

ROYAL MAIL STAMPS

There's letters seal'd, and my two schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd –
They bear the mandate, they must sweep my way
And marshal me to knavery.
Hamlet



SHAKESPEARE ON STAMPS

- Shakespeare was the very first commoner (not a member of the Royal Family) to appear on British stamps, for the tercentenary in 1964.
- Shakespeare and his work have been featured in more stamp issues by Royal Mail than any other individual, apart from Her Majesty The Queen.
- The new RSC issue includes a miniature sheet showing the theatres the Company has played in, as well as Stratford landmarks including Holy Trinity Church, the last resting place of the Bard.
- Shakespeare has a walk on part in the border of the brand new miniature sheet.

LETTERS, BEARING SECRETS or messages of love, often occur in Shakespeare's plays. The plot can hinge on their reading: Hamlet chances upon the letter in the charge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ordering his death. This spring, letters again bear Shakespeare's words: this time on stamps. Ten Royal Mail stamps featuring RSC performances are issued on 12 April, marking the 50th anniversary of our Royal Charter.

'The play's the thing' summarises the brief – to encapsulate the live performance over the RSC's half century. The idea of Shakespeare's plays is a familiar one, so the challenge was to find a fresh approach. Royal Mail works with the cream of design talent, and this issue was no exception. London based design company *hat trick* were commissioned to start work in 2009.

At about one-inch square, a stamp is minute for design work: what might work on a poster probably does not at stamp size. *hat trick* visited the RSC, attended a rehearsal of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and discussions with the RSC Artistic Director, Michael Boyd, proved essential in getting under the skin of the Company. Working closely with one of Royal Mail's design managers, *hat trick* developed several visual approaches, which were presented to the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC). The SAC provides Royal Mail with objective advice on stamp design, and its membership consists of experts in design, art and philately.

Initial ideas included the use of shapes signifying each play, such as a crown for *Hamlet*, within which would print an image of a performance. Another approach created a 'virtual ensemble' of actors from 50 years of performances across a row of stamps.

A third concept focussed on the words of the plays, with text flowing around the performers. Although a challenge, it was this idea which ultimately both the RSC and SAC thought worthy of exploration and review at subsequent meetings. Marion Deuchars's liquid typography was ideal for this design and *hat trick* invited him to devise renderings of quotes from the plays for the different stamps. Alternating between dark and light backgrounds was the final touch to seal a 'stamp' of approval from both the RSC and the committee.

The set of six stamps focus on the plays, while a further four RSC (printed within a miniature sheet) tell another tale: the heritage of the Stratford-upon-Avon theatres. *hat trick* commissioned Becky Sutherland to create the illustrations for a cut out diorama. The various elements were arranged as a montage, and carefully lit and photographed to create the stamps.

Once Royal Mail was satisfied that the promise of the best design route was fulfilled, high quality proofs were produced and these were sent to Buckingham Palace in late 2010. Every new stamp is approved by Her Majesty The Queen prior to print and distribution to post offices. And so from 12 April these one-inch square 'performances' will be affixed to letters, and will play to audiences worldwide.

For more information please visit
www.royalmail.com/rsc

