

Student Enquiry Pack

Contents

- Mission Statement
- Company Background
- Marketing Objectives
- Education and Learning
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Staffing Structure

Polka Theatre Mission

Our mission is to spark the imagination and fuel a sense of discovery in children from every background.

We do this through thrilling world-class theatre and a creative programme of learning, in a welcoming and stimulating environment.

Polka Theatre Company Background

1. Organisation

Since the company was founded in 1968, and especially since it opened its unique venue in Wimbledon Broadway in 1979, Polka Theatre has established itself as a highly-regarded and strategically important element of British theatrical provision. Its reputation has been solidly based on work of high-quality and an exemplary understanding and concern for its audience of children. The nature of the work has generally occupied a position mid-way between large-scale commercial touring productions, drawing principally on children's television programmes or popular book adaptations, and the more experimental and usually small-scale touring work of subsidised companies performing in schools, community venues or festivals. The company has been particularly noted for its nurturing of new writing and as a venue for Early Years work and has a strong international profile.

1.1 Status

The Company is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is administered by a Board of Trustees who also serve as directors of the limited company, and a permanent core staff of 20.

The Company currently operates on an annual turnover of £1.6m. Besides what it can earn through the box office and other activities (which in 2008/09 accounted for 46% of total income), it receives subsidy from Arts Council England, London (37%), London Councils (5%) and The London Borough of Merton (2%) and attracts donations and sponsorship (10%).

1.2 Brief History

Polka Theatre started life as a touring company in 1968 under the Artistic Directorship of Richard Gill. It specialised in shows which featured both actors and puppets and toured them to a range of schools, arts centres and theatres throughout the UK. By 1971, the company had succeeded in attracting Arts Council revenue funding.

Touring to other people's theatres imposed restrictions and it became the company's clear aim to find a permanent building which could be a home for its work. In 1976, Polka found the Holy Trinity Halls in Wimbledon and in 1979, following a lengthy fundraising campaign, Polka's dream of a permanent home for children's theatre became a reality.

When Polka, The Children's Theatre opened its doors on 20th November 1979, it became the UK's first theatre venue dedicated exclusively to children. With two performance spaces (a 300-seat Main Auditorium and an 80-seat studio), a café, a playground, a toyshop and exhibition and gallery spaces, Polka Theatre was unique in its totally child-centred design. It quickly became a popular attraction both locally and London-wide, for the high production values of its ongoing programme of performances and for the exceptional environment in which they were staged.

Once established in its own space, the company began to diversify, and the number of writers, directors and puppeteers with whom the company worked grew. By 1983 Polka was regularly programming and producing productions aimed specifically at the Under-5s: the studio, known as the Adventure Theatre, became the designated performance space for this age-range and, even today, it remains the only space in the UK dedicated to work for Early Years audiences.

In 1988, Vicky Ireland joined Polka as the company's second Artistic Director. Under Vicky's leadership, the company flourished as a centre of excellence, leading to a 75% increase in Arts Council revenue funding in 1991. Productions, now predominantly actor-based and driven by quality scriptwriting, widened in both content and form. The company's commitment to quality playwriting was also reflected in the appointment of a Director of New Writing in 2001, out of which Polka's New Writing Programme was born.

Another notable landmark in Polka's history came in 1994, when Polka won the Vivien Duffield Theatre Award to begin the pioneering audience development initiative, *Curtain-Up!*. The scheme offered free theatre tickets to disadvantaged schools whose pupils would otherwise not have had the opportunity to experience theatre because of financial or other restrictions, supplemented by money to cover transport costs and a free post-show drama workshop to support the visits. The scheme, which still runs, has introduced an estimated 30,000 school children to the magic of theatre since it began.

In 2002, Annie Wood was appointed as Polka's third Artistic Director. She was instrumental in injecting greater variety and flexibility into the programme: staging work in different spaces, for shorter or longer runs, in collaboration with other companies, from visiting UK and overseas companies, and for a wider age-range.

2007 saw the arrival of Polka's current Artistic Director, **Jonathan Lloyd** and the age range of the programme adjusted to 0-11 years. Since Jonathan's appointment Polka has had an ambitious and entertaining mix of new plays, adaptations and innovative work for Early Years audiences. Shows have included the premiere of Fevered Sleep's *Brilliant; Ghosts in the Gallery* by Paul Sirett, a collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery and *Charlie and Lola's Best Bestest Play* which toured nationally and to Sao Paulo in Brazil. Education projects have flourished, including Writing the World, a story-writing competition looking at what life is like for children in other countries and Freefalling, a youth theatre group for children in Merton at risk of exclusion.

Today, Polka Theatre continues to lead the way in producing innovative, high-quality and often daring theatre that remains relevant to a new generation of young audiences. The heart of our work is rooted at our Wimbledon home, which has now seen over 2,000,000 visitors in the 30 years since we opened our doors.

2009 sees the 30th birthday of the building itself, celebrating 30 years of being a local theatre with an international reputation. The company is also in the early stages of looking at the building's refurbishment, ensuring that we develop our vision of offering world-class theatre for children in an environment that is playful, stimulating and fun.

Marketing Objectives

Financial

Polka's annual turnover is approximately £1.6 million per annum.

In 2008/09 about £600,000 came from money taken at the box office for ticket sales.

£580,000 came from the Arts Council England, London's grant

The remaining £420,000 came from other earned income and fundraising from sources such as government/local authority funding (we receive regular grants from the London Councils and The London Borough of Merton); trusts and foundations; corporate sponsors/donors; individual members and donors.

The annual £600,000 box office target is broken down into a series of financial targets for each and every show at Polka. These targets are set by the Executive Director.

To help with setting the targets, we will judge how 'commercial' a particular show is likely to be, for example by looking at the popularity of previous shows which were similar, or if the play is an adaptation of a book how popular the author is. Using these guidelines, we judge an approximate percentage of tickets we feel we are likely to sell (ranging from about 45% for new plays for older children to about 90 – 95% for our work for under 5s). Then we work out an average 'ticket yield'. This is the average amount of money which will be spent on a ticket for this show. This depends on the ticket prices set, the balance between schools and public performances (schools tickets are cheaper), and the amount of discounted or free tickets we are planning to give. The average ticket yield multiplied by the amount of tickets we hope to sell forms the financial target for the production.

Sometimes the financial targets are very high and difficult to reach, as not all shows will be as successful as we hope they will be. Sometimes, though, a production will do much better than we hoped. Usually it balances out.

When planning our marketing strategies, the financial targets help us to set other types of targets. We can work out how many families and how many schools we need to sell tickets to in order to make enough money. This helps us to plan out our campaign to try to ensure that we are reaching the right number, and the right balance, of schools and families.

Social Objectives

In addition to our financial targets, we also aim to ensure that Polka Theatre welcomes theatre audiences and workshop participants from all sections of the community – all ethnicities, all income brackets, all levels of experience of the arts, and deaf or disabled people.

These 'social' objectives are important for three reasons:

Firstly, we feel strongly that theatre is an art form that can cross all boundaries of difference and should in no way be considered to be only for those 'in-the-know' - traditionally white, middle to high income people. Working with actors/writers/musicians/directors from diverse communities enriches our work greatly, and so does the diversity in our audience.

Secondly, it makes good commercial sense to appeal to the widest possible market. We need to sell lots of tickets, and the more people who feel welcomed into and attracted by Polka's work, the more potential customers we have.

Thirdly, many of our funders, especially government funders, make it a requirement that we actively work to reach out to all sections of society, and we have to prove that we are doing so in order to obtain our grants.

Just a note about ethnic diversity... We compare our statistics with those of the Borough of Merton, those of London, and those of the UK as a whole. We aim in the first instance to match the make-up of our local community, and ideally that of London, by far the most diverse city in the country. Largely we achieve this aim, though there is always room for improvement. Take a look at some of the statistics for Merton, London and the UK (you can find the Census online) – they might surprise you!

Education and Learning

This excerpt from our 2007-2012 plan, gives an overview of our education work at Polka.

3. Learning Programme

A creative programme of learning...

3.1 Introduction

Creative learning is central to Polka's mission. Our relationship with schools is crucial to our success, and we intend to be a partner and a resource for teachers and their students. But our education work extends beyond what we do in schools; it is a natural part of everything we do and as such is fun, exciting and entertaining. Our overall aims for learning in the next five years are to:

3.1.1 Offer opportunities for learning for every Polka show

Children have a natural curiosity, a hunger to find out more about the world, and Polka feeds this through our plays, our participatory clubs, our building and the extensive learning opportunities we create around every show.

3.1.2 Make Polka's education work more visible; to celebrate it

- Give children's own work a presence in our building: family learning and schools projects led by professional artists to produce high-quality work
- Dedicated Polka Learning display in a prominent position

3.1.3 Present children's views directly - to make their voices heard

- The Young Journalists scheme - invites children to feed into the rehearsal process and to write reviews and post them online
- Space in the artistic programme for the work of children to be on stage
- Children involved in the development of new work
- Consider opportunities for campaigning, in which children's voices are heard

3.1.4 Create closer links between children in London and children abroad

- 'Writing the World': Olympics-themed story-writing project from 2008-2012, connecting with children in other parts of the world, including China, India, Africa and South America.
- Workshops, exhibitions, family events and show-related resources linked to Polka plays that focus on other parts of the world

3.1.5 *Develop a digital learning strategy, to promote the website as a creative learning resource*

- Rehearsal diaries for every Polka show
- Free teachers' packs available online
- Lesson tips to follow up a visit
- Polka blogs, podcasts
- 360° virtual tour of the theatre; what to expect from your visit; meet the staff etc
- Student enquiry packs

3.2 Learning - Schools

3.2.1 *Align our offer to schools so that Polka is seen as a partner, a resource for teachers, a natural part of school life in London*

- Show-related workshops and resources for schools for every Polka production
- Every full-time member of staff to partner with a local school
- Dedicated schools print, including regular newsletter / Polka wallchart
- Teachers encouraged to participate in Polka workshops and skillshare with Polka's workshop leaders – to create legacy of teachers' increased confidence in using drama-based skills
- Polka workshops and teacher placements as part of Teacher Training courses
- 'Playhouse': teacher development and performance project for Year 6 pupils & their teachers
- 'Free for all' - scheme offering free tickets, subsidised transport and partnership programmes for disadvantaged schools
- Online resources (see above)
- Residencies in special schools and support for special schools visiting the theatre i.e. audio tapes, touch tours, pre-show visit in school
- Teachers Advisory panel, to offer support and advice to Polka staff

3.2.2 *Offer focused work experience opportunities*

- Unique work experience week twice a year for up to 15 local pupils
- Interactive world of work days for special schools

3.3 Learning - Families

3.3.1 *Develop extensive opportunities for family learning and give this equal status alongside our schools programme*

- Create a family learning project for every Polka production
- Affordable, fun and easy-to-book family events / open days / drop-in activities
- Encourage families to participate in Polka events through outreach events in community settings i.e. libraries, schools
- Research new post of Community Liaison Officer, to consult and make work with local families and family groups

3.4 Learning - Independently

3.4.1 *Provide extensive opportunities for children and young people to participate in projects, and expect the highest standards*

- Challenging and inspiring weekly after-school groups, holiday workshops and summer schools for 4 - 17 year-olds
- Opportunities to perform on Polka's stage; increase status and profile of these showcases

3.4.2 *Increase the diversity of our out-of-school clubs and summer schools*

- 'Freefalling': intensive summer project and weekly youth theatre for children age 10-13 at risk of exclusion, with support from Merton organisations, e.g. Youth Service, Turnaround Project
- Secure funding for 4 year-long scholarship places for each after-school group and holiday workshop, for children from low-income families.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is your mission/ethos?

Polka's mission is... 'to spark the imagination and fuel a sense of discovery in children from every background. We do this through thrilling world-class theatre and a creative programme of learning, in a welcoming and stimulating environment.'

Our artistic and education work defines us. It's the heart of who we are and what we do. Our work aims to be surprising and unexpected, but always to embody the same core values. A Polka experience tells a good story and is memorable by striving to be:

- **Resonant** – to provoke ideas, thoughts, questions about yourself and the world
- **Engaging** – to stir your emotions & spark your imagination
- **Fun, exciting & entertaining** – serious purpose, but a playful, light touch

2. What is children's theatre?

Children's theatre is impossible to pin down in a neat, tidy way. Obviously the term is used in the main to describe theatre which is aimed at and enjoyed by children (which isn't to say that adults can enjoy it too). Legally, 'children' means anyone under 18, but many people argue for more distinction between children and 'young people', by which they normally mean teenagers. But all that sounds pedantic and a bit dry. Yes, you have to think about how a child would engage with your material, and sometimes mind your language, but at heart, children's theatre at its best is much like *any* theatre at its best – it tells big stories that speak to the imagination, the head and the heart. It does it in ways that excite, provoke and entertain, and celebrates the fact that it's a live art. It certainly should never be a more simplistic, less ambitious, milder form of 'grown-up' theatre – that would be patronising and naïve.

3. What is the importance of children's theatre?

Children are hungry to know more – about themselves, and the world around them. Theatre is an exciting, magical way of asking questions that resonate for children in today's UK. They like and need to see stories with children in, stories that reflect back their own experiences and offer up new ones, as well as stories that feed their curiosity about how the world works (or doesn't). It's also important to be playful and have fun, to share a special experience with hundreds of other children.

4. What does the education department do?

Creative learning is at the heart of Polka's mission. Our relationship with schools is crucial to our success, and Polka intends to be a partner and a resource for teachers and their students. But our education work extends beyond what we do in schools, embracing family learning and children learning independently. It is a natural part of everything we do and as such is fun, exciting and entertaining. Polka's education department work on a wide range of projects, including show-related workshops, INSET sessions, a thriving youth theatre from ages 3 to 17; also the *Playhouse* project for Year Six students to perform in plays written by professional playwrights; the *Writing the World* project, inspiring children to write stories and learn more about what it's like to be a child in other countries; and *Freefalling*, working with children at risk of exclusion.

5. What is educational drama?

At Polka, we don't see our artistic and education programmes as separate; they are closely inter-woven. Too often, education departments do great work, but are cut off from the rest of a company's output, and invisible to other staff and audiences. The phrase 'educational drama' has a whiff of the 1980s about it and conjures up worthy, issue-based TIE plays that children endured but didn't enjoy. The best drama can educate by asking questions, in order to make children think for themselves. And it can do this while still exciting and entertaining, by putting on a show. Otherwise, you end up with what I call 'medicine theatre' – meant to be good for you, but hard to stomach.

Jonathan Lloyd
Artistic Director