

Author

Members of BP or Not BP?

Theatrical actions can be joyous, collective experiences, make a great impact and offer a great way to spice up your campaign strategy. But they can also be tricky to pull off, with a number of issues to consider.

But don't worry – activist theatre troupe *BP or not BP?* want to share our 10 tips to help you plan a theatrical action to be proud of.

1. Have a clear target

Ask yourself who your performance is aimed at and how it will support your aims. Is it a whole organisation? A single person? A specific group of people? *BP or not BP?* have chosen to target the museums and cultural institutions that BP sponsors, because we think that by associating arts and culture with fossil fuel extraction, BP are trying to cover up the negative impacts of what they do. We aim to pressure these institutions into breaking their links with BP through carrying out creative actions inside and around BP-sponsored spaces that tell the real story about fossil fuels to visitors, staff and trustees.

2. Be clear on what your objectives are and how theatrical action can best meet them

Even if there is one clear target, the objectives of any one intervention can be multiple and layered. The overall aim of the Art Not Oil campaign, which *BP or not BP?* is part of, is to end fossil fuel sponsorship of the arts. But *BP or not BP?* performances often have a series of objectives: to pressure one particular institution into cutting off their links to Big Oil; to place the issue of oil-sponsorship and fossil fuels more broadly in the mainstream media; to express solidarity with frontline communities affected by the activities of BP and other fossil fuel companies; and/or to provide opportunities for horizontal, collective art making, among others. For example, if the objective is to express solidarity with a frontline community that is fighting against BP, we commit to making the process for the performance as collaborative as possible, working in partnership or in consultation with those affected. We pay attention to things like wording, visual representation, and our position as allies, following their lead and offering our own experience and spaces of action as tools to be used in that struggle.

3. Have a clear message

A theatrical intervention, as any other kind of action, may want to get a few different points across. Always go back to the basics; remember what it is you want to get across, try to make that message as simple as possible, and let that guide the way in which you write scripts, document and share the action, and do any press work. Sometimes, when writing a script for *BP or not BP?* we might get carried away by the plot, and forget the reason why we are doing the intervention in the first place – so we try out scripts in groups to make sure the key points aren't lost. We've experimented with a whole variety of approaches – from using lines straight out of Shakespeare's plays to chanting and singing – but keep checking that the format supports our important messages and doesn't overwhelm them.

4. Know your space

In theatrical interventions any place can be a stage. But same as in any performance, considering the physical characteristics of that space is important. Checking the space (be this a public building, a street, or other) before the performance is key, as this will allow you to identify the best spot to perform, be aware of entry and exit points, and consider any particularities of the space that might interfere with the performance. Remember to consider if you need to find a local space for everyone to meet up in before or after the event too, and how you'll keep personal belongings and props safe on the day.

5. Know your audience – and how to expand it

Theatrical interventions often speak to two different audiences: passers-by or guests who watch when the performance is taking place, and people looking at documentation of the performance (be that images or video) afterwards. Think about how to make your message and your language accessible to both audiences, and how you'll get your point across in photographs or when writing about the event.

6. Think about safety

This includes thinking about the safety of your group members and any other participants, the safety of the general public, and that of workers (in the case of performing inside an institution or venue). Be aware of any performers who are in a vulnerable position due to race, gender, age, religion, ability, migration status, or other reasons. Even peaceful protest carries a risk of arrest (this varies according to country and to the space where the intervention takes place), and thinking of each other's safety means making sure those most at risk are protected in terms of their roles in the performance, their level of exposure, etc. It is also important to consider the safety of others around you, especially in performances that might include large props, dynamic choreographies, spilling of liquids or other sudden interventions.

7. Think about visuals

While theatrical performances might have speaking parts and carefully crafted scripts, visuals are an important aspect of how you communicate a message. It is often the case that only those standing very close-by can hear your words properly, and also, pictures from a performance tend to play an important role in reaching further audiences. Costumes and props are therefore opportunities to get the most important elements of your performance across. Think about how you'll use them to symbolise the points you want to make and reinforce your message in photographs and videos. Visuals don't need to cost a lot – we've scoured second hand shops, queued outside theatre sales and hand-made props in the basement. Our performances usually incorporate the BP logo in one way or another, which is then tarnished with oil, broken apart, or physically ejected from the museum!

8. Think about sound

Sound is both a difficult aspect of theatrical interventions and a potential resource for spectacular quality. Thinking about sound brings us back to thinking about space. How are the acoustics? What other sounds can we expect (announcements, nearby construction site, traffic)? But thinking about sound also means using

bodies, voices and props to grab people's attention, to make a scene, or to generate a particular mood. In the past, *BP or not BP?* have used stomping to mark the pace of a Viking ship moving across the British Museum's Great Court; singing to create a solemn mood, and loud, orchestrated noises to recreate the sound of an oil rig explosion. The group has also made use of musical instruments and amplifiers in the past, but these do not always get past security - something to consider.

9. Get the tone right

Theatrical interventions can be humorous and playful, or ceremonial and solemn. When thinking about the tone of the performance, think about the story you are trying to get across, and then develop the script and the sensory aspects in a way that honours the essence of that story. This is particularly important when dealing with sensitive issues and/or doing solidarity work and telling a story that is not one's own. Collaboration and/or consultation is crucial in these occasions.

Don't forget to think about how your chosen tone might work for your audience. We've run singalong sessions in spaces full of children and families, and acted out Shakespearian satire on stage at the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company). Those ideas just wouldn't have worked the other way around! And importantly, think carefully before you ruin someone's day. The great thing about creative actions is that they can make a point in an engaging way. There are times when being disruptive might be absolutely the right thing to do – for example, if the performance was part of a blockade of a fossil fuel extraction site, or was taking place at a dinner party of oil executives – but there are also times when you want audiences, workers or artists in the space to be won over to your cause. For example, with our stage invasions we want the public – and RSC actors and directors - to support us in asking the RSC to ditch their oily sponsor, and to make clear that our interventions are aimed at the theatre managers and trustees who have made the BP deal, not the artists and workers lower down the hierarchy who have had little or no say in the matter. So we made the decision to invade the stage before the start of the plays, or during the interval, rather than interrupting the performances.

10. Think about logistics

...and have a contingency plan! Our creative actions can be tiny, with just a couple of volunteers scattering black paper oil drops in the British Museum, or giant – with hundreds of flashmobbers and audience members singing together. That means we need to rehearse not only the script and any performed actions, but think about how we'll move people through the space, make sure all the important bits get seen, and ensure everyone is confident about their role. It's also important to allocate roles and tasks in advance, such as filming, social media, and press work, and to allocate people to deal with problems and enquiries on the day, and provide any other 'backstage' support.

For *BP or not BP?* it can be a challenge to get everyone in the venue, along with any costumes, props and filming equipment needed, because of security checks which might lead to confiscated props. Keep logistics in mind when planning an action (e.g. will I be able to get that in and how? Will this prop need assembling? Do we have a mechanism for making sure everyone is inside and in place?). Also, have a plan B in case things don't work out as planned (props get confiscated or break, someone does not arrive in time, etc). Be prepared to improvise with hand-drawn props, stand ins and mobile phones when needed.

Enjoy the mischief!

These top tips were brought to you by [BP or not BP?](https://bp-or-not-bp.org/) - an activist theatre troupe that stands against oil sponsorship of the arts and for a fossil fuel-free culture. The group came together in 2012 to join a growing movement of artists, grassroots collectives and organisations advocating for an end of the relationship between big oil and the arts in the UK and beyond. In the last 6 years BP or not BP? has staged dozens of unsanctioned performances at institutions such as the British Museum, Royal Shakespeare Company, and National Portrait Gallery. Borrowing from a range of styles, genres and cultural references, the performances have managed to connect with audiences, attract media attention, and position the issue of oil sponsorship (as well as other issues related to social justice and ethical practices in the cultural sector) in the public eye. Find out more about us at <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/>

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