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Royal Shakespeare Gets \$5 Million From U.S. Donor

By **CAMPBELL ROBERTSON**

A \$5 million donation to the Royal Shakespeare Company for its planned new theater in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, is the largest gift from an American in the company's history. The contribution, scheduled to be announced today, comes from Chris Abele, a 40-year-old philanthropist who lives in Milwaukee.

The gift is part of a \$25 million fund-raising campaign by the Royal Shakespeare Company America, an 11-year-old American organization created to support the British theater company. The campaign is divided into three parts: \$15 million for the construction of the company's \$228 million theater in Stratford; \$5 million for training, educational projects and new productions; and \$5 million to start a fund to help productions, which can be big and costly, to be presented in American theaters. The campaign has raised about \$10 million to date.

The contribution from Mr. Abele, president of the American organization, is going entirely toward the construction of the theater.

Mr. Abele grew up outside of Boston, but after attending college in Wisconsin decided to stay there. When his father, John Abele, a founder of the biotech company Boston Scientific, asked Chris to run the family's philanthropic efforts, he agreed on one condition: that the Argosy Foundation be based in Milwaukee.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else," Mr. Abele (pronounced AY-buh-lee) said in a phone interview.

Since then the younger Mr. Abele, who is also the chief executive of a commercial real estate firm, has become somewhat of a power player in Milwaukee cultural

institutions. In 2000 he helped create the Milwaukee Shakespeare Company and, while working on that, made connections with people from the Royal Shakespeare.

During the next couple of years the Royal was going through an overhaul with the departure of Adrian Noble and the arrival of Michael Boyd as artistic director and, a year later, Vikki Heywood as executive director. The company paid down debts, rekindled efforts to build a new theater in Stratford, announced ambitious projects like the Complete Works cycle and, to pay for these and future endeavors, reached out for more robust philanthropic support.

While British art institutions are often heavily subsidized by the government, which contributed around \$140 million toward building the theater, the United States is where you go for the big private donors.

“We needed to set ourselves real goals, and that wasn’t just about supporting the capital campaign,” Ms. Heywood said. “We felt that not only did we want American support for that, but also to help produce our own work.”

The Royal is a regular visitor to America, including repertory productions of “The Seagull” and “King Lear” (part of the Complete Works cycle) running through the end of this week at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

With the support of the Royal’s board, Mr. Abele became president in 2005 of the Royal Shakespeare Company America, which until then had mostly raised money to help underwrite residencies for the company at American universities. Mr. Abele and new members of the American board began reorganizing, shutting down an office in Washington and changing the focus of the fund-raising to support Mr. Boyd’s goals of strengthening the resident company. The idea, Mr. Abele explained, was that if the Royal Shakespeare was solid, touring productions would follow.

Within two years the contribution from the American organization directly to the Royal more than tripled, to \$1.4 million from \$436,000.

While most of the campaign is going to help build the theater, scheduled to open in 2010, the boards of the American organization and the Royal decided to create

a fund that would shore up productions that might otherwise be too costly to come to American theaters.

“These days people don’t commit to long-term rigor toward expertise or virtuosity much,” Mr. Abele said. “That level of greatness exists, and it’s a kind of statement that we as a society value that.”