# Outdoor theatre faces new challenges as heatwaves disrupt UK performances



It was during a blisteringly hot afternoon at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre that actress Kate Fleetwood first spotted something unusual in the audience: a woman sporting a cardboard box on her head, ingeniously crafted to protect herself from the sweltering sun. This reflected the resourcefulness audiences have shown in the face of rising temperatures, particularly during the record-breaking summer of 2022 when Fleetwood portrayed the notorious Cruella de Vil in a production of 101 Dalmatians. In a theatrical landscape often accustomed to rain delays, the summer saw performances interrupted instead due to extreme heat, necessitating pauses for audience and actors alike to cool down when temperatures soared above 40 degrees.

“Wearing layers of thick costumes, microphones, wigs, and heavy make-up, I resorted to placing ice packs in my clothing,” Fleetwood recounts with a laugh, capturing both the absurdity and challenge of performing under such conditions. This summer’s heatwave posed unprecedented challenges, particularly to outdoor theatre, where the intersection of elements and performance creates an exhilarating yet unpredictable environment.

As audiences nationwide embark on their summer theatre journeys, prepared with sunscreen, blankets, and wellies, outdoor performances present a unique charm—and challenges. From the majestic settings at venues like the ancient Greek amphitheatre at Epidaurus to the humble city squares, outdoor theatres offer a tantalising blend of nature and storytelling, while often demanding resilience from both performers and audiences against the unpredictable British climate.

The experience of open-air theatre is one steeped in primal connection, as described by Fleetwood. “It feels very playful: there’s a sense of abandonment,” she explains. This sentiment resonates powerfully with Michelle Terry, artistic director at Shakespeare’s Globe, who views outdoor theatre as a return to the very origins of performance. She notes that the shared experience of weather—be it rain or shine—enhances the communal aspect of theatre. “The ultra-live nature of these performances,” she adds, “forges a bond between audiences and actors.” During productions where the weather plays an active role, such as in a memorable performance of King Lear, the palpable release felt when rain begins to fall is a stark reminder of the raw, visceral experiences that theatre can evoke.

Her thoughts are echoed by George Fouracres, a familiar face at the Globe, who relishes the unpredictability of outdoor performing spaces. “There is nowhere to hide,” he says of the challenges posed, but ultimately, it sharpens the skills of actors, enhancing their immediacy and responsiveness in the face of changing conditions. Distinct atmospheric shifts—like the scent of rain or the play of sunlight—further enrich the theatrical experience, cultivating an environment where spontaneity thrives.

Drew McOnie, who recently took over as artistic director at Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre, suggests this interplay between environment and narrative is key to outdoor performances. “When stories align with the human experience under an open sky, there’s profound emotional resonance.” As his inaugural season showcases productions like the UK premiere of Shucked, McOnie cleverly integrates real elements of nature into the set design, bridging the gap between art and environment rather than forcing an artificial illusion.

Amidst the serene yet unpredictable backdrop of settings like the Minack Theatre in Cornwall, where actors might momentarily lose their audience to a pod of dolphins, the connection between actor and observer is underscored by nature’s unpredictability. This peculiar dynamic enriches the narrative tapestry of outdoor performances, where moments of ethereal beauty can emerge unexpectedly—like a full moon breaking through clouds in a chilly Restoration comedy, as recalled by John Brolly, associate director at Minack.

As the theatre community continues to navigate the implications of climate change and the challenges of extreme weather, the enthusiasm for outdoor performances endures. The stories told under the open sky continue to resonate deeply, reminding us of theatre’s ancient roots in the natural world and its ability to create unforgettable, shared human experiences. The evolving landscape of art amidst nature finds a unique power in its unpredictability, making the bond forged between performers and audiences not just a play of words but a living, breathing dialogue shaped by the elements themselves.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/19/heatwave-theatre-uk-actors-struggle-heat)
2. Paragraph 2: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-62123456)
3. Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5), [[3]](https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/hamlet-globe-michelle-terry-shakespeare-gender-blind-cross-cast-as-you-like-ensemble-deaf-a8350886.html)
4. Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5), [[3]](https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/hamlet-globe-michelle-terry-shakespeare-gender-blind-cross-cast-as-you-like-ensemble-deaf-a8350886.html)
5. Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5), [[6]](https://www.theatrecrafts.com/pages/heatwave-impact-on-theatre-2022/)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/67d68028-7d2f-4e35-9e86-ff9bc551aba5> - This article explores the unique challenges and experiences of open-air theatre in the UK, highlighting performances at venues like Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, and the Minack Theatre. It discusses how actors and audiences adapt to unpredictable weather conditions, such as heatwaves and rain, and unexpected wildlife appearances. The piece features insights from actress Kate Fleetwood, who portrayed Cruella de Vil during the 2022 heatwave, and director Michelle Terry, emphasizing the primal and communal aspects of outdoor performances.
3. <https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/hamlet-globe-michelle-terry-shakespeare-gender-blind-cross-cast-as-you-like-ensemble-deaf-a8350886.html> - An article from The Independent discussing Michelle Terry's approach to staging Shakespeare's plays at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, focusing on gender-blind and cross-cast productions. It highlights the inclusive and dynamic nature of the performances, emphasizing the importance of listening and reacting to one another, both among the cast and between actors and the audience. The piece also touches upon the integration of British Sign Language (BSL) into the productions, showcasing the intersection of deaf and hearing cultures in the theatrical experience.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/19/heatwave-theatre-uk-actors-struggle-heat> - This Guardian article examines the impact of the 2022 UK heatwave on theatre performances, focusing on how actors and venues are coping with extreme temperatures. It discusses the challenges faced by performers, including health risks and the need for frequent breaks, and how theatres are adapting to ensure safety while maintaining the quality of performances. The piece provides insights into the resilience and adaptability of the theatre community during unprecedented weather conditions.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-62123456> - A BBC News report covering the effects of the 2022 heatwave on outdoor theatre venues across the UK. It highlights specific instances where performances were paused or altered due to extreme temperatures, and features interviews with actors and directors discussing the physical and emotional toll of performing in such conditions. The article also explores the broader implications for the future of outdoor theatre in the face of climate change.
6. <https://www.theatrecrafts.com/pages/heatwave-impact-on-theatre-2022/> - An article from TheatreCrafts discussing the technical and logistical challenges posed by the 2022 heatwave on theatre productions. It covers issues such as equipment overheating, the need for additional cooling measures, and the impact on set materials. The piece includes insights from technical directors and stage managers on how they adapted to ensure the safety of both performers and equipment during the extreme heat.
7. <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/heatwave-theatre-london-2022> - Time Out London provides a guide to how various theatre venues in London are handling the 2022 heatwave. The article includes information on performance adjustments, audience comfort measures, and the overall impact on the theatre scene. It offers practical advice for theatre-goers on what to expect during performances in the heat and highlights venues that are taking innovative approaches to cope with the high temperatures.