

## How to get started in Street Theatre

Fraser Hooper

I have been performing as a clown over the last 30 years, entertaining the public at festivals and events that are not restricted by walls and a roof. I prefer this way of working because street theatre has inclusion at its heart, it's for everyone or anyone who wants to stop and watch. At the beginning of my current show one of my favourite routines is to hand out fake tickets as I walk through the audience. I use a torch to check their "seat" number and show them where to sit. Sometimes I ask if they have a ticket for the show and if they haven't (no one has!) I ask them to leave. This always gets a laugh because it points out the unwritten rule, everyone is welcome and you don't need to buy a ticket to share the fun of a street theatre show.

### **SO HOW DO YOU GET STARTED IN STREET THEATRE?**

First it's important to identify the different avenues of work open to new artists keen on making this a career choice or just wanting to give it a go. There are a number of different art forms that come under the broad umbrella of street theatre: busking, outdoor festivals, walkaround entertainment, site specific theatre, street protest theatre, promotions and parades. There are a lot of crossovers between all of these and most artists working outdoors will

certainly be involved in some of the above. I will share my insights here on busking and outdoor festivals.

## **WATCH STUFF, LEARN A FEW SKILLS AND FIND YOUR TRIBE.**

I grew up in London and from the early eighties I used to go and watch the street performers at Covent Garden. I saw a lot of the acts that now have become folklore legends. My favourites were the ones that made me laugh. The brilliant Chris Adams and Alex

Dandridge with their fabulous unicycle club passing routine <https://juggling.tv/11530> Arlo Barlow with his incredibly long arms and the wonderful Florists featuring Sean Gandini, John Feely, Dave Southern and Mark Digby. There were many others too and I spent most weekends sitting on those hallowed cobbles watching the best. There was also the nearby Colombo Street juggling club on Sunday afternoons that a lot of the buskers frequented, and I learnt heaps by just being around these hungry artists. I was actually quite shy but I knew I had found my tribe. I enrolled in every mime and clown workshop I could find, I hung out with performers all the time, lived for the London Mime festival each year, attended the Edinburgh Fringe and sat on the pitch just watching acts for the whole festival. I learnt to juggle, created a double act and toured the London cabaret circuit for three years. I immersed myself in comedy and honed my craft working outdoors doing six summers at Chessington

World of Adventures, a UK theme park. This was pivotal for me, the ability to play every day alongside other street performers who are still some of my greatest friends thirty years on. Find your tribe and play a lot, it's quantity not quality! The quality will come in due course.

## **BUSKING**

The majority of busking around the world is done by street musicians with their case open in front of them collecting donations from passers-by. The type of busking I am concentrating on here is where the busker transforms a pedestrianised street into a theatre space, a circle show, a static performance with a 180 degree audience around them, usually lasting thirty to forty five minutes long. This is sometimes referred to as raw street. For some street performers this is a way of life, their only contract is between them and their audience. If the performer has a good show and the audience likes what they see they can profit from their art as soon as the show has finished. Most buskers start by learning a few skills such as magic, juggling, dance, music or acrobatics before they attempt a full raw street show. Once they have enough proficiency (or think they do), then the difficult part is how to make it entertaining enough to get the public to stop and watch. There is no set formula to achieve this but here are a few techniques and methods to get you started.

## **PRACTISE OUTDOORS**

In order to gain confidence performing outdoors it is a worthwhile exercise to practise on a busy street with a hat out on the ground for donations, just like the street musicians. Don't choose the "local pitch" in the early stages and try not to obstruct access to shop doorways. Over time as your art improves it will feel natural to get eye contact with passers-by and to strike up conversations with strangers, "hey, do you want to see a trick?" If one person stops it

becomes easier to get the next. A good tip is to ask a family to be your lucky first audience members. Engage the children quickly, if they are keen to watch and their parents aren't, there is a good chance they will feel pressured by their kids to stay. Soon after enough practice busking there comes a time when you just have to take the plunge and play a longer show on a well-established pitch. There will be rules to adhere to set up by the council and the buskers themselves. Don't ignore these. Busking may feel like you're free from any societal structures but you're not and it's best to keep on the good side of both.

## **MUSIC AND ROPE**

Most buskers start by putting some recorded music on, the Bose S1 Pro is currently the amp of choice to play your tunes. Choose music you love, this seems obvious but I've watched many acts play what

they think the audience will like. Performing is an opportunity to share the gift that is you, a mini celebration of your personality, a chance for strangers to get to know a little bit about you, so be authentic and share what you love. I control my music via a midi foot pedal connected to my iPad which has a six metre cable running to my PA, the Bose S1 Pro, or a DI box, or the sound desk if I'm doing a festival gig. A lot of artists happily use Bluetooth connectivity with a handheld remote. There are many remote control systems out there and they are getting better all the time, but for peace of mind I like a wired connection that can't be unpaired whilst performing. Also using a foot pedal to trigger my sound frees up my hands, it is a good fixed point on the stage to

return to and visually feels good. I have the Go Button app on the iPad, this is a great way to run two playlists together. I use sound effects and music and this app allows simultaneous play. Music quickly creates atmosphere, sets the tone of the show, creates engagement and fills the space. If you speak in your act, use a microphone and talk to the audience immediately, ask them about the sound levels, are they ok? Too loud? Can you hear me? Is anybody out there? Then lay out a long rope or small cones on the ground to mark out the performance space. This establishes where you want the first row to sit or stand, your front edge. Sitting is the goal as it shows commitment from the public that they want to stay. The pitch conditions and the weather will often determine if this is achievable, but do

encourage potential audience members to walk up to the rope and to sit down. This is important as the public space starts to now look like a performance space, giving the impression that something is about to happen.

## **THE HOLDING GAME**

As well as playing music, including a few jokes (both visual and verbal) at the start of your show, a great technique to build a larger crowd when only a few people have stopped to watch is to play the holding game. This is where you create expectations that something bigger and better is about to happen. Call out a list of skills and routines that if the audience sticks around they will get to see, especially your incredible grand finale! All the props are carefully placed on the ground one by one and the busker describes what will happen with each of them. This is often accompanied

with a lot of hype, a call and response system. “Who wants to see me juggle these dangerous knives? Say yeah.” Audience, “Yeah” “Well stick around, but first I need to warm up.” Another great way to keep your audience there is to use volunteers. I like to get a child out as my first volunteer which means the parents can’t go anywhere! As my show progresses I transition from one routine to the next by keeping an audience volunteer on stage as I release other volunteers back to their seats. The holding game is about making the audience feel excited to see what will happen

next. This is why so many street shows rely on volunteers and dangerous stunts. Buskers try and create enough drama so the audience can't leave, they are emotionally invested and will stay to the end to hopefully pay the busker.

## **CRITICAL MASS**

The beginning of a street theatre show is the hardest part. Buskers spend a long time filling in the gaps of their front edge, many will use the "let's practise clapping and cheering" strategy. This is an effective method to create a lot of noise, draw attention and to train the public to be your audience. When you feel there are enough people, the show can really start. This is called critical mass. When it hits a lot of buskers will delay the start even further to build a bigger crowd by moving the rope closer to them and getting the audience to move up to it as one. This is a great way to get more of them to sit down, so more people can see, the size of the crowd grows and the potential to make more money increases. Then the fun begins, with a warm up!

## **WARM UP**

Change the music here. A new track, signifies the beginning even though you're technically still warming them up. Start with some smaller tricks and get the audience vocally joining in. Respond to what they like and don't like. If you do a hard trick and get little

response, tell them that you expect more, “I’ve worked all week on this!” Be playful, start and finish routines with a fixed point, this is a term to describe a definite stillness in your movement after action that cues the audience to applaud, laugh, gasp or cheer. Move economically and don’t wander about onstage for no reason.

## **THE SHOW**

Now you have built your front edge, created a large excited audience, warmed them up with music and comedy, introduced yourself, got them to clap and cheer for a few simple tricks, you’re ready to go, it’s showtime! This is where all that practising of your specialist skill is showcased for maximum effect. This is your time to show the audience what you can do. Some acts have a few routines that they have been honing for years. Others are great improvisers that have become masters at audience manipulation. Many use a ladder or a pole to gain height to perform their finale so more people can see and the size of their “hat” grows. All of them, including the mimes, talk at the end of the show to ask for money. My advice here is to play to your strengths. Get really good at one or two art forms, don’t try to do everything and again perform what you love. Happiness is contagious and sharing your pleasure to play whatever the artform will infect all who watch, it can only make people feel better about their day.



## **THE HAT**

Getting the audience to pay after they have watched the show is an art in itself. I remember watching an act at Covent Garden, where for his bottling speech (also known as a hat line) he would recite a lengthy catalogue of countries embroiled in war. After presenting his extensive list, he reminded the audience of their current peaceful setting, encouraging them to appreciate the shared experience of freedom in that moment. He'd then invite everyone to contribute to his hat, symbolising a collective wish for enduring freedom for all. Surprisingly everyone paid! Most acts will suggest how much money to put into the hat and will offer a QR code system for online payments. To set this up check out The Busking Project [www.busk.co](http://www.busk.co) There is definitely a shift to a cashless society and it is worthwhile getting one of these QR codes displayed on your case so the public can easily pay.

## **OUTDOOR FESTIVALS**

For many buskers these paid gigs are the goal but not all raw street shows are appropriate for this extensive worldwide circuit. There is no hatting at the end of a paid outdoor festival show, so the street performer has a lot more freedom to muck about and be more creative or indulgent depending on your perspective. The pressure of building a huge audience so you get paid at the end has gone.

These paid outdoor festivals are where I most like to play. My show is silent with recorded music and the style and structure of raw street doesn't allow for a lot of deviation. I do pass the hat working at busking festivals of which there are many, but these gigs are very different to raw street. Your name and time of show is in the programme, they give you hotel accommodation, pick you up at the airport and some even supply free food and beer, it's nice! The best ones also pay a retainer, a small but reasonable sum of money that ensures you have something in your pocket if it rains all weekend long. These outdoor festivals especially in Europe have a much wider variety of artists than raw street. I've worked alongside teeter board artists, trampolinists, ballet dancers, speed painters, snooker players, human fountains, puppeteers, comedy car acts, skiers, undertakers: the crazy list goes on. The challenge for me is how can I make my show as creative and fun as possible, not how do I get the audience to stay so I get paid. In an ideal world the two would sit well together, performing the most creative raw street show would mean the audience were yours for the duration, but I don't think that this is the case. In an outdoor festival if your show isn't keeping the audience engaged until the end the booker is certainly not going to hire you again. So there is pressure, but it feels unseen, you'll still get paid just not hired at that festival again. The audience are still judgemental, they will have their favourites, but they want to be there, they've come to be entertained, you are not trying to distract them from their day. However many of the same techniques learned from playing raw street will

definitely make your outdoor festival show a lot better. I play the holding game, I

use fixed point, I create my front edge if I need to and I have a grand finale. I try not to hype the audience, well perhaps a little, but I do use drama and emotion to draw the audience in.

I've been very lucky to work full time mucking about for a living playing street festivals, theatres and events around the world for most of my adult life. And a lot of the friends on the circuit I started with are also still performing, which I love. I now go to work for a social life! Playing outside has informed my personality onstage, my outlook on life and a travel schedule that follows the sun. Apart from Covid I haven't seen a winter since 1995. I teach clown a lot and at the end of a course I will leave them with this thought, if you have the gift of making people laugh it's selfish not to share it. Share love and laughter until the end.

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