



# Impact Report 2025

**POLKA**  
Where Theatre Begins

## A few words from our Joint CEOs

It's been an incredible year at Polka, being named the UK Most Welcoming Theatre, record engagement numbers and more free tickets given to schools than ever before. This report details the amazing impact Polka's work has had for children, families, schools, artists and our local community during 2024/5.



Our productions have entertained more audiences than ever, including the Olivier-nominated 'The Nutcracker', the Offie Award-winning 'Romeo and Juliet' and the world premiere of **Sir Lenny Henry's** 'The Boy With Wings'. These productions reflect our values: bold, inclusive, and pioneering theatre.

We've launched new initiatives including The Polka Playwriting Award and Catapult artist development programme. Talking Tales began crucial work with primary schools on developing oracy skills through drama.

We've extended our Curtain Up! free schools ticketing programme to 9,000 tickets, toured shows to local schools, and our literacy programme Write Here Write Now has inspired hundreds more children to pick up a pen and put their imaginations on paper.

It feels more vital than ever to deliver this transformative work. None of it would be possible without the extraordinary support of our audiences and funders, completely inspired by the brilliant children who are at the centre of it all.

We hope you enjoy reading this report as much as the Polka team have enjoyed delivering this exciting and rewarding year of inspiring work!

**Lynette Shanbury – Executive Director / Joint CEO**  
**Helen Matravers – Artistic Director / Joint CEO**



© Sara Hijazi-Greenwood & Hufton + Crow

## Polka is the home of children's theatre

We deliver a year-round programme of exceptional and exciting new work made by some of the UK's best theatre makers, showcasing international productions, visiting theatre shows, and creative learning activities for 0-12 year olds.

Polka opened its doors in 1979, as the UK's first dedicated children's theatre, and has remained at the forefront of performance and creative learning for children ever since.

In 2024/5 we were named the UK's Most Welcoming Theatre, and Merton's Best Business.

### Our Values



#### Child-centred

Children at the heart of everything we do.



#### Community

Engaging diverse communities of children, families, educationalists and artists.



#### Excellent

Pioneering, adventurous, offering the highest quality.



#### Memorable

Creating magical, meaningful experiences.



#### Inclusive

Welcoming, accessible, nurturing, supportive, representative.

# 2024/25 at a glance



**98** volunteers  
gave **4,810**  
hours

**763**  
performances of  
**30** productions

**9** touring productions  
reaching **24,000+**  
people



**37** access adapted  
performances  
reaching **3,957**  
audience members

**145,000+**  
audience members &  
workshop participants

**20,800+**  
Creative Learning  
participants joined  
**1,326** events

**11,000+**  
people enjoyed  
our free play  
spaces

**184** school  
partners



**29,548kWh**  
generated from  
our solar panels

**10,000+**  
free tickets given to  
schools &  
community groups



## AWARD WINS

- **UK's Most Welcoming Theatre** - UK Theatre Awards 2024
- **Overall Best Business plus Equality, Diversity & Inclusion and Sustainable Impact Awards** - Merton Best Business Awards 2024
- **Best Sound & Music** for 'Romeo and Juliet' - Offie Awards 2025
- **Family Attraction of the Year** - Time & Leisure Food & Culture Awards 2024



## AWARD NOMINATIONS

- **Best Family Show** for 'The Nutcracker' - Olivier Awards 2025
- **Outstanding Drama Initiative** for Polka's 'Freefalling' programme - Music & Drama Education Awards 2025
- **Audience Impact & Innovation** for Polka's 'Take Your Seats' programme - Fantastic For Families Awards 2025

"Polka continues to make an **extraordinary impact** in the world of children's theatre and I am so pleased to be a Patron of such an innovative and dedicated organisation...and the **outstanding work** you do to make the arts accessible and engaging for young audiences"

**Sir Sadiq Khan**

Mayor of London and Polka Patron



'The Nutcracker', November 2024

© Steve Gregson

# Artistic Year at Polka

An Unlimited UK Partner Award 2023  
commission with Otic Theatre company, with  
support from Bristol Old Vic and Paraorchestra

## The Colour of Dinosaurs

★★★★★ LondonTheatre!

A Polka Theatre production

## Sam Wu is NOT Afraid of Ghosts

★★★★★ The Stage

## Big Dreams Early Years Theatre Festival

"Wonderfully arranged space"  
"Great inspiration for my daughter to  
become an author"

A Polka Theatre and Half Moon co-production

## Soft or Spiky?

★★★★★ Everything Theatre

A Polka Theatre and Little Bulb co-production

## The Nutcracker

★★★★★ The Stage

A Polka Theatre and Can't Sit Still co-production

## The Snowy Day

★★★★★ Everything Theatre



A Polka Theatre production in collaboration with  
Singapore Repertory Theatre

## The PEA and the Princess

★★★★★ Theatre Art & Films

A Polka Theatre, AIK and Turtle Key Arts co-  
production, in association with Leeds Playhouse

## Sisters 360

★★★★★ Cinema Stars  
Entertainment

A Polka Theatre, Hiccup Theatre and Derby Theatre  
co-production

## Chicken Licken

★★★★★ Curtain Call Reviews

A Polka Theatre production (originally a Mapping  
co-production)

## Let's Build!

★★★★★ Everything Theatre

A Polka Theatre and Birmingham Rep co-production

## The Boy with Wings

★★★★★ Bromsgrove  
Standard

© Paul Blakemore, Steve Gregson, Tasha Best,  
Graeme Braidwood, Jake Bush & Adela Ursachi.



# Playwriting Award



The Polka Playwriting Award is the UK's first prize dedicated to professional new writing for 8-13-year-old audiences.

It will support new writing that is bold, ambitious and exciting, filling a gap in contemporary theatre for this age group.

**81** submissions

**5** plays shortlisted

**1** brand-new production

**3** industry leading judges

**7** Polka GRAD judges

**3** free online writing masterclasses

**"I am so delighted to be a judge and know that Polka, with its track record in high quality theatre for young audiences, is the perfect place for new playwrights to flourish."**

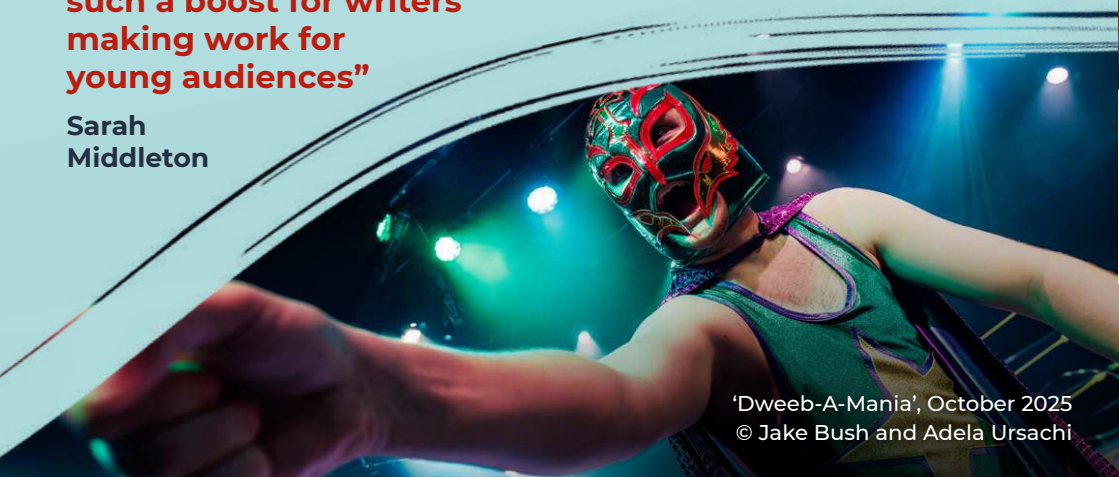
**Joseph Coelho**

**Award Judge alongside Chinonyerem Odimba and Vicky Ireland**

The winning commission was **Dweeb-A-Mania** by **Sarah Middleton**, which will be published by Methuen Drama and produced by Polka in our Adventure Theatre in autumn 2025 for a 5-week run.

**"The existence of this award is such a boost for writers making work for young audiences"**

**Sarah Middleton**



'Dweeb-A-Mania', October 2025  
© Jake Bush and Adela Ursachi

# Young Ambassadors

Our Young Ambassadors help us create the best children's shows and have a say in how Polka is run. They are invited to research new stories they would like to find on stage and help develop ideas in rehearsals.

Having young voices as part of Polka's research, development and delivery of shows is essential for our growth and success!



**Younger Voices**

5-7 yrs

**Young Voices**

8-12 yrs

**Polka GRADS**

12+ yrs



© Vicky Dowding and Jemima Deboo-Sands

**"I love Polka because it's making drama more available to more people, which is important to me."**

**Young Ambassador**

**60**

**Young Ambassadors**

**6** rehearsals for new Polka productions

**12** creative workshops

**2** fundraising events & board meetings

**6** training sessions with Polka departments

# Catapult

A new artist development programme which supports exciting original work via two strands – First Steps and Next Steps. Catapult offers a platform to creatives from all disciplines who are underrepresented in theatre for young audiences.



Mentoring and free theatre tickets to all Polka shows

**90** applications submitted

**144** hours of free rehearsal space

**75** producers, programmers, directors and venues invited to showcase of artists' work

**£7,200**

in seed funding for 6 artists



“The seed commission, access to key industry players and space to play and explore has enabled me to develop with other wonderful artists.”

© Julia Canavan and Vicky Dowding

**Ruby Kitching**

## First Steps for audiences age 0-6 years

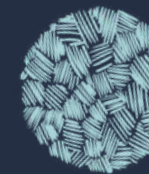
### Mikayla Teodoro: Into The Blue

Centring on the Sama Bajau folk of the Philippines and their relationship with the sea.



### Layla Bradbeer: The Misbehaving Letters

Using puppetry to playfully explore dyslexia.



### Ashton Owen & Natalya Martin: For the Benefit of Pablo Fanque

A show celebrating the life of Britain's first black circus owner.

### Farrell Cox: Don't Yuk My Yum

An aerial show inspired by the vibrant memories of Farrell's Jamaican grandparents' garden.

## Next Steps for audiences age 0-12 years

### Kiota (Aisha Ali & Deepraj Singh): How Lightning Came To Be

Exploring the nature folktale of the Khasi people of the North-Eastern Indian state of Meghalaya.

### Ruby Kitching: Baki

A show about a Bangladeshi Grandfather, his English Grandson and the impact of Partition.





**Theatre & Tonic**



**Bromsgrove Standard**



**Reviews Gate**



**Curtain Call  
Reviews**



**Culture  
Bab**



**The Stage**



**WhatsOnStage**



**A Youngish  
Perspective**



**Fairy Powered  
Productions**



**Mama Geek**



**Brum Hour**

# Creative Learning Year

Creative learning and participation are at the heart of Polka's work. Our inclusive approach nurtures creativity, critical thinking and personal expression. We inspire children and families through rich and dynamic experiences, and provide innovative professional training for teachers.

Thanks to our generous funders, many children take part in our wide-ranging, accessible programme for free. Every child should have the chance to benefit equally from the arts.

**32,201** individual experiences

**56%** took part in activities for free

**20,863** participants

**10,000+** tickets given away for free

**20** work experience opportunities

Amongst the children who benefited from our free programmes for schools in 2025:

**40%** received free school meals (National average 26%)

**51%** were multilingual learners (National average 21%)

**44%** identified as Deaf, disabled, or neurodivergent

“Polka Theatre was the first theatre I went to when I was a kid, and my social worker used to take me to the gift shop after meetings. It really transported my young mind to a whole other dimension. I have performed and made a lot of shows nationally and across the globe but being at the Polka is extra special and means so much to me.”

Conrad Murray, Beats & Elements

# Curtain Up!

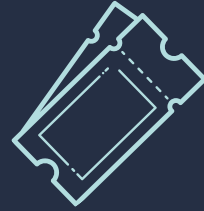
Our trailblazing free schools ticket scheme, running at Polka for 30 years. Designed to give children, who would otherwise not be able to afford it, their first experience of live theatre.

**9,098** free tickets given away

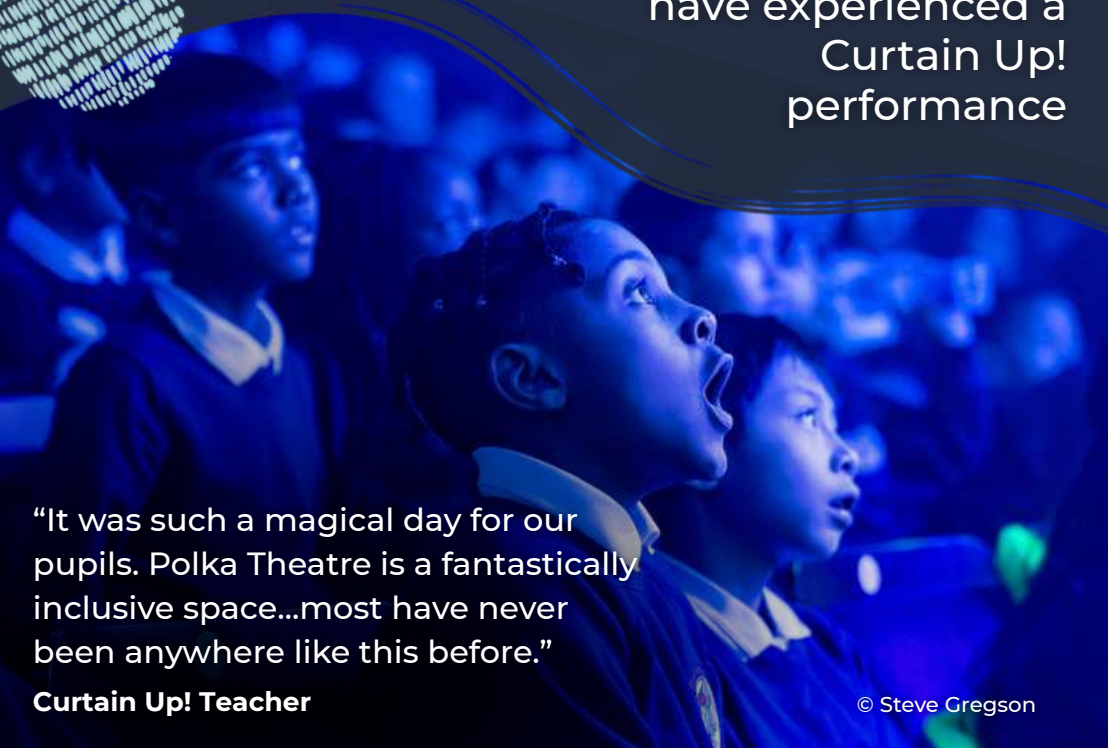
**96** schools

**42%** received free school meals

**51%** had English as a second language



Since 1994,  
**over 76,000 children**  
have experienced a  
Curtain Up!  
performance

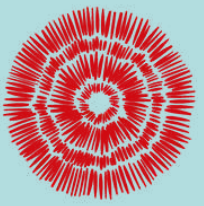


"It was such a magical day for our pupils. Polka Theatre is a fantastically inclusive space...most have never been anywhere like this before."

**Curtain Up! Teacher**

© Steve Gregson

# Romeo and Juliet Schools Tour



We brought a modern-day interpretation directly into schools, ensuring live theatre reached children who might not otherwise experience it.

The production was created and directed by **Conrad Murray** and **Lakeisha Lynch-Stevens** from **Beats & Elements**, Polka Associate Artists. Through rap, rhythms and harmonies, Shakespeare's most famous story was set-in modern-day Merton.

**2,000+** pupils aged 9-13 saw the production in 15 schools

**60%** of schools had more than 30% of pupils eligible for free school meals

**20%** were specialist SEND school performances

**47%** of schools had more than 40% of children with English as an additional language

**800** pupils took part in linked creative workshops



**Winner**  
Best Sound  
& Music  
Offie Awards 2025



© Tasha Best

# Freefalling

For the past 20 years, Freefalling has been supporting children in Merton who face challenging circumstances to gain confidence and improve their social skills.

Weekly tailor-made drama workshops and summer schools, which are free to referred participants, help vulnerable young people to explore their identity and environment.

## Freefalling Foundation (age 8-11)

- **85%** felt more confident
- **85%** made a new friend

## Freefalling Young Company (age 11-16)

- **100%** felt more confident
- **100%** made a new friend



**Finalist**  
Outstanding  
Drama Initiative  
Music & Drama  
Education Awards 2025



"Freefalling taught me how to work with others and communicate. I feel much more confident now"

Freefalling participant

# Write Here Write Now

Inspires a life-long love of storytelling and creative writing amongst children aged 7-9 (years 3-4) who are struggling in school. Write Here Write Now builds children's confidence, self-esteem and imagination, helping participants reach their full literacy potential.

Following 6 months of weekly school workshops, the project culminates at Polka with an exhibition of the children's work and professional performances of their stories.



**Finalist**  
Outstanding  
Drama Initiative  
Music & Drama  
Education Awards 2024

"The project had a huge impact on their confidence, creativity and self-expression (and imagination!)"  
Year 3 Teacher



**127** children from  
13 schools

**93%** improved their ability  
to communicate

**90%** showed  
increased  
confidence

**82%** showed improvements  
in their use of language  
and vocabulary

# Talking Tales

A new oracy project developed in response to post-pandemic declines in Early Years and KS1 communication skills. Teachers and artists co-design, co-deliver, and co-reflect to embed creative, inclusive, drama-based practices.



**6 Schools • 21 Teachers • 630 Pupils**

Full impact evaluation will take place following the second year of this project.

© Steve Gregson and Tory Sandars



© Steve Gregson

# In the community

Working in partnership with local charities, we reach children and families who otherwise couldn't take part due to financial or other barriers.

We offer:

- Workshop places and theatre tickets via our Saturday Club and Polka Invites schemes
- Free access to our spaces
- Lunches in school holidays
- Creative activities in hospitals, parks and community settings
- Annual community day

All for free!

**2,553** free workshop experiences

**1,360** free show tickets

**300+** free lunches

"I'm very grateful for this opportunity. I can't begin to describe how much we needed that and what impact it had."

**Polka Invites member**



**Shortlisted**  
Audience Impact & Innovation Award  
Fantastic For Families Awards 2025

**415** Community Day attendees

**174** family memberships

# Theatre is for everyone

Polka is more than a theatre – we're a vibrant community hub, with free indoor and outdoor play spaces. For many children, it's their first step into theatre. Every visit is unforgettable, and for those who need extra support, we create tailored experiences to make sure no one is left out.

Through our Arts Access scheme, we work with Special Educational schools and units to ensure every child can make the most of their time at Polka.

"All of our students felt well-supported in accessing Polka. The staff were highly accommodating and ensured that any special needs were met with care and attention."

**Teacher from Arts Access Scheme**

**37** adapted access performances,  
attended by **3,957**  
audience members

**970** access tickets sold

**861** free companion tickets

**9** social stories created

**6** British Sign Language/Audio Described trailers

"This show was the hallmark in the seamless integration of accessibility, diversity, representation and storytelling. This is absolutely how it should be done."

**Audience feedback**



**Winner**  
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Award  
Merton Best Business Awards 2024



Polka Community Day, April 2025  
© Lizzie Corscaden

© Steve Gregson

# Thank you to our supporters

Polka is a registered charity. Thanks to our incredible family of supporters, our work can be enjoyed by children now and in the future.

## Lead Supporters

Arts Council England  
London Borough of Merton  
The Garek Trust

The Chan Yin Chuen Memorial  
Charitable Foundation

## Supporters and Corporate Partners

The Andor Charitable Trust  
Backstage Trust  
The Barbara Whatmore Charitable  
Trust  
Bombay Delight  
The Brann Family  
The Calleva Foundation  
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The Charlotte Bonham-Carter  
Charitable Trust  
Chartered Accountants' Livery Charity  
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Cockayne and the London Community  
Foundation  
The Dorus Trust  
Sabine Elkington  
Equity Charitable Trust  
Enterprise Arts Trust  
Family Treatment Service  
Frazer Trust  
The Greenslade Family Foundation  
The Harpur Family  
The Hugo Halkes Charitable Trust

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Icon Solutions  
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John Horniman's Children's Trust  
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MFS Investment Management  
Methuen Drama  
Misses Barrie Charitable Trust  
Morr & Co Solicitors  
Paul Hamlyn Foundation – Teacher  
Development Fund  
The Carmela & Ronnie Pignatelli  
Foundation  
The Patricia Routledge Charitable Trust  
Royal Wimbledon Golf Club  
The Study Prep  
Tesco Community Grants  
The Vernon N Ely Charitable Trust  
The Weinstock Fund  
Wimbledon District Nursing &  
Midwifery Benevolent Society  
Wimbledon Foundation  
Wimbledon Offices  
Wimbledon Quarter  
Wolfson Foundation

## Guardians & Super Heroes

Anonymous  
Tom Bolland  
Mairi Brewis  
Phillip and Gillian Broadley  
Natasha Gill  
Stephen and Hilary Harland  
Katherine Hill

John Hyatt  
Adrian Johnson  
Vincent O'Brien  
Keith Steventon  
The Robertson Family  
Lucy Thomlinson  
Susie Wells

**Thank you to everyone who has supported Polka over the past year.**

**We're grateful to every staff member, volunteer, artist, and freelancer whose talent and dedication has enriched our creative community this year.**

Learn more  
about how to  
support us:



020 8543 4888  
polkatheatre.com

Registered charity no. 256979

'Sisters 360' - March 2025  
© Tasha Best



# UK's Most Welcoming Theatre