



**Friends of
the Earth**

How to: put act back into action

If all the world's a stage why aren't you using street theatre to get your campaign messages to a wider audience? North West Regional Campaigns Co-ordinator Frank Kennedy offers golden rules for street theatre



Friends of the Earth

Traffic stopping: using street theatre to put the car on trial

Drama can be a powerful tool for activists, and street theatre a brilliant way of getting complex messages over in a more accessible way to a much wider audience. Do it well and you can even make memorable the odd fact and figure. During Friends of the Earth's Cars Cost The Earth Campaign local groups nationwide used street theatre to put the car on trial. And now there's lots of scope for using street theatre as part of your activist toolkit. If you are finding it hard to explain how big business

has too much power in a leaflet, consider putting on a simply acted out drama with a goodie and a baddie.

Street theatre is also a brilliant way to get your group noticed. Do it with wit and humour and you will find you draw many more people in. Using humour is also a good way to avoid the tag of being one of those environmental groups which is very serious and worthy, but not much fun. Remember, your play is just one tactic for attention. So ensure passers-by – or a seated audience – get your action postcard, sign your petition or whatever it is your group wants them to do for Friends of the Earth.

Centre stage

Street theatre can be one-sided agit-prop, intended to reinforce or directly challenge the audience's perspective.

Amnesty International took advantage of this technique by being associated with Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman's play about human rights violations, *Death and the Maiden*.

Street theatre can:

- Get complex issues over in an accessible way
- Get you noticed – it helps you to grab people's attention and make an impact
- Get your message over in a fun and creative way
- Bring your group together as a team – street theatre needs good teamwork and you may be surprised at the hidden thespians within your group who are enthusiastic about having a go



Street theatre is about taking the action to where people are.

Street theatre isn't just on the street...

You can perform anywhere, eg school hall, community centre, trade union meeting/activist gathering, office training day, student bar, hotel foyer, town hall steps, pub. Think through where you're going to perform. What's the size? What are the acoustics like? What distractions will there be?

Types of drama you can use



Skit, panto-style

Perfect for getting across one big idea (eg building a new road is stupid). A panto is similar to a skit, but involves the audience in stock responses, songs, chorus or similar.



Comedy can speak very powerfully and get complicated messages pared down to the simple issues. It's a step removed from people so they don't feel preached at but can be still be challenged.

Artistic Director Cathy Westby at Credo Theatre, Hull. More info at www.credoarts.org.uk

- A skit is usually short (10 minutes is enough). A panto could be longer, but ideally keep it short too.
- May be scripted/devised/improvised
- Shows motivations of/impact on people involved
- Humour is important
- Characters may represent or satirise real people or their organisations (as in Channel Four's *Bremner Bird & Fortune*).



Devised piece

Workshop-style experimenting is a great starting point for developing performance ideas. Begin by making up things as you go along and rehearse the results until you feel ready to be let loose on the public.

- Small group are best and often loads of fun
- Set strict time limits for devising short sketches
- Be clear about your theme and don't have too many messages. One or two are enough, eg "Incinerators bring health risks" and "Developers like to line their pockets"
- First impressions are crucial, so surprise your audience.
- Tried and tested approaches involve parodies of the familiar, eg nursery rhymes, folk tales, TV shows – from *Eastenders* to *Blue Peter* (eg "Here's a waste-to-energy plant we made earlier...").



Participatory workshops

Good for developing your group's confidence about performing, which can be useful for public speaking or speaking at conferences. Workshops can also be ideal for honing ideas.

- An experienced workshop leader needs to be on hand to train people in devising skits, role play games and so on
- It is always worth including games and exercises to relax people and stretch muscles (vocal and other)
- Breaks down inhibitions
- Gives chance to do a small group mini-performance to a limited, supportive audience (each other).

“ I've written, acted and directed theatre with members of the community who've been affected by injustice. First, people tell their own stories, and we act them out. It's a workshop really. Later, these are written up, and we adapt them as we rehearse. We look for the humour in any situation – after all we do want to entertain the audience! John Fay, Kirkby Response Theatre and TV scriptwriter

Golden rules

- 1 Clearly identify your audience, your purpose and your message. Are you introducing a topic to strangers, or boosting the morale of supporters?
- 2 You don't have to be brilliant actors, just ham it up and be heard
- 3 If you don't want to act or write see *Tips for the terrified*, on the next page, about how to get others to help
- 4 Don't rely on technical effects (even one person switching a tape on/off at the right moment can go wrong and make your show look too amateur)
- 5 Keep props simple. A plain wooden chair can be used to stand on, to hide behind, to shout at, or even play the role of deaf chairman of an uncaring giant corporation
- 6 Humour beats horror on the street. If it's not fun for you, who else will appreciate it?
- 7 Rehearse enough to be confident, but not so much that you get bored



Feedback

Communities in developing countries with an important development decision to make, eg how to spend a grant or to identify the root causes of reduced life quality (from alcohol abuse to logging), sometimes use role play workshops to help. This could be a vital tool for groups facing environmental threats in our own neighbourhoods – but a trained leader and the full commitment of those taking part are essential starting points.



Want a script? Try asking a local writers' group or playwriting class.



Don't lose your voice competing with traffic (eg, outside a corporate AGM). Try something more visual or bring microphones.

(Above) Keep props simple. A wooden chair can be used to stand on, hide behind or can even act as an unresponsive chairperson. (Below) Masks can be a simple and direct way to set the scene.



Working from a script is OK

- Many people feel safest this way
- Finding a script that says what you want may be tricky (see *Resources and websites*)
- Be aware of copyright laws if advertising or using a published work in public
- Pieces should be no longer than they need be to make the point
- Readings can be brilliant but rehearsing is essential

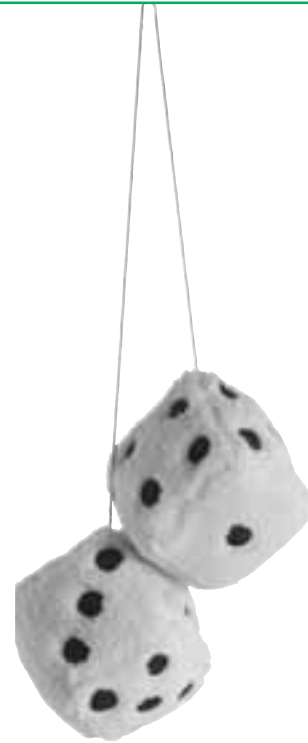
Trial and error

“ We wanted to highlight the impacts that cars have on the environment and on society as part of our Cars Cost the Earth Campaign. We needed to find a way to engage the car-driving public so we decided to use street theatre to put the car on trial. Local groups got to play differing roles from the over-the-top guy who loved his car’s furry dice to the people who have to live with the impacts of new roads, traffic and road deaths. It was a light-hearted way to get a hard-hitting message across. Groups around the country tried out this action on local streets – Greenwich and Lewisham enjoyed it so much they went on to form a theatre group. While Reading ended up performing at the One World Stage at the Womad Festival.

Senior Local Campaigner Elaine Gilligan

Resources and websites

- *Doing a play* briefing can be downloaded from www.networktheatre.org.uk/index/training.htm. If you want a paper copy, contact Friends of the Earth North West office, tel: 0151 707 4328, or email: frankk@foe.co.uk.
- www.formaat.org/uk/home/indexint.php
More on Theatre of the Oppressed
- www.uktw.co.uk
homesite of UK theatre
- www.amadrama.co.uk
homesite of Amateur Theatre UK
- www.gn.apc.org
GreenNet’s website for social justice
includes news on publicity stunts
- <http://pages.nyu.edu/~as245/AITG/>
provides applied and interactive
theatre guide
- www.funteambuilding.com/links.html
With links to sites containing
suggestions for games



Tips for the terrified

You don’t have to do it. All of us get butterflies, some have a real and deep sense of dread at the thought of performing in front of others – even when disguised by a mask or costume. If this is you then borrow actors. It’s not only professionals who are “resting” between performances. Think of any friends, neighbours or relatives who enjoy performing. Check your local library, websites, am-dram groups in the phone book, colleges with drama students or clubs. Two or three members may be delighted to help out – by writing, acting, cadging or stitching costumes, helping with make-up or running warm-ups. The best activism is often carried out by people having fun; they don’t have to be full-time campaigners.