

ACT OUT this summer: ten tips for open air performance

Experienced writer/directors Philip Dart and Claudia Leaf from Scene Three Creative offer help and advice on acting in the open air

As Covid-19 restrictions on indoor performance are likely to be around for most of 2022, it may be time to hit the great outdoors. Here are ten tips to help you conquer the elements and get your work outside this summer.

1 Venue choice

There are several things to bear in mind when you are choosing a venue for your outdoor performance. Is it quiet? Can you cordon it off to keep out non-payers? Can people sit in their bubbles, comfortably socially distanced, for ninety minutes or more in your space? Are public toilets reasonably close? Can people park nearby? Is your performance likely to cause a nuisance to anyone? Do you have access to electrical power?

2 Acoustics

If your actors find it hard to project their voices, then outdoor may not be the right choice for them (alternatively it may be a useful opportunity to introduce some formal vocal training). However, you can do a lot to help them by carefully planning the location of your stage. Look for an area with a high bank or hedge behind it, as this will help to contain the sound.

3 Location

Don't go too far off-piste. If you normally perform in a hall close to a recreation field or village green, that open space might be the best option for your performance, as the hall will provide a place to store props and also provide changing space for the actors. Alternatively you could put up tents for changing, but do make sure they are waterproof and securely staked into the ground.

4 Licensing

Your next step might be to check with the licensing department of the appropriate local authority (*ie* relevant to your venue's location), especially if you want to perform in or near a built-up area. The rules about performing are much tighter in town centres, but if your play takes place in a rural or semi-rural area between 8am and 11pm, and there are no more than 500 people

(including the acting company and organisers) taking part or watching, there's a good chance that you won't need a licence to perform.

5 Seating the audience

Whether you seat the audience on chairs or hay bales or let them find their own spaces, sitting on the ground, will largely depend on sightlines. If you are able to perform on a raised area, then conventional seating should be fine. If you are performing on a flat piece of ground, then the audience will need to seat themselves at ground level, too (always a good excuse to bring a picnic). There are many more distractions when you're performing outdoors so your actors may fare better if they can perform on a raised platform or a mound, with the audience seated formally, on chairs.

6 Lighting

It's always a magical moment when darkness starts to fall and the stage lighting comes into full effect, but lighting an open air performance isn't a matter of simply attaching the lamps from your theatre to portable stands. Electricity and rain aren't happy companions, so you'll need to hire specially made outdoor stage lights. Ideally you'll draw your power from a nearby building, using electric cable mats to avoid creating a trip hazard. Alternatively you could choose to perform in full daylight: sunset times are around 9pm in the UK in July/August and this should give you plenty of time to end the performance before dark.

7 Stage set

Outdoor performance needs a radically different approach to designing and making a stage set. Untreated wood will quickly warp in outdoor conditions and flamage – no matter how well it has been weighted down – can be a risk to actors and audience if the wind is strong. That's why it's better to choose a performance site with a relatively plain backdrop – such as trees or hedges – and concentrate on props and costumes instead.

8 Play choice

Shakespeare is always a safe choice for outdoor performance, but classic comedies like 'The Importance of Being Earnest' also work surprisingly well outdoors. If you want to appeal to a family audience, plays based on folk tales or legends are usually popular. Outdoor performances that worked exceptionally well for us included our own adaptations of *The Wind in the Willows*, *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*. To view these and other scripts available for performance, go to scenethreecreative.co.uk and click on 'Script writing and script bank'.

9 Health and safety

With the best will in the world, sometimes the heavens open, killing any chance of continuing with the performance. In the event of rain, and especially a thunderstorm, you'll need to consider the safety of the audience and your actors. Decide beforehand on what constitutes grounds to stop the performance – for example you may all decide it's fine to continue in light rain, but the actors must stop in the event of heavy rain and thunder. Appoint two people to take the decision between them.

If Covid restrictions are in place*, you'll need to create a route around the performance area that allows people to enter one way and leave another. You must avoid instances where people accidentally become grouped together as they enter or leave the space. Make sure that stewards wear masks at all times and encourage audience members to do the same if that is what the regulations require.

Singing may not be allowed because of the infection risk, so avoid productions where your actors are required to sing, and don't encourage members of the audience to sing or shout out either.

10 Cancellation and refunds

It's up to you whether you offer refunds for cancelled performances, but from a marketing viewpoint you may find people are more willing to book in advance if you can offer a refund for bad weather cancellation. If you are staging several performances you may be able to give customers the option of attending another show, rather than giving them their money back.

If it all goes well, open-air performance can be one of the most joyful and exciting experiences you can have as a performer. Being outside seems to put the audiences into a good mood, too – maybe it's the picnic wine, or maybe it's just the elemental thrill of seeing theatre as it was performed hundreds of years ago. So if you decide to 'act out', we wish you every success (and fingers crossed that it stays fine).

*Covid safety rules are subject to change at short notice. It's therefore essential to follow the latest guidance on safety procedures before you start to plan your production. Information should be available from trusted sites such as www.gov.uk or from your local council.