artistic Director Michael Boyd summed up the problem:

The RSC has suffered both historically and in the recent past from a remote and overly hierarchical management approach which has led to a sclerosis in the communication of authority, the misuse of information as power and a dearth of initiative and management skills at departmental level.⁵

The erosion of the acting ensemble

By 2000 the ensemble principle, as applied to the acting company, had been undermined by changes in the theatrical economy that meant that many actors were reluctant to take long-term contracts. It is also possible that the RSC's poor critical reputation at this time and the working conditions in the company, discouraged long-term commitment. At the same time, the leadership of the RSC respected the principle of ensemble acting less, since it was argued that it constrained the choice of talent to work with.

External relationships

Relations with the RSC's principal public funder, Arts Council England (ACE), were severely strained. In 1999, the RSC entered the Arts Council's Stabilisation Programme. This was intended to create a financial breathing space for arts organisations in difficulties while they reorganised their policies, management structures and finances. Normally, stabilisation programmes were developed in concert with ACE, but the senior management of the RSC developed their plans independently, advised pro bono, and in extreme secrecy, by a team of management consultants from McKinsey. Their plan became known as Project Fleet.

Failed reform

Project Fleet did not cause the crisis that threatened to engulf the RSC, but its effect was to make the crisis worse. Two decisions taken at the time, to leave the Barbican, the RSC's London home since 1982, and to rebuild the RST, have in fact been carried through, although the approach to transforming the RST has been different, and the timetable altered. The Project Fleet plan was over-optimistic on several fronts: about the possibility of RSC productions being presented in London on an ad hoc basis in different venues by commercial managements; about help from the USA in fundraising and production partnerships with American universities; and about the ability to raise an endowment. Significantly, Project Fleet proposed to weaken the ensemble principle in the acting

company, with actors' contracts limited to six to nine months, at most. Overall, the plan had been to introduce a spirit of enterprise by exploiting the RSC brand. At that time, however, the brand was a waning asset.

Morale

Project Fleet called for 85 redundancies in London and up to 60 in Stratford-upon-Avon. The redundancies resulting from the departure from the Barbican affected staff morale – especially since the RSC had long been thought of as a 'family' by many people working there – and damaged trade union relationships. These redundancies were carried out at the decision of the Managing Director through a centralised human resources process, and were announced at a large company meeting that circumstances had obliged the management to hold.

Finance

Although the RSC has substantial capital resources in the form of land and buildings, like all performing arts organisations, it is dependent on a combination of box-office and other earned revenue including commercial transfers, donations, commercial sponsorship, and public subsidy, chiefly from ACE. Critical reputation also has a profound influence on financial success. In 2000, financial projections showed that the RSC would soon be facing an annual deficit of £4 million.

During the period 1999–2002, the simultaneous pressures of delivering Project Fleet and the projected rebuilding of the RST proved too much for the overstretched staff. While the need for change was recognised, the staff of the RSC could not support a plan that had been sprung on them. Loyal senior staff were left to drive through a top-level decision. The theatrical profession denounced the plans as a destruction of everything the RSC was supposed to stand for, as was widely reported in the press at the time.⁶ There was a public protest march in Stratford-upon-Avon, and strikes were only narrowly averted.

While the RSC and ACE tried to find a way forward, in 2002 the then Artistic Director exercised his contractual right to take a sabbatical in order to direct a West End musical, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. In April 2002, he announced that he would not be seeking renewal of his contract, which expired in April 2003.

It should be noted that the RSC was not the only cultural organisation facing significant financial and operational problems at the close of the 1990s. The Royal Opera House, the British Museum, English National Opera and others were also in severe difficulties. Post 2000, the operating context for the arts improved: funding increased, a number of iconic buildings were opened, and, before the recession of 2008/09, there was a fresh spirit of confidence.

The changing context for institutions

In parallel with the immediate problems of the RSC, social and technological developments were (and still are) combining to change the way that organisations, including the RSC, must operate:

- Technology has made communication quicker, and increased the connectivity (the number, strength, speed and frequency of connections) between people within organisations and between institutions.
- The speed at which organisations need to function, in order to remain competitive in the face of changing consumer expectations and rapidly changing externalities, means there is no longer time for decisions to flow up and down hierarchies making the devolution of decision making essential.
- There is an increasing tendency to put together teams and ad hoc groupings of people from both within an organisation and outside it to solve specific problems, or to address specific issues that require particular combinations of knowledge, skill or access to networks for their solution.
- In order to reduce costs and use expertise efficiently, organisations are outsourcing more of the functions that used to be managed and developed in-house.

- As roles within organisations have become increasingly specialised, and ever more complex within those specialisms, it has become impossible for leaders to know everything about their organisations. They can no longer be the ultimate source of knowledge.
- A further consequence of increased specialisation is that particular skills and competencies become highly valued, and ‘talent retention’ can become difficult. People are motivated to stay with organisations not only by financial reward, but by finding satisfaction and emotional reward in their work and their working relationships.
- Organisations now operate in virtual as well as physical spaces. Consumers can interact with organisations, and staff members can be managed, out of hours and without face-to-face contact. This not only places new demands on staff in terms of their knowledge, skills and behaviour, but also means that more people within organisations are now ‘frontline’ because they have direct contact with the outside world. In turn, this presents challenges in terms of communications, brand management, logistics and investment.

These developments combine to create a situation in which organisations need to build systems that are not just optimally efficient in a specific set of circumstances, but also capable of changing to meet new circumstances: in other words, organisations need internally generated resilience. In turn, that resilience is developed by creating shared terms of engagement – they cannot be imposed – that govern the relationships between different people and functions.

It is the job of leaders to develop organisational interconnectedness, and the capability of individuals and departments to work together. Instead of attempting the now impossible task of micromanaging specialised, knowledge-driven functions, leaders must pay attention to developing the norms of responsibility, honesty and trust within the organisation that enable people to work together.

The RSC believes that the ensemble principle addresses exactly these questions of instilling behavioural norms

through strong values while reconciling the individual's needs for creative expression, reward, and autonomy, with the need to be part of a social system that is efficient, responsive and liberating rather than conformist, restricting and inefficient.

The challenges faced by the RSC

The events of 1999–2002 precipitated the change process at the RSC that began with the appointment of Michael Boyd as Artistic Director in 2002 (with effect from April 2003), and which is still continuing. Now, as in 2002, the RSC's management has to find solutions to two sets of challenges, one generic to any organisation in transition, and the other specific to the RSC. The principal challenges facing the RSC are scale and complexity and organisational ageing.

Scale and complexity

As of 31 December 2009, a total of 807 people were employed in varying capacities by the RSC. They included:

- 384 permanent employees
- 87 people on long-term contracts
- 126 actors and stage managers
- 131 pro-rata musicians (whose employment varies from regular to very occasional work)
- 79 casual workers.

The RSC normally performs year-round across three stages in Stratford-upon-Avon, has an annual residency in Newcastle, mounts seasons in London, and presents national and international tours. During the period covered by this report reconstruction work at Stratford meant that performances there were confined to one temporary theatre, The Courtyard. This means that the number of productions, performances and potential audience numbers in Stratford were constrained and, in normal circumstances, would be considerably larger.

In 2008/09, the period covered by the latest annual report, the RSC sold 532,764 tickets overall, playing to 85 per cent capacity. In Stratford, the company played to 92 per cent capacity at The Courtyard. In addition to the eight plays in The Histories cycle, and a revival of Gregory Doran's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there were ten productions, of which two were new commissions. The scale of the enterprise, which also includes UK and international touring, and seasons in Newcastle and London, imposes a demanding production cycle on the RSC. It calls for long-term planning and substantial resources in terms of finance, materials, technical skills and creativity.

The complexity of the production cycle and touring are compounded by the fact that offices, workshops, rehearsal rooms and other functions are in different locations spread around Stratford-upon-Avon and London (see figure 1). This imposes not just a geographical but also a psychological and cultural distance between different areas. Moreover, during the period covered in this report, some of the offices and theatre locations were temporary while the new RST was being built.

The RSC's long presence in Stratford-upon-Avon means that it is a significant local employer in a town that is a vital tourist attraction, welcoming three million visitors a year. It has an important relationship with the local community, who monitor the RSC closely. During the period of partial demolition and transformation, the old RST building and the Swan Theatre have been a material reminder of change, evoking complex emotions as a result. The redevelopment represents progress and activity, but also the (temporary) loss of an icon.

As well as operating across different geographic locations, different parts of the organisation are at their busiest at different times of the day. Cleaners and maintenance start early, administrative staff work mainly office hours, others such as front of house staff and technicians have to support matinée and evening performances, and undertake regular weekend work. Many staff and all senior managers have open-ended working time contracts (to a maximum of 48 hours

a week averaged over a year). Actors have their own timetables of rehearsals and performances. For everyone, there can be irregular and long hours to meet the needs of specific shows, and the European Working Time Directive has reduced the flexibility of working hours, making operations more complex.

Organisational ageing

In 2003 the RSC had an unusually large number of staff with long tenure, some with over 30 years' service. This brought a strong sense of loyalty and community, but an adherence to traditional practices and values by some staff did not always contribute to the creation of a highly integrated organisation.

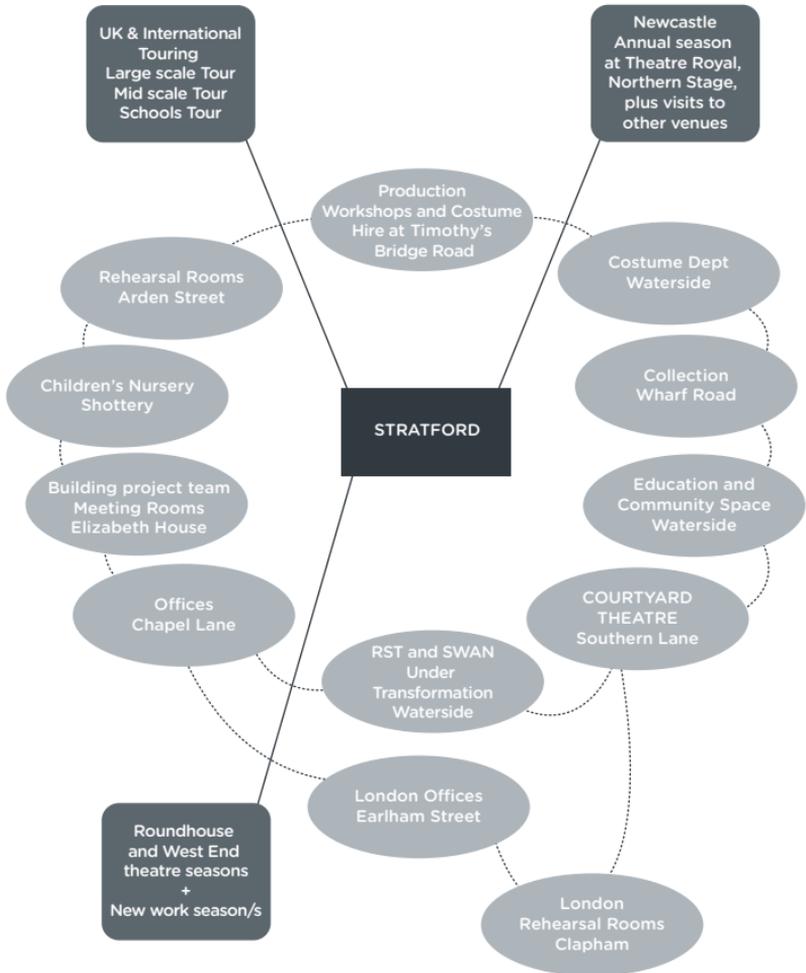
The longevity of both staff and organisation meant that there were established networks of staff and areas of authority that, although highly efficient in terms of fulfilling their specific function, concentrated organisational power in certain individuals, who retained certain ways of working. The downside of the positive 'family feeling' was that members of staff expected the organisation to be indulgent and forgiving, and there was an inherent resistance to change.

In addition, as the work of the organisation changed and expanded, the RSC needed to create new functions not previously associated with theatre practice, for example in IT, education and digital media. This brought new people with new skills and different expectations into the organisation.

Summary: the challenges facing the new leadership of the RSC in 2003

A combination of internal and external circumstances created an extremely challenging situation for the new leadership of the RSC in 2003. Attempted change had not been successful, producing internal resistance, weak organisational inter-connectedness, inefficiency and a lack of internal resilience. The new Artistic Director, Michael Boyd, and new Executive Director, Vikki Heywood, faced the following challenges:

Figure 1 RSC locations in the UK



- how to rebuild the morale of the organisation.
- how to rebuild the critical reputation of the RSC, which was low.
- how to restore the confidence of senior management.
- how to restore confidence in senior management.
- how to restore relations with supporters, sponsors and funders, especially the Arts Council.
- how to deal with a looming financial deficit.
- how to handle the loss of a permanently available London theatre
- how to manage the reconstruction of the RST, for which the Arts Council had set aside £50 million in Lottery funding, but which would cost more than double that.
- how to solve the long-term structural problems of the RSC, and rebuild an organisation, while working with the grain of its dominant culture.
- how to do all these things, and continue to show artistic leadership by mounting critically successful productions.

Financially and, more importantly, creatively, the RSC has not only survived the crisis of 1999–2002, but has also re-established its reputation, and is about to open a reconstructed main theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon which physically embodies the ensemble principles discussed in this report. This achievement has happened because of a process of change and growth across the whole organisation that is rooted in the concept of ‘ensemble’.

2 Ensemble

*I want to say that the ensemble... is the meat and potatoes of what we as actors do.*⁷

Actor Sam West, *The Stage*, 2002

To address the challenges set out in chapter 2, the new leadership of the RSC used the concept of ‘ensemble’ to bring about change across the whole organisation, not just within the acting company. This chapter explains what ensemble means, the logic of its use at the RSC, and what it was intended to accomplish. It considers the social changes that encourage a more ensemble approach to managing organisations, and identifies a crucial paradox that has to be resolved if the ensemble principle is to become an organisation-wide practice, as opposed to an ideal in the minds of its leaders.

In the RSC’s current statement of its ‘Purpose and Values’ it makes a commitment: ‘To create our work through the ensemble principles of collaboration, trust, mutual respect, and a belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’. This purpose should not only govern work on the stage and in the rehearsal room, but extend throughout the operations of the RSC, so as: ‘to inspire artists and staff to learn and make theatre at the same time’.⁸

At the RSC, the resuscitation of the ensemble principle from 2002 was, in a sense, a case of ‘back to the future’. The word held rhetorical power, and carried with it an appeal both to the organisation’s historic achievements and the distinct world of the theatre. As Boyd told the board in 2003:

*The RSC's best and most celebrated work has invariably been the fruit of an ensemble company of actors, who have developed a deepened understanding of each other and their material over a sustained period of time, in an atmosphere of trust, and a climate of courage.*⁹

Boyd's decision to revive the ensemble principle not only gave the RSC and its stakeholders' confidence by signalling continuity within change. In addition, the word has a useful ambiguity. As Boyd remarked at a meeting that we observed in February 2007:

It is a bin that anything could go in. My ideal ensemble is both closed and monastic, and focused and a whorehouse, and looking out.

What does ensemble mean?

Ensemble is a French word meaning 'together' or 'viewed as a whole'. In its simplest theatrical context, ensemble means no more than a group of actors working together on a series of productions over time. When it comes to applying the term more broadly to organisational development, ensemble should be thought of not only as a way of doing or as a management tool, but as a way of being, based on a set of moral principles that guide leadership decisions and administrative actions. The word may be usefully ambiguous, but there is no doubt about the values that shape Boyd's approach. One of his most crafted statements on the topic was made in a speech given at the New York Public Library on 20 June 2008. The presentation linked theatrical practice with organisational form, in the context of social and cultural changes in the world as a whole:

*Our dominant, secular, western culture is obsessed with individualism. It is fearful of the boredom, humiliation and disappointments of collective activity. Just do it yourself, get on with it yourself and at least you can control the experience you're going to have. Don't throw yourself at the mercy of other people.*¹⁰

Boyd argued that at the heart of healthy, creative theatre making is collaboration. But there is a tendency for the open world of theatre to become a closed system, as directors, writers, and designers impose patterns that the actors are then constrained to work to. However, political, social and cultural changes suggest that the spirit of ensemble that is intended to inform the RSC may once more be in tune with the times:

We have found that this approach to theatre making both enables and requires a set of behaviours... worth looking at, because they create our conditions – what we call the conditions for creativity. And they also create the conditions for community. ¹¹

These behaviours – in the terms of this report, the moral values of ensemble – Boyd summarised as:

Cooperation *The intense and unobstructed traffic between artists at play, that also surrenders to the connection with others even while making demands on ourselves.*

Altruism *The moral imagination and the social perception to see that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is about the stronger helping the weaker, not the weaker being choreographed to make the stronger look good.*

Trust *Otherwise you are not going to be able to experiment or be honest without fear.*

Empathetic curiosity *Caring for others with a forensic curiosity that seeks new ways of being together and creating together.*

Imagination *And time for that imagination, so that we can keep ideas in the mind long enough to allow them to emerge from the alchemy of the imagination rather than the factory of the will.*

Compassion *Engaging with the world and each other, knowing that there may well be mutual pain in doing so.*

Tolerance and forgiveness *To allow mistakes and recover from very big mistakes.*

Humility *The person who has nothing to learn is certainly incapable of creative dialogue.*

Magnanimity *The courage to give away your ideas.*

Love *The ability to be inspired by your whole self and by the whole self of others.*

Rapport *The magic language between individuals in tune with each other.*

Patience *Only really possible and only really called upon in a company that stays together this long... Patience to develop relationships with each other as fellow artists ... The patience to stalk the big beast and achieve what only we can achieve.*

Diversity *Far from imposing homogeneity, a true ensemble requires dynamic difference.*

Boyd added that not everyone in the RSC was expected to display every one of these qualities all the time. These values, he said 'were a report of findings, not a code of behaviour'. They were an ideal, a guiding star by which people could coordinate their individual contribution to the direction taken by the larger whole.

The most formal statement of these values in the company's official papers is in the RSC's first-ever strategic plan, issued in August 2006, which declared:

The values that define the RSC's approach to ensemble are:

- *a commitment to the unexpected, born out of trust and the time the company spends together*
- *a belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*
- *a rigorous approach to training*
- *a duty to experiment*
- *a celebration and nurturing of the skills of emerging artists*
- *creative communication across theatre disciplines*
- *curiosity for and engagement with best practices from other cultures and disciplines.*¹²

Since then the company has summarised these values as being 'collaborative', 'engaging', 'ambitious' and 'enquiring'. Its stated aims are:

- to connect people with Shakespeare
- to engage with the world
- and to work through the principles of ensemble.

Ensemble in the theatre and the acting company

From the beginning, the RSC was conceived as an 'ensemble company'. It was established with the principle of offering long term contracts not only to create the circumstances in which actors could develop their performance skills, but also to generate mutual trust and knowledge that would enhance the work on the stage. While not in any way achieved through an egalitarian process, ensemble productions call for a much stronger sense of co-ownership of creative decisions and they produce a form of social capital.

In our interviews, we noted that many long-serving members of staff referred to the RSC as a ‘family’, and the RSC has by and large always enjoyed very strong loyalty from its staff. But an ensemble is not a family. Indeed, one generally unacknowledged aspect of the belief in the value of ensemble that presents a strategic challenge to the RSC, is that, although the plays of Shakespeare were written for a ‘family’ of players, they were not written for an ensemble. Unlike the plays of, for instance, Chekhov or Ibsen, where there is a roughly equal distribution of parts, in the case of Shakespeare there are two or three strong, usually male, leads, some minor character parts, and then a flexible number of one-liners or walk-ons. In addition, there will always be a tension between the theatrical economy’s need for ‘stars’ as lead players and the more communitarian idea of an ensemble where actors play both minor and major parts. The RSC’s repertory system also calls for actors to be ready to understudy roles of all sizes and, in the past, leading actors have been reluctant to do this.

During Boyd’s tenure, ensemble has been thoroughly re-embedded in the RSC’s theatre practice. Early progress was made towards establishing three-year contracts for actors. In the spring of 2006, Boyd began rehearsing a new cycle of Shakespeare’s history plays, which he described as: ‘the birth of our first two and a half year ensemble... a model of how we would like to produce work in the future’.¹³

Alongside the long contracts, Boyd initiated the ‘Artist Development Programme’, which required that all actors with the company undertake training and development in everything from voice and verse to rhetoric and movement as a normal part of the working week. Understudying became a requirement – with their agreement – for all actors, regardless of the seniority of their roles or experience.

Nonetheless, the RSC continued to hire stars. Soon after *The Histories*, the *Hamlet* ensemble featured David Tennant and Patrick Stewart. In Boyd’s words: ‘There was no bigger star-led phenomenon.’¹⁴ Casting them tested the resilience of the values of ensemble. It required the ensemble to accommodate stars, and also that the stars themselves fit

within the ensemble. Boyd emphasised the latter and the significance that both actors had grown up in the ensemble tradition of the RSC.¹⁵

In January 2009 rehearsals began with a new ensemble acting company, comprising 44 actors, who would present seven Shakespeare plays and seven other productions over a period of three years. Known informally as the 'Long Ensemble', 17 of the actors had worked at the RSC before, 7 played in *The Histories*, and 27 were new to the company. The oldest actor was 66, the youngest 22, and 12 were women. The company as a whole encompasses a diverse range of experience, education, accent and ethnic origin.

Extending ensemble to the whole company

From the beginning Boyd made it clear, as he told the board shortly after his appointment, that he believed that ensemble work was the organisation's destiny. He also argued that the organisation as a whole should become more of an ensemble, by breaking down the walls between operational staff and artists, and between the cultures of managers and artists. This prescription flowed from Boyd's analysis of the problems that the RSC had recently faced, including the observations that:

- *There has been an over-specialisation between conception and execution, between artist and manager; and*
- *There has been poor communication between theatre artists and 'members of staff'.¹⁶*

The board agreed that Boyd's vision needed to be transmitted throughout the organisation and supported by actions that would instil values with which everyone could identify. The means of transmission was to be the Steering Committee, a group of senior managers originally established by Boyd when the previous Managing Director was still in post, but which was now to be the means by which leadership could be distributed beyond the Artistic and Executive

Director. Although at this stage Boyd and the staff were still feeling their way towards the ensemble ideal, in his contribution to the 2004/05 annual report Boyd wrote that ensemble:

Is the way to lift everyone to new and unexpected levels of vividness and clarity. It does not preclude one-part offers, or short contracts, but does demand an understanding and a commitment to the philosophy.

Importantly he went on:

*Ensemble is not just about actors. Already we have been investing in training and developing opportunities for assistant directors, costume makers, designers and workshop craftspeople. We need training and development to extend to all staff.*¹⁷

As a signifier of change, and recommitment to purpose, Boyd took the unusual step of opening up the RSC to outside influences by inviting different national and international theatre companies to share in mounting a festival of the complete works of Shakespeare, The Complete Works festival, which ran at Stratford-upon-Avon from April 2006 to March 2007. The experience of working with outside companies, some good, some bad, was a challenge to the RSC's ways of working, but it served to root the changes being made throughout the administration and support operations in the practice of the theatre, grounding wider change in the reality of production and performance.

Ensemble: a moving target

The Complete Works festival and The Histories that followed (alongside productions by other directors) are reminders that the RSC works to an organisational rhythm as new seasons are planned and prepared, new acting companies formed, and new challenges undertaken. These challenges, such as The Complete Works, generate a pulse of pressure points that are often exhausting, but which move the company forward. As

the cycle continues, the work of refining the RSC's values and practices goes on. The all-embracing term 'ensemble' turns out to be a moving target, as understanding of its meaning and ways of achieving it change and are refined. Certain actions, not necessarily performed with ensemble in mind, will be seen in chapter 3 to have contributed to the RSC's purpose. Change has to be understood as a developmental process rather than a predetermined plan, an incremental approach achieved by small steps whose full significance often appears only in retrospect.

Ensemble and collaboration: placing the RSC in a wider context

In his speech at the New York Public Library, Boyd spoke of ensemble being increasingly in tune with the zeitgeist. Looking beyond the RSC, it is clear that a number of social, technological and economic factors have interacted to create a climate where the ideas and practice of collaboration have spread across different sectors. It is against this backdrop that the RSC has implemented and been able to implement ensemble.

In their book *The Support Economy*, Harvard Business School Professor Shoshana Zuboff and her husband Dr James Maxmin, chart how processes of production and consumption are increasingly becoming collaborative ventures.¹⁸ Rather than deciding upon an a priori product or service, and then delivering it, organisations are starting from the needs of their customers and then designing ways to meet those needs – increasingly with the customer's collaboration. Similarly, in the realm of public services, there is increasing interest in the co-production of public services between providers and users.¹⁹

Collaboration is also a major organising principle of the internet. Much software now enables collaborative ventures to happen, such as the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Other web 'events', including the success of particular Youtube uploads or 'crowd-sourcing' (the process by which solutions are

found to given problems by making an open call to a number of people or a community), occur through the aggregation of individual decisions in an unorganised, but ultimately integrated, fashion.²⁰

The point to note about collaboration is that it is motivated by a desire to improve the product, service or outcome for *everyone* who participates or is affected by the collaboration. In the collaborative model, the input of the ‘consumer’ is assumed to improve the product of the ‘producer’ and to lead to a better outcome for both. At the RSC this means that organisational change through ensemble should benefit actors, the wider company, the audience, and the ‘product’ itself. This principle underlies the physical redesign of the RST.

Since audiences are increasingly able to participate in determining their desired outcomes in the commercial and public service arenas, they are likely to demand the opportunity to do the same in the arts sector. As Boyd put it in his New York speech:

*The time might be ripe for theatre to offer a better, more honest, more active and intimate relationship also between the performer and the audience. I sense a new contract being drawn up among young theatre-artists... and audiences that acknowledges the audience as part of this ensemble as well.*²¹

This is observable in the performance style of the RSC, exploited to the full on the thrust stage, discussed in chapter 3.

Ensemble leadership: a paradox

In an interview for this report, the RSC’s founding Artistic Director Sir Peter Hall said that the objectives of ensemble were ‘growth, security, confidence, continuity’ and, in his view, the words ‘ensemble’ and ‘family’ were interchangeable. But that did not mean that the rehearsal process, and still less the running of the company, was egalitarian. He was prepared to describe his own approach as autocratic, and added: ‘I don’t

believe it is possible to run a family, a tribe, or a collective, or whatever, without there being a boss.²²

The difficulty of striking a balance between the shared exploratory process in the rehearsal room and the imperative of being on budget and on schedule quickly became apparent in the course of our research. This is the ensemble paradox – that collective creativity nonetheless needs a defining vision and decisive leadership. There is a further paradoxical relationship between the practice of ensemble as a creative and administrative process, and the fact that the RSC is judged by its product: what ends up on stage. The key paradox, however, is that although the values of ensemble have to be held in common in order to succeed, the process of instilling those values throughout the organisation was initiated from the top down. The key to this process was for as many senior managers as possible to take responsibility for its development, as will be seen in chapter 3, where the Steering Committee and a larger Steering Group are discussed in more detail.

In conversations with us, Vikki Heywood, the RSC's Executive Director, acknowledged the paradox inherent in having to 'lead' an ensemble. The RSC, she told us, has to have a visionary Artistic Director but: 'the challenge then is to take that from an autocracy to an empowered group of people all working together to develop a vision'.²³

The challenge of ensemble leadership, then, is to align the achievement of strategic and operational goals with the organic development of a cooperative and empowered organisational culture. This is the subject of the following chapter.