

# Bicycle Boy



Photo credit: Bob Marsden

## Richard Matthews Marketing Manager Oxford Playhouse



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)

Published 2013 on [CultureHive](https://culturehive.org/), a place to discover and share best practice in cultural marketing

Supported by



Created and managed by



In partnership with



***Bicycle Boy***

*An Oxford Playhouse production*

*Written and directed by Helen Eastman*

## Background

*Oxford Playhouse (OP) presents and produces a wide range of live performance, including the best of British and international drama, family shows, contemporary dance and music, student and amateur shows, comedy, lectures and poetry.*

Oxford Playhouse also produces and tours its own shows under the banner of Playhouse Plays Out (PPO), an on-going series of off-site productions and events which happen at surprising and unusual locations across the county.

PPO is one of the key audience development tools of Oxford Playhouse, aiming to bring theatre to an audience who may not regard themselves as traditional theatre-goers. The hope is that PPO productions will act as 'stepping stones' to find their way to the Playhouse, and eventually other theatres and arts organisations. Bicycle Boy was the first PPO production of 2013-14 financial year, running for 12 performances in May. It was aimed at ages 5 to 8, and took place in a specially converted garage about half a mile from Oxford Playhouse, with a venue capacity of 60.

## Objectives

- To sell tickets for Bicycle Boy at Osney Mill Garage.
- To develop a new family audience for Oxford Playhouse.
- To increase awareness of the PPO brand.
- To develop and increase links with community organisations across the county, particularly the environmental lobby.

## Target audience

Particularly targeting the parents of 5-8 year olds in each of the below categories:

- Family audiences already familiar with the work of Oxford Playhouse
- Families not familiar with the work of the Playhouse, or with little experience of traditional theatre
- People with a proactive interest in 'green' and environmental issues
- Members of local cycling groups
- Local residents living near the venue
- Local primary schools

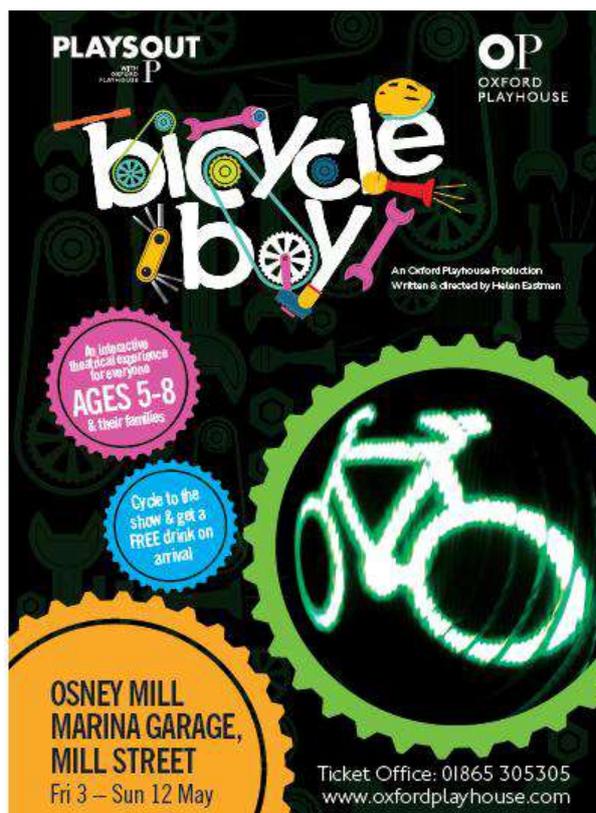
## Process

It was essential that the marketing campaign reflected the strongly eco-friendly 'message' of Bicycle Boy. Consequently, we relied more heavily on digital, guerrilla and viral marketing techniques than on our usual direct and outdoor marketing methods (whilst taking care not to overlook the Playhouse's core family audience).

A title treatment for the production was rolled out three months before the show opened. It was specifically designed to be used in a variety of contexts and on a range of media - both in combination with the poster artwork (a graphic of a bicycle) and on its own as a free-standing logo, which is how it appeared on all digital activity for the production.

A relatively small quantity of print was created. Leaflets were printed on recycled, matt paper in order to reflect the urban and environmentally conscious themes of the production. Approximately 6 weeks in advance, flyers and posters were distributed to family venues across the city, and mailed only to the small number of Playhouse family contacts with no email address, thus reducing paper usage. The covering letter featured photos of the garage venue to help ignite curiosity, particularly among local residents. A telemarketing campaign was also undertaken to primary schools across Oxford to establish whether they would accept leaflets to insert in all children's bags and all schools contacted agreed.

In order to communicate the unique elements of this production (including the use of electricity generated with 'pedal power' by volunteers from the audience) and play with the curiosity of the target audience, a teaser campaign was adopted for use through digital and social media networks. We commissioned a series of production diary blogs from members of the creative team. These were posted on our website and social media channels on a weekly basis for 5 weeks; the first blog came from the writer and director of the production, and the last from a cast member immediately after the dress rehearsal.



Leaflet/poster design. The 'golden helmet', which features in the story, was placed on the 'e' to help promote the cycling safety angle of the production.

To help convey the unusual musical element (which involved the use of tools and bicycle parts as instruments) we recorded the two-man cast performing one of the songs in rehearsal 4 weeks before opening. This was rolled out via social media, on the website, and on email versions of the direct mail, with careful attention to timing so as to stagger the communications – and be viewed on [YouTube: "On Yer Bike" - the music of Bicycle Boy](#).



Example of a teaser photo rolled out daily from 10 days before the production opened. Photo credit: Richard Matthews.

Ten days prior to the production opening, teaser photos were rolled out daily on the Oxford Playhouse Facebook and Twitter accounts; these photos were close-ups of bike parts and other props and set pieces from the rehearsal room, and were posted with captions that allowed the user to actively engage with the post and prompt a response - e.g. 'Guess what this is?' These photos were carefully selected to reveal the interesting and exciting elements of the production, including the live music.

Another key element of the campaign was the development of links with a number of local cycling and environmental groups (most notably Cyclox and Broken Spoke co-op). They helped by sending the e-flyer to their databases, distributing print and greatly increasing our exposure on social media. Their support was invaluable, not only because of our limited budget but also by enabling us to access new networks and reach a potential new audience. An allotment close to the venue allowed their fence on a major road to display a large vinyl banner, thus giving the production some show-appropriate outdoor advertising presence.

A guerrilla campaign was also developed to gain outdoor exposure and attract cycling enthusiasts across the city, also taking advantage of the large pool of volunteer ushers engaged with the Playhouse. All staff and volunteers with a bike took several laminated flyers and tied them to the handle bars of their bikes, while also leaving flyers in the baskets of children's bikes that they came across throughout the city.



Photo credit: Bob Marsden

Raising sufficient press interest was essential. A press launch event was held at the rehearsal rooms in the first week of rehearsals, when a couple of songs were performed, set-up photo shots taken and interviews given. This resulted in the publication of several key preview pieces in local papers and *WhatsOnStage*.

Production photos were taken and vox-pops recorded with invited audience members during the first dress rehearsal, and immediately published through Oxford Playhouse social media channels and on the website - a final eve-of-performance thrust in the campaign to arouse public interest in this highly unusual show. Vox-pops recorded with the invited audience at the final dress rehearsal can be seen on [YouTube: Bicycle Boy - what the audience had to say](#).

## Outcomes

The response from audience and press was very enthusiastic, and both the educational and feel-good factors of the show were received extremely well, resulting in positive publicity for PPO and OP.

### Selected audience comments:

*“Brilliant play. Great message on the environment. Should tour schools/UK with this.”*

*“A terrific show, so enjoyed it. A lovely fusion of nostalgia, fun, hope and songs.”*

*“It should take its bicycle-safety-joy all over the country”*

*“Great, lovely, fun, inclusive piece without being patronising. Very inventive. Brilliant actors.”*

### Selected press quotes:

★★★★ *“Fast, pacey and fun – the children were absorbed... and most of the adults were grinning throughout”*

What'sOnStage

*“This is one not to be missed. The joy in your young companions face will affirm the power of a simple story, earnestly performed”*

The Public Reviews

*“Anyone and everyone will be thrilled by the possibilities provided by their bikes... Whatever you take from Bicycle Boy, you will want to be getting ‘on yer bike’.”*

Daily Info

Seats sold for the production totalled 628 (across 12 performances), representing a sold venue capacity of 87%. The production also achieved its aim of attracting a new family audience who hadn't engaged with OP previously; out of 174 bookers, 51 of those were first-time bookers at an OP or PPO event.

54 children participated in four free bike mending workshops were run before and after selected performances, delivered by the organisations with whom links had been developed (including Broken Spoke Bike Co-Op, Cyclox and Walton Street bikes).

## Key points for effective practice

As the marketing budget for the production was very limited, the most effective elements of the campaign were those which were adopted less traditional marketing techniques, and which therefore had a zero to minimal cost attached. The traditional marketing activity (excluding print design and production) cost just under £1k.

While the time and effort spent on researching and making personal contact with local interest groups was very staff resource heavy, this activity paid dividends in terms of gaining access to new networks and databases, reaching a new audience, and increasing exposure of the Oxford Playhouse and PPO brand.

The range and scope of digital marketing techniques adopted, including video footage, teaser photos from the rehearsal room, recordings and production diary blogs, was particularly helpful for such a highly visual and engaging show in a unique and unknown location. This activity lent itself particularly helpful to the gradual 'build' necessary to maintain momentum the campaign. Each time a different photo, video or blog was rolled-out prior to the production opening, the campaign messaging was, by default, developed, and as such the target audience were taken on a 'journey'.

Giving the production some outdoor advertising presence was also important, and had a noticeable impact on ticket sales. However, as budget prohibited traditional outdoor methods, the large vinyl banner tied to the local allotment fences worked well. Having the banner displayed here also helped to give the production eco/green associations and keep the campaign messaging consistent. The production of this banner cost £170.

## Conclusions

The campaign was successful for the following reasons:

- The unusual, unique and eco-friendly nature of the production was reflected in all aspects of the marketing campaign from the outset, not only in the activity undertaken, but the look, feel and detail of all marketing collateral. By rolling out the 'teaser' aspect of the campaign with photos, videos and blogs, we developed the curiosity of the target audience, took them on a journey from first rehearsal to the opening performance, and gave them 'ownership' of the production, resulting in a ticket purchase.
- The strategic development of relationships with groups representing both the target market, and reaching a new audience that may well have not engaged with the Playhouse before. This also had the benefit of being absolutely free.
- Planning the campaign in detail and with plenty of lead-in time, and involving not only all staff from the marketing department, but members of the creative team, ticket office staff, and production staff - which resulted in campaign ownership across the whole project, as well as invaluable contributions for the teaser part of the campaign.

## Recommendations

- Even with a low marketing budget, you can achieve a highly successful marketing campaign - find a unique angle for the production and tease the audience with visuals and production insights from the rehearsal room and production. Developing partnerships with targeted organisations is also invaluable, and can help to create a viral campaign for the production simply, easily and highly effectively ☑ as well as free of charge.
- Explore all the possible resources at your disposal, don't just rely on your budget. As with Bicycle Boy, we created an effective guerrilla campaign by laminating leaflets and cable tying them to the bike handle bars of all staff and volunteers. If your organisation uses volunteers in another area of the business (e.g. Front of House) see how else you can tap into their good-will - these people are likely to have good links in areas of the community that might be harder to reach through traditional methods
- Plan the marketing campaign with more lead in time than you think is necessary, and go through all possible target markets and campaign messages to each of those markets with a fine toothcomb. Planning every last detail (even if it feels laborious, will pay off), with particular attention to timing and taking the audience on a journey. Ideally involve all members.

## Development of marketing materials



**Image 1:** The public announcement of Bicycle Boy, via the double page spread in the Oxford Playhouse season brochure. This was before any artwork or title treatment had been developed, but the graphic of the bicycle was incorporated into the design of print (see below) to retain continuity.

**Image 2:** Final version of the title treatment. The colours used were aimed at being unisex.



**Image 3:** Outdoor banner design. The background colour was chosen to reiterate the eco/green messages of the show and give the production stronger association with the allotments, which it was tied to the fences of.