



## Charcoalblue - one year on . . .

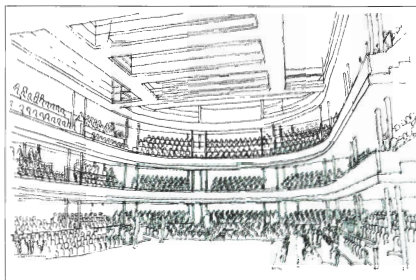
**UK** - Since announcing its inception just one year ago in these very pages, theatre consultancy Charcoalblue has grown beyond all expectations. The company's success might give the impression that to set up a business, attract new clients and develop a reputation is just 'oh so simple!'

Of course, this is barely ever the case: three out of four small businesses fold in the first three years. So while founding directors Andy Hayles, Jon Stevens, Jack Tilbury and Gavin Green appear to have sailed through the experience virtually unscathed, there must have been some furious paddling going on out of sight!

Charcoalblue now supports seven staff, various freelancers and an office in Waterloo. The company's client list reads like a 'Who's Who' of British theatres and includes the new RSC Courtyard Theatre, the National Theatre Studio, English National Opera, Bristol Theatre Royal and Siobhan Davies Dance Company; plus (in collaboration with Theatre Projects) the Young Vic Theatre, Camden Roundhouse and the Unicorn Childrens' Centre.

So what has made this company accelerate to success so quickly? To me, the linchpin and main architect of its triumph has to be Hayles himself, although he would hate to hear me say that. He is afforded a huge respect from the industry; his intuitive understanding of the theatre world and its people has been gained during a long career both in the theatre and other associated disciplines. By the same token, his Charcoalblue colleagues all offer equally long associations with theatre and their own set of unique abilities, resulting in a strong and cohesive team

Responsible for technical systems design is Jon Stevens - formerly head of sound at Glyndebourne Opera and a lighting designer to boot. Gavin Green is a qualified architect who has worked on numerous projects - including the Hollywood and Highland (Kodak) Theatre in



*Top, the expanded Charcoalblue team, 2005. Above, sketch for the RSC Courtyard Theatre.*

LA Jack Tilbury, the company's projects director, was previously with Imagination and worked as a theatre production manager. Recently employed are LD Gavin Owen, and former senior stage engineer from the National Theatre, Mark Priestley. Part-time is John Owens - well known for his sound production engineering work on shows such as *Miss Saigon*, and practice manager Katy Alexander, a former stage manager at the Royal Court.

Hayles says: "We are all passionate about our theatrical roots and our desire is always to work with informed clients in the industry who understand the technical requirements of their venues. Of course, sometimes a little guidance is needed and this is where we come in."

To his clients, Hayles is considered very much a concept enabler. As Phil Gladwell, technical manager of the Young Vic told me: "What makes working with Charcoalblue so

pleasurable is Andy, who mediates the creative process by encouraging discussion, which then enables us to discover what we really want for our venue."

During my visit Hayles and Stevens proudly hauled me off to visit three projects, all building sites at various stages of completion. What I noticed almost immediately about these venues was the diversity, there was nothing formulaic linking them. For Charcoalblue, everything from the overall technical infrastructure down to the

size of a screw on a stage box or the gap between the buttons on a cue light desk is crucial and worthy of consideration. All the clients I met enthused about how pleased and excited they were with their venues, each one having been designed to complement the unique way in which each of the companies works and performs.

Another remarkable factor was that each client had its own pet innovation, often a bespoke development in association with Charcoalblue and now existing in the real world. The Unicorn had lighting bridges with lift-up flaps through which sets can be flown: the Young Vic has a geographical patch to intuitively tell the technician where a circuit is; and the Siobhan Davies studio has specially curved bars to fit into the spectacular roof design, created to allow maximum daylight into the rooms.

With so much achieved already what does the future hold for Charcoalblue? The company has numerous irons in the fire, but by far the most fascinating project is the 1,000-seat temporary venue being constructed for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon. The new Courtyard Theatre has to be one of the most exciting venues to be built in recent years, providing a home for the RSC while their main theatre is refurbished. The project is due for completion in 2006: watch this space.

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 [www.charcoalblue.com](http://www.charcoalblue.com)