



POLKA

Where Theatre Begins

Impact Report 2026

Image: 'The Rapping Princess' Jake Bush

Welcome from Our Joint CEOs



The past 12 months at Polka have been extraordinary – from award-winning theatre staged at our home in Merton, to touring work all over the UK, and delivering life-changing creative opportunities for children.

We celebrated two Olivier Award nominations and expanded our vital community and schools programmes to reach record breaking numbers. We continued to prove that world-class theatre made specifically for young audiences can be transformative, hugely entertaining and profoundly impactful.

Behind the scenes, we took time to reframe our mission and values, completed a critical technical transformation of our main auditorium (now proudly named the Y C Chan Theatre), developed a game-changing oracy schools programme and launched a brand-new website.

Polka is more than just a theatre. It is a unique, brilliant, inspiring place full of exciting activity. Our Polka-made productions, Creative Learning programmes, artist development, and targeted community initiatives do not operate in isolation, they fuel one another. When we commission bold new writing, we test ideas by listening directly to our Young Ambassadors. When we train early-career artists, we build paths into our rehearsal rooms, and to stages across the whole theatre world. And through vital ticket schemes and school partnerships, we systematically dismantle the financial, logistical and social barriers that keep children from experiencing the magic of live performance.

With arts education facing an unprecedented squeeze in schools and public life, an organisation like Polka is not a luxury, it is an essential champion of a child's right to creativity, imagination, and joy. Experiencing theatre builds empathy, critical thinking, confidence, and connection. At a time of huge pressure on children's mental health, our mission to ignite and empower young imaginations has never been more urgent.

2026 marks the five-year anniversary of Polka reopening following major refurbishment. Over 500,000 visitors later, and the building has exceeded our wildest hopes: it has deepened our bonds with local families and schools, and allowed our artistic output to grow bolder.

Our plans for the next five years are unapologetically ambitious. We will commission more exciting new work, and nurture a diverse generation of children's theatre makers and lovers. The generosity of our supporters, partners and audiences is vital in this mission. We are especially thrilled to welcome our wonderful new Patrons, **Maz Evans** and **Sir Lenny Henry**, whose passion for storytelling and inclusion in the arts matches our own. Together we are ensuring that every child – regardless of background or circumstance – can be part of that journey.

Thank you for being part of Polka's story.

Helen Matravers

Artistic Director & Joint CEO

Lynette Shanbury

Executive Director & Joint CEO

Image: Jake Bush

Polka is the Home of Children's Theatre

Our Mission:

To inspire, to entertain and to change children's lives through world-class theatre and creative experiences.

Our Values:



Child-centred

Placing children at the heart of everything we do and every decision we make.



Inclusive

Making theatre accessible for all our communities, ensuring every child, artist, and visitor feels they belong, are represented, and can thrive.



Exceptional

Creating distinctive work of the highest ambition and quality.



Playful

Inspiring and nurturing curiosity, imagination and adventure in ourselves and our audiences.



Bold

Championing big ideas and important stories that push boundaries.

2025/26 at a glance



14,156

free theatre
tickets

60% of
workshop
places given
for free
to children and
families to ensure
cost is never a
barrier



2 Olivier Award
Nominations

'The Firework-Maker's Daughter'
'The Boy with Wings'



9 touring
productions
reaching

41,000+
people

125,000
visitors

27,611

Creative Learning
participants
joined



1,520
events

724 performances of
20 productions across
Polka's two auditoriums



99%

of visitors agree
that Polka has a
positive impact on
children's lives

269 school partners

**"You walk into Polka Theatre,
you walk into paradise!"**

Letter from a child whose entire school class
received free tickets to a show at Polka



Image: 'The Boy With Wings' Jake Bush

★★★★★

"Daft, dynamic and touching"

The Stage



Image: Jake Bush

Who Let The Gods Out

★★★★★

"A sparkling new take"

The Guardian



Arthur

Image: Jake Bush

A Year on Stage

★★★★★

"Bouncy, boisterous fun...uncontained delight"

The Stage



The Rapping Princess

Image: Jake Bush

★★★★★

"This is truly theatre made for children and completely inclusive for all"

Kev Castle Theatre Reviews



Tortoise and the Hare

Image: Graeme Braidwood



Image: Jake Bush

The Firework-Maker's Daughter

★★★★★
 “A shimmering
 show”
 The Stage



Image: Ellie Kurtz

The Snowflake

★★★★★
 “A feel-good family
 Christmas show”
 West End Best Friend

A Year on Stage



We're investing in new playwriting that is relevant, adventurous and of exceptional quality - ensuring young people see themselves and their experiences represented on our stage.

★★★★★
 “Without doubt the
 perfect show for
 children”
 Everything Theatre

★★★★★
 “An electrifying
 burst of theatrical
 joy”
 The Spy in the Stalls



Image: Jake Bush & Adela Ursachi

Dweeb-A-Mania
 Winner, TYA Writing
 Fringe Theatre

“Winning the Polka Playwriting Award gave me a much-needed boost of confidence at a vital moment in my career... It's a game-changing award.”

Sarah Middleton
 Winner of the inaugural Polka Playwriting Award
 for Dweeb-A-Mania

Creating Exceptional Theatre for Young Audiences

Polka is a place where artists can take creative risks and test new ideas. We commission and co-produce ambitious new writing for children, investing in a bold and inclusive vision of children's theatre.

9 Polka productions and co-productions toured across the UK reaching over 41,000 audience members, including a month-long run of 'The Nutcracker' in London's **West End**.

6 artists and collectives joined our artist development programme **Catapult**, and 20 artists and companies benefited from free R&D space. We launched a professional training programme with **Page One Theatre**, focusing on theatre for Early Years audiences, and in Summer 2026 we launched our second **Polka Playwriting Award**.



"We couldn't imagine a better home to be developing our piece."

Layla Madanat
Next Steps Catapult Artist

Sisters 360 on Tour

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

Written by **Asif Khan**
Directed by **Ameera Conrad**

- A new script commissioned by Polka
- Originated at Polka with 39 performances in our Adventure Theatre
- Free London-wide Schools Tour reaching 2,000+ children across 19 schools
- National tour to 32 venues including theatres, arts centres, festivals and community spaces
- Performed at Bradford City of Culture and Merton's Start of the Line Festival
- Shortlisted for Best Stage Production - Asian Media Awards 2025



"Uplifting and
surreally playful"
The Stage

"[The students] loved the representation of having sisters who were Muslim in the show and that they were wearing hijabs. They connected with the sisters' story."

Teacher feedback
Sisters 360 Schools Tour



Children at the Heart of our Mission

Every action and decision at Polka is inspired and influenced by children and young people. They shape Polka's productions, events and how we run our venue, and they help us understand what matters to children and young people today.

Our 60 **Young Ambassadors** aged 5 to 16 have reviewed productions, given feedback in rehearsals, and explored ideas with the creative teams working on new shows. They have also joined Trustee meetings, suggested toys for our shop, helped shape our annual family fundraiser, and tested out our birthday party activities.

The Young Ambassadors programme is a meaningful platform for young voices to be heard, and for their confidence, creativity, and communication skills to grow. A big thank you to our incredible Young Ambassadors.

"Helping to run Polka is one of my wishes I would do when I'm older"

"I really enjoyed the workshop on how to write a review... and feeling like I am part of the Polka community."

"Amazing programme and these are experiences that will stay with children for the rest of their lives - transformative!"

Parent



"Excitement for all ages"

Stage to Page Theatre Reviews



"Just purest stage magic"

Sadie Takes the Stage



"Shimmering and inventive"

The Stage



"A testament to the technical magic of theatre"

The Spy in the Stalls

"This spellbinding adaptation... manages to be both epic and intimate"

The Guardian

"Sparks of exciting, imaginative colour and puppetry"

Everything Theatre

OLIVIER
AWARDS
CUNARD

NOMINEE
2026

The Firework-Maker's Daughter
Nominee, Best Family Show
Olivier Awards 2026
Winner, Design Award
OffWestEnd Awards 2026

Image: 'The Firework-Maker's Daughter' Jake Bush

A World of Creativity for all Children

Polka offers a creative journey throughout childhood.

Our extensive Creative Learning programme offers something for all ages and backgrounds. At Polka this includes weekly baby and toddler classes, Saturday morning clubs, our Youth Theatre, and workshops for children with sensory challenges or hearing impairments.

Our in-school programmes use drama to meet curriculum and childhood development needs, helping children explore their creativity and develop new skills and confidence.

We also bring creativity directly to families in their own communities through workshops in hospitals and in community settings, offering a range of free or low cost opportunities to take part.

39,031 Creative Learning Experiences

20 Work Experience placements

1,520 different events

67% took part for free

“Imagine what a day in hospital feels like for a child. Being a patient is scary for a child, and it strips them of their agency. But when the team from Polka arrive, the child isn’t a patient, they are a storyteller. Polka staff create a warm, safe environment where a child gets to take charge, run wild with their imagination and build new worlds where they make the rules.”

Teacher, Chelsea Community Hospital School

In Partnership with Schools

With 53% of UK schools reporting cuts to arts budgets, and 44% reducing school trips due to expense^[1], providing affordable arts opportunities is more vital than ever.

For more than 30 years our trailblazing **Curtain Up!** programme has provided free theatre tickets for schools where pupils would otherwise miss out.

This year, we worked in-depth with 6 Curtain Up! school partners on a new project: **Creative Connections**. This free, school-wide project includes arts-based training for teachers, in-school workshops and tickets for every child to see productions.

269 school partners across London and South-East England

32,500 children saw a show at Polka with their school

2,000 children experienced the 'Sisters 360' tour for free in their school

10,325 free theatre tickets through Curtain Up!

269 teachers participated in training days

"Most of our children do not have opportunities to experience the arts. The children have experienced moments of pure joy and have lasting memories."

Partner school, Creative Connections

¹ NCFE Campaign for Learning Poll, 2026

Changing Lives Through Drama

Drama is the perfect platform to improve children's oracy and literacy levels. Alongside our regular workshops with schools, we've delivered two long-term funded programmes with 25 London-wide schools this year:

Write Here Write Now inspires a love of storytelling and confidence in creative writing for children who are struggling with literacy.

Talking Tales raises children's oracy through drama, story and play responding to the rapid decline in communication skills since 2020.

With 31% of UK children now starting primary school lacking the communication skills expected for their age², programmes like **Talking Tales** and **Write Here Write Now** make a vital difference.



Talking Tales
Nominee
Excellence in
Arts Education
UK Theatre
Awards 2026

“Talking Tales is the kind of project I'd tell any school or senior leader to grab with both hands.”

English Lead, Talking Tales partner school

Of children taking part in Write Here Write Now:

- 90% more creative with their ideas
- 86% improved use of language and vocabulary
- 86% improved creative writing skills
- 85% increased confidence

Of teachers taking part in Talking Tales:

- 100% agreed they are more confident using drama and storytelling in their teaching
- 100% now use the Polka Oracy Framework at least weekly

² National Literacy Trust, 2024

In 2026 we celebrated 20 years of **Freefalling!**

Theatre is a powerful tool for personal growth. Freefalling is our flagship programme providing fully funded, referral-only drama workshops for young people aged 9-16 in Merton who face challenges at home or at school.

Free weekly workshops and a week-long Summer School develop young people's confidence, self-expression and understanding of the world in a safe space.

Of 40 Freefalling participants in 2026:

- 91% grew in confidence
- 96% had fun
- 81% made a friend



“You could be having a bad day and then you go to Freefalling, and then everything seems so much lighter. For me personally, it gave me a lot of confidence.”

Freefalling member



Image: Del Taylor



Images: Jake Bush

Everyone is welcome at Polka

Polka is dedicated to improving access to theatre for all children. We make theatre affordable, with £10 tickets for all our main house shows. Families with access needs can enjoy access adapted versions of productions, join sensory workshops, and see themselves represented on stage.

26 adapted access performances
with **2,247** audience members

2,195 access and free companion tickets

6,000 £10 tickets sold

We champion Deaf and disabled artists and the creation of new inclusive productions. Over 12,000 children and adults saw shows which were created with audio description, captioning and British Sign Language fully integrated into their performance.

Beyond our venue, we've expanded our extensive projects with special educational needs schools, community groups and hospitals because children who are unable to visit Polka should not miss out.

"I attended the relaxed performance with my son and it was brilliant. The freedom to move around if needed made this a fantastic and accessible experience for our family."

Parent

"Tortoise and the Hare felt like such an impressive example of your Access programme from the first moment we saw the characters, the BSL interpreters were alongside and fully integrated within the performance. The live captions accompanying the show on the screen above the stage were inspiring to see."

Parent

Image: 'Tortoise and the Hare' Graeme Braidwood

In the Heart of the Local Community Since 1979

Polka is one of only a handful of dedicated children's theatres in the UK. Our free indoor and outdoor play spaces make Polka a welcoming community hub for everyone all year round. We're a registered Warm Space in Winter and Cool Space in Summer.

With 57% of families saying cost prevents them from going on trips and doing activities together³, our free spaces give families the opportunity to have creative time together without the pressure to spend money.

Through partnerships with local community groups and council services, our free community membership scheme, **Polka Invites**, provides families facing financial or other barriers with free theatre tickets and workshop places, alongside subsidised food and drinks in our café.

Our outreach activities bring drama, storytelling, circus skills, puppetry and much more to community events and festivals across Merton, Wandsworth and Croydon.

10,000+

people used our
free play areas

107 volunteers gave
4,749 hours

32,452 kWh
generated from our solar panels

251 free meals with Tasty Tuesdays, our
free school holiday food programme in
partnership with Dons Local Action Group

1,223 free workshop and theatre tickets for
community groups and families from
Polka Invites

"We've always felt welcomed. My daughter loves Polka and it really helps me feel like I'm doing the best for her by bringing her here. Without Polka Invites, it wouldn't be a reality for us or her."

Polka Invites Member

³ Campaign for Learning, 2026

Thank you to our supporters

Polka is a registered charity. Thanks to our incredible supporters, Polka can open up a world of theatre and creativity for all children.

Lead Supporters

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The Chan Yin Chuen Memorial
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The Garek Trust

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Midwifery Benevolent Society
Wimbledon Foundation
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Wolfson Foundation

Guardians and Super Heroes

Anonymous
Tom Bolland and Janice Monteith
Mairi Brewis
Phillip and Gillian Broadley
Natasha Gill
Stephen and Hilary Harland
Katherine Hill
Adrian Johnson
Vincent O'Brien
Keith Steventon
The Robertson Family
Lucy Thomlinson

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

020 8543 4888 | polkatheatre.com
development@polkatheatre.com

Interested in joining our family of supporters and making a difference? We'd love to hear from you.



"I am so grateful because you chose us to come to your amazing theatre. And just so you know your performance was 5 stars."

Pupil attending a free Curtain Up! performance of 'The Firework-Maker's Daughter' with their class



Registered charity 256979

Image: Steve Gregson

LONDON BOROUGH OF
MERTON

ARTS COUNCIL
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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
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“I couldn’t be more behind Polka’s mission of blasting through barriers to the arts for everyone and anyone.”

Maz Evans, Author, ‘Who Let the Gods Out’
and new Polka Patron

