



Above, projects on the company CV: the RSC Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon and right, the Unicorn Theatre, London.

# Charcoalblue, moving on up

Growth has been rapid for theatre consultancy Charcoalblue, and just three years after its inception, with increasing staff numbers and a string of very successful projects under its collective belt, the company prepares to move (again) to larger premises on London's Bankside. Sarah Rushton-Read looks for the secret of the company's success . . .



New premises in Bankside, London.

UK - There are not many new businesses that expect to reinvent the wheel. Most take an existing model they admire, then strive to stamp their own unique mark upon it. As those judicious ladies of Bananarama so wisely put it: 'It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it - that's what get results!'

One company that appears to have picked not only the right way, but clearly listened to the rest of the song and picked the right time and place to do it - is Charcoalblue. In little more than three years the company has established a fresh, dynamically collaborative theatre consultancy, developed a strong brand and gained respect for their innovative ideas and approach. This has resulted in significant year-on-year expansion since their inception.

Expansion to such an extent, in fact, that the company has twice outgrown its London offices. In October, Charcoalblue will move again, this time to larger premises on Short Street in Bankside, London, conveniently located around the corner from an ongoing project - the National Theatre Studios, due to open this autumn. Next door is English Touring Theatre's Upstream Rehearsal Rooms and at the end of the road, a prize-winning Charcoalblue project which has already opened - the Young Vic Theatre.

Over the last 12 months, Charcoalblue has seen many of its projects successfully commissioned. All have received critical acclaim in the trade, architectural and national press. They include the RSC Courtyard in August 2006, the Theatre Royal, Newcastle in October 2006, the Young Vic in November 2006, and St Edwards School, Oxford in July 2007.

Throughout that time the company has experienced a constant influx of work, which has in turn driven almost continuous recruitment of new staff and the development of links with experienced and specialist associates still working on the shop floor of theatre.

Jon Stevens, creative director of Charcoalblue, explains: "A key part of our approach to theatre consultancy is to ensure that we retain strong links with the people driving and developing theatre practice and product development. Experienced sound engineers, lighting designers and programmers, AV specialists and stage engineers, all help to ensure that the equipment and systems we design and specify for a particular venue are exactly right. As the company expands it would be all too easy to lose touch with what's happening at the grass roots. We are making sure that we maintain a grip on the day-to-day practicalities of theatre and the implications that they might have in the future."

Since last September the Charcoalblue team has expanded by almost 50%. New staff members include Adam Crosthwaite, previously the production manager of the Little Angel Theatre in Islington, who brings a wealth of experience in lighting design and technical management; Gregory Allan, who comes to Charcoalblue fresh from a degree in product design, as stage engineering consultant; and Paul Crosbie, who was previously the general manager of the Shaftesbury Theatre and who adds his recent experience of its major refurbishment to the pot.

Jack Tilbury, projects director for Charcoalblue continues: "As well as expanding our full-time staff, we have added to our diverse and experienced selection of professional associates, bringing in Alistair Grant,



Clockwise from top left:

Charcoalblue's new staff members Adam Crosthwaite, Paul Crosbie and Gregory Allan.



production electrician extraordinaire, and designer and draughtsman Will Bowen. And we continue to encourage our full-time staff to continue work in live theatre whenever they can - most recently Gavin Owen, who took a week off to light a show at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in June."

Charcoalblue has also recently sponsored the Theatres Trust's first International Conference - *Performing Spaces?* hosted by the Young Vic (see L&SI July-August 2007). Managing director Andy Hayles elaborates: "This was a rare and wonderful opportunity to gather many stakeholders interested in the present and future development of theatre to discuss their thoughts. The event allowed artistic and management teams, theatre consultants and architects, arts funding organizations and technical and backstage staff to air their views, which in turn facilitated a wide and positive debate centred around how we, as an industry, can improve the way theatres perform now and in the future."

The company has also been closely involved with three out of the four theatre projects presented with National RIBA awards this year. Of these, the Young Vic Theatre has now made it onto a shortlist of six for the Stirling Prize and will be featured during the awards, which will be broadcast from the Roundhouse in October.

Charcoalblue is also pleased to have recently won two key theatre consultancy appointments - the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury with Keith Williams Architects; and the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse Theatres with Haworth Tompkins. Gavin Green, design director of Charcoalblue, is delighted: "We are lucky to have already worked with both practices on very successful projects: we collaborated with Keith Williams on the Unicorn Children's Centre which opened in 2005, and we have a continuing and extremely creative relationship with Haworth Tompkins, architects of the Young Vic and St Edwards theatres, with whom we are also working with on projects in Snape Maltings and Canterbury."

Four years ago Charcoalblue was no more than a twinkle in its founders' eyes. Since then the company has opened some of the most groundbreaking and exciting new-build and refurbishment theatre projects in the UK. With numerous theatre spaces already tucked under their belts, plenty of exciting new projects in the bag for the future and a diverse range of staff and associates working in the theatre environment, there's sure to be plenty more theatres destined to benefit from the Charcoalblue Midas touch.

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