



Annual Report 2022/2023

BIRDS OF PARADISE
THEATRE COMPANY



Introduction

This was an exciting and challenging year for Birds of Paradise Theatre Company (BOP) as the arts world began to settle into new ways of working following the many changes brought about by the pandemic. While we were delighted to return to in-person work and live performance, we also continued to develop our digital and hybrid work, allowing us to reach new audiences and partners across Scotland and around the world.

We returned with a bang to the live stage in October 2022 with **Don't. Make. Tea.**, a new dark comedy set in an imagined near future in which 'Accessible Britain' is rolling out a new benefits system. **Don't. Make. Tea.** is a new commission from critically acclaimed playwright Rob Drummond, directed by BOP's Artistic Director Robert Softley Gale. As part of the development process, Rob interviewed disabled people with lived experience of the benefits assessment system and BOP produced a newsnight style debate with Scottish Government MSPs, disability inclusion activists and the then Minister for Social Security in Scotland, no less!

Building on work over 2020 and 2021, we continued to explore the possibilities of film, digital and hybrid work. Our production **The Super Special Disability Roadshow** was reworked as a live experience integrating the original film, and toured Scotland and to the No Limits festival in Hong Kong, while **Don't. Make. Tea.** was made available for audiences to stream from home after the live run and once the digital version had been made accessible. In late 2022, the Executive Director Mairi Taylor travelled to Portugal to film **Orbits**, a new dance film set to launch in 2023. Finally, work continued on Locked World, an access-centred digital art space spearheaded by members of the BOP Young Artists development programme.

Throughout the year, BOP Young Artists continued to meet online and to develop new work across music, theatre, film and digital art. The 36-minute short film **Dollhouse**, developed by the BOP Young Artists digital cohort, completed filming. Meanwhile, BOP Young Artists III undertook a week-long residency with professional artists to create a multimedia mini album which will be released in 2024. Our new playwriting group, BOP Writers, offered a space for disabled writers of all levels to share, workshop and develop their writing for the stage.

Partnership work also remained a strong focus of our development projects. During this year we collaborated with Playwrights Studio Scotland on the Disabled Playwright Support Programme, with Summerhall on the Mary Dick Award, and with Biljli Productions on Bolster; between them, these projects supported five disabled artists to develop and mount new work.

Our work with the British Council in Central and South America for their DASH programme culminated in Robert and Mairi attending the 11th Encuentro Otros Territorios Disability Arts Festival in Mexico City in November 2023 to launch a new Accessibility Toolkit.

This was a year of diverse challenges for both the arts sector and the world, with deep political, environmental and economic questions at the centre of many conversations. Nevertheless, in this year BOP was able to explore new ways of working, return to live performance and events, and continue to build strong relationships with audiences, artists and organisations across Scotland and around the world.

Snapshots

In 2022/23 BOP...

Snapshot: BOP Theatre

Commissioned playwright Rob Drummond to write **Don't. Make. Tea.**, which premiered at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre in October 2022. Travelled to Portugal to make the new dance film **Orbits**. Toured The Super Special Disability Roadshow around Scotland and to the No Limits Festival in Hong Kong.

Snapshot: BOP Development

Continued to work with young and emerging disabled artists through the BOP Young Artists Programme. Commissioned the development of bespoke access-centred digital art space Locked World. Hosted six disabled playwrights in the BOP Writers Group. Supported the production One of Two at Fringe 2022 through the Mary Dick Award. Created space for the development of three new works by disabled artists of colour through Bolster. Supported playwrights through the Disabled Playwright Support Programme.

Snapshot: BOP Strategic

Resumed printed production of the Access Scottish Theatre guide after a pandemic-induced hiatus. Concluded the relaxed performance research project House Lights Up! Undertook larger consultation projects with organisations such as Scottish Ballet. Delivered Disability Equality Training to organisations across Scotland. Became an official Access Partner of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Worked with the British Council to deliver training and development work across Central and South America.

At a Glance

410 people attended our training sessions

8 new works developed

37 artists employed across creative, development and strategic work

4 disabled artists supported through tailored development programmes

10 live performances to 1640 audience members

4 film screenings to 100 audience members

6 countries worked in across three continents: Scotland, Portugal, Hong Kong, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela

BOP Theatre

Don't. Make. Tea.

Written by Rob Drummond
Directed by Robert Softley Gale

BOP commissioned Rob Drummond to write a play about the disability benefits system in the UK. **Don't. Make. Tea.** — another bloody serious comedy from BOP — marked the company's return to live theatre in October 2023. While researching this piece, Rob undertook interviews with disabled people with direct experience of being assessed by the UK system and knowledge of working within it, and heard from disability rights advocates at the Benefits Debate.

This is a piece I have been thinking about writing for a long time - since becoming aware of the inherent, often Kafkaesque, drama involved in undertaking a disability assessment in this country... I'm proud of what we've come up with - a dark comedy that doesn't claim to have all the answers but hopefully asks a lot of the right questions, in a way that aims to heal political divides rather than exacerbate them.

Rob Drummond, playwright.

Creative access was part of **Don't. Make. Tea.** from the outset. As part of the commissioning process, Rob was tasked to think about how access to the play for BSL users and people with sight and hearing impairments could be written into the script itself.

"There will never be a performance that is totally accessible to everyone, but **Don't. Make. Tea.** gets pretty damn close."

Bel Pye, Disability Arts Online



Don't. Make. Tea. was presented at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre from 4–10 October 2022 and seen by **548** people. In response to the ongoing challenges presented by COVID-19, the run included a masked performance and the production was made available to stream online.

"It's hard to think of a production that has realised this level of integration so sublimely and acts as a challenge to the industry for future productions to follow."

Olivia Fischer, The Student



"laugh-out-loud comedy, psychological thriller, and deep conversation on the disabled experience of the state"

WJQuinn, The Quintessential Review



"Well-portrayed characters who delivered a slick satire of the benefits system that twists & penalises the vulnerable. I thought it would be glum but it was shockingly hilarious."

Audience member

"Loved @BOPTheatre's Don't Make Tea! Fantastic script, great direction, brilliant performances and horribly plausible design choices. Unflinchingly dystopian but funny as hell. Tour it, publish it, film it, it deserves a wide audience."

Audience member

DMT Debate

On Friday 29th April 2022, we produced a live in-person and streamed debate event that explored disabled people's experience of the benefits system to date and the wider systems and attitudes that society constructs to support disabled people. The Adult Disability Payment was introduced in Scotland in 2022, making it an ideal time to hold these conversations. This debate was presented as a hybrid event to include people still shielding, including speaker Dr Sally Witcher.

[Find out more about the Don't. Make. Tea. Benefits Debate.](#)

BREW: Crafting Responses to the Disability Benefits System

Textile artist Zephyr Liddell was commissioned as an Associate Artist to respond to the themes of **Don't. Make. Tea.** In the weeks following the production, participants were invited to contribute to the creation of a new poetry anthology and collaborative textile work using repurposed benefit application forms and dyes made of spilt tea.

[Find out more about Don't. Make. Tea.](#)

Orbits

Director: Rachel Drazek

Dancer: Diana Niepce

Filmmaker: Hugo Glendinning

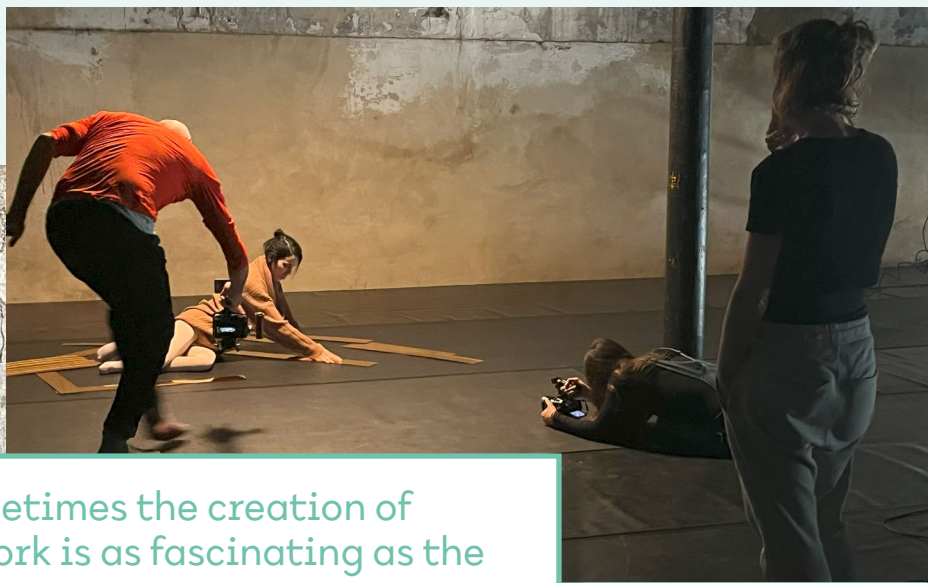
Composer: Scott Twynholm

Dedicated to Pete Edwards,
1963 - 2022

Orbits is a new film work presented by Birds of Paradise Theatre Company and featuring Portuguese dancer Diana Niepce. The project began in 2021 with seed funding from the Genesis Foundation and was envisaged as a duet between Diana and Pete Edwards (BOP past collaborator, Purposeless Movements, 2016) to be filmed in London in September 2022 (after rescheduling from December 2021 when the Omicron variant of COVID-19 forced us to shut down production).

In 2022, Pete very sadly passed away and we lost a dear friend and a brilliant artist. The creative team met in London when filming had been due to take place—this was the first time Robert, Mairi, Rachel, Diana and Hugo had met in person. Over two days, they determined that the work would be continued in Pete's memory and filming took place in December in Lisbon. This was never the plan; we had initially set off in a different direction. And yet, **we live, love and lose in all sorts of ways concurrently as we create.**

[Find out more about Orbits.](#)



"Sometimes the creation of artwork is as fascinating as the artwork itself."

SNACK magazine



The Super Special Disability Roadshow - Live!

Written by Robert Softley Gale

Film directed by Joe Douglas, live show directed by Robert Softley Gale

Original songs by Sally Clay

Commissioned by Imagine for the 2021 Edinburgh International Children's Festival

The Super Special Disability Roadshow takes audiences on a global tour to find out why disability equality is still lightyears away. In this funny and engaging show, an intergalactic visitor needs to report back home to explain the Earth phenomenon 'disability'.

The Super Special Disability Roadshow is BOP's first hybrid production, available as both a live show and a film. It was originally commissioned and developed in 2021 for the Edinburgh International Children's Festival, and has since gone on to productions around the UK and internationally. The production was seen by **1156** people this year.

Lanternhouse at Cumbernauld Theatre – Thursday 9th March 2023

The Lemon Tree, Aberdeen – Friday 10th March 2023

No Limits Festival, Hong Kong – Friday 17th, Saturday 18th, Sunday 19th March 2023

"I've just watched #SSDR and I really can't recommend it highly enough, for both adults and children. The show grapples with some of the most difficult questions around disability in a completely upfront way, while still being hugely entertaining, funny and very moving. Massive congrats to @BOPTheatre, Urbancroft Films and @ImagineUK for making this show. I really implore you to watch it."

Audience member

"... a collision of memories, bickering, songs, animations, jokes and serious commentary."

Mark Fisher, The Guardian

★★★★

"The Super Special indeed!! First show of the tour, and it is really worth going to! If you are interested in understanding more about disability, especially if you have children, truly educational."

Audience member

"Smart, funny and nuanced online show exploring lived experiences of disability"

Thom Dibdin, The Stage

★★★★

[Find out more about The Super Special Disability Roadshow.](#)

BOP Development

BOP Young Artists

BOP's bespoke artist development programme for disabled creatives aged 16–30 continued to expand and deepen opportunities for support and growth. BOP Young Artists is for disabled creatives who have faced barriers to engaging in other opportunities to develop their creative practice.

This year: Andrew Robertson from BOP Young Artists Pilot Cohort had the incredible opportunity to perform his solo hybrid dance piece Glitch in the System at Indepen-Dance international dance festival Gathered Together (October 2022).

BOP Young Artists (Digital) Cohort took part in a screenwriting project- creating a 36-minute original screenplay called Dollhouse. The short film was co-written by Karis Williamson, Joanna Shand, Gavin Yule, Bo Hogan and Lewis Teckkam, with dramaturgical support from Morna McGeoch. BOP then produced the short film, giving the artists invaluable experience in taking work from the concept and first draft stages through to design, casting and production. Dollhouse is now in post-production with film-maker/ editor Bartosz Madejski and producer/director Morna McGeoch.



BOP Young Artists III undertook a week-long residency to create their multimedia mini album with singer/song-writer Nicole Cassandra-Smit, movement artist Aya Kobayashi and film-maker Monika Smekot. The group learned a great deal about themselves and each other, as well as learning about music-making and film-making. The album is now in post-production with the members of the cohort taking an active role in video editing and captioning, and will be released next year.



[Find out more about BOP Young Artists.](#)

Locked World

BOPs pioneering disability-centred digital arts platform Locked World entered the creation phase this year. Partner agency Design and Code delivered several phases as part of the development and build:

- Rigorous research and coding experiments in many areas of accessible web design to ensure that Locked World can be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.
- Interviews with disabled web users to identify barriers based on current lived experience.
- Completing the design of the site in response to their findings as well as the original brief set out by BOP Young Artists.

“Everything works great with using a screen reader and the alt text is fantastic!”
User feedback for Locked World research

Locked World is now being fully custom coded for launch in late 2023.

BOP Writers

BOP Writers is a space where disabled playwrights can come together to share their work with a supportive group of like-minded individuals. The sessions are facilitated by autistic playwright Nelly Kelly. The project began in 2022 as a single group of six writers who met once a fortnight over a period of eight weeks, with sessions taking place online.

Moving forward, BOP Writers will expand to include in-person groups and spaces for playwrights with different levels of experience.

[Find out more about BOP Writers.](#)

“Really nice to have a community of people to talk and exchange new work with.”

BOP Writers Participant

“I learned a lot from writers who were further along than me.”

BOP Writers Participant

“Performing and hearing other people's scripts helped me with my confidence.”

BOP Writers Participant

Mary Dick Award

The Mary Dick Award is an annual opportunity for a disabled artist or disabled-led arts collective to present their work as part of [Summerhall's Edinburgh Fringe Festival](#) programme.

The 2022 winner was One of Two, a Jack Hunter production in association with Birds of Paradise, supported by Queen Margaret University. A true tale of twins growing up with cerebral palsy, One of Two is “full of heart and a half empty bag of Weetos.”

One of Two was presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival from 3 to 28 August 2022. The show was shortlisted for Best Scottish Theatre Production at the Scottish Theatre Awards.

Jack previously worked with BOP on the 2018 film [You've Got to be Ballsy: Stories from the Front Line of Cerebral Palsy](#) and as an inaugural Youth Arts Consultant. One of Two is his debut production.

“...a captivating and funny look at the different experiences of disability from an engaging performer.”

Natalie O'Donoghue, Broadway World

★★★★

“I regard his performance as nothing short of masterful.”

Ella Catherall, Neurodiverse Review

★★★★

[Find out more about the Mary Dick Award.](#)

Bolster

Bolster was a creative development opportunity from Birds of Paradise (BOP) and [Bijli Productions](#) that offered artists identifying as disabled and as a person of colour or from a mixed heritage the chance to develop or continue working on a creative idea.

Early Stage

Artist: Myla Corvidae

Project: Living With All of Me

Artistic responses to living with Dissociative Identity Disorder and ADHD.

Artist: Yoonett

Project: Überlebenskünstlerin – Artist of Survival

A play exploring international adoption, mental health and suicide from the perspective of a Korean Overseas Adoptee.

Continuing Development

Artist: Hannah Yahya Hassan

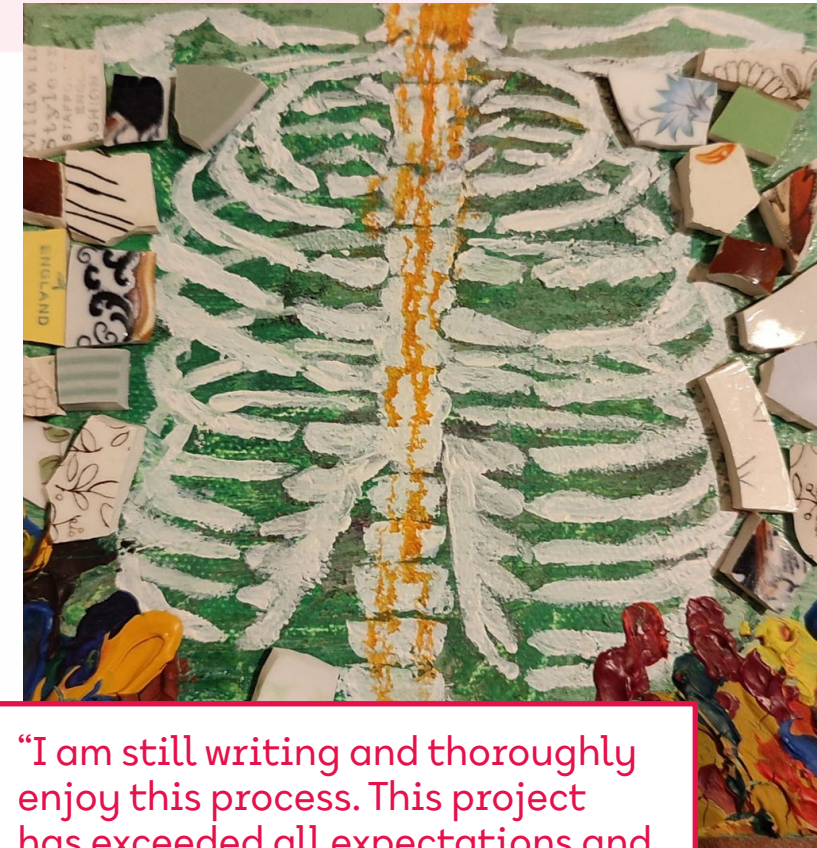
Project: How to Ride a Bike (and Other Things Baba Taught Me)

A play exploring and celebrating neurodiversity in Arab/Muslim cultures through a father–daughter relationship.

[Find out more about Bolster.](#)

“The fear of faltering is something everyone is familiar with in some way or another and having the Bolster grant has given me the space to face that fear and develop this piece of work I set out to do.”

Myla Corvidae



“I am still writing and thoroughly enjoy this process. This project has exceeded all expectations and extends far and beyond.”

Yoonett

BOP & Playwrights Studio Scotland Mentoring Award

We teamed up with Playwrights' Studio Scotland to deliver our annual Disabled Playwright Support Programme. The selected writer was Bel Pye. As part of the opportunity they received a £2000 cash bursary, skills workshops and community building opportunities. Additionally, they received one-to-one mentoring sessions with professional playwright Uma Nada-Rajah.

[Find out more about the Disabled Playwright Support Programme.](#)

BOP Strategic

Access Scottish Theatre

Produced by BOP, on behalf of Federation of Scottish Theatre, funded by Creative Scotland.

After a period of redirected focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, live performance was back and so was the Access Scottish Theatre guide. Access provision listings continued to be available on the website, social media, and via a monthly e-bulletin and a biannual printed guide sent to venues and distribution points around the country.

In this year, there were:

146 BSL-interpreted

107 captioned

141 audio-described

35 relaxed performances across Scotland.

[Find out more about Access Scottish Theatre.](#)

House Lights Up!

Produced by BOP, on behalf of Federation of Scottish Theatre, funded by Creative Scotland.

House Lights Up! was a research project investigating the provision of relaxed performances in Scotland from both industry and neurodivergent/learning-disabled audience perspectives. During this year, neurodivergent researchers and artists Aby Watson, Thom Scullion and Zoe Halliday focussed on writing up the finished report for publication in May 2023.

“It’s very difficult to put your hand up and say, ‘I need this entire event to change because of me’... I can’t count the amount of times I’ve sat in a room, not daring to say ‘This is way too loud’. I can’t because I’m too self-conscious.”

House Lights Up! research participant

[Find out more about House Lights Up!](#)

Training and Consultation

In this year, BOP continued to develop its training and consultation work. This work has grown into a significant source of unrestricted income that supports the Theatre and Development strands of our work. All training and consultation work is delivered by a combination of BOP core team and Youth Arts Consultants, depending on the aims of the training partners. In this year, Anna Richardson was appointed as Training Coordinator to manage demand and organise the company's core training work.

Across the year, 410 individuals were trained across 24 Disability Equality Training sessions that were tailored to the focus and needs of clients—from front-of-house skills to access tools and procedures. Access audits were also undertaken for clients such as the Edinburgh International Festival, and our ongoing training and consultation work with Edinburgh Festival Fringe was developed into a formal partner agreement.

Larger consultation projects during this period included Scottish Ballet and Prism Arts in Carlisle, with whom we supported organisational development and equality action planning.

[Find out more about BOP’s training and consultation work.](#)

“One of the outcomes, with a wider impact, was that we initiated a national arts companies access group, meeting every two months to identify shared issues, experiences, contacts and ways forward. Our work with BOP was pivotal in galvanising action across the company and in engaging with others as we work towards improving access for all.”
Scottish Ballet

“We have really enjoyed working with BOP staff and we are also delighted with the final documents which have now been approved by our board of trustees. It was really important to the process to be able to work with a company with similar aims and priorities to ours, and who fully understood our organisation therefore (and when to challenge us too!).”
Prism Arts

International Work

In this year, BOP concluded a significant body of work with the British Council in Central and South America as part of DASH (Disability Arts Showcase Network for the Americas).

This involved BOP delivering a variety of online training and development workshops across:

Mexico
Peru
Venezuela.



Overall, we delivered **26** sessions attended by over **100** individuals made up of arts, policy and education workers, and disabled and non-disabled artists and theatre makers.

BOP also curated and facilitated a programme of digital work in Mexico, and then attended the 11th Encuentro Otros Territorios in person in Mexico City in November 2023 to launch a new Accessibility Toolkit written for the British Council and DASH network. Following this visit, we worked with festival organisers and DASH partners Teatro Ciego on a collaborative project which was shortlisted for an Unlimited International Award.

“I acquired fundamental knowledge and tools to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in artistic spaces.”

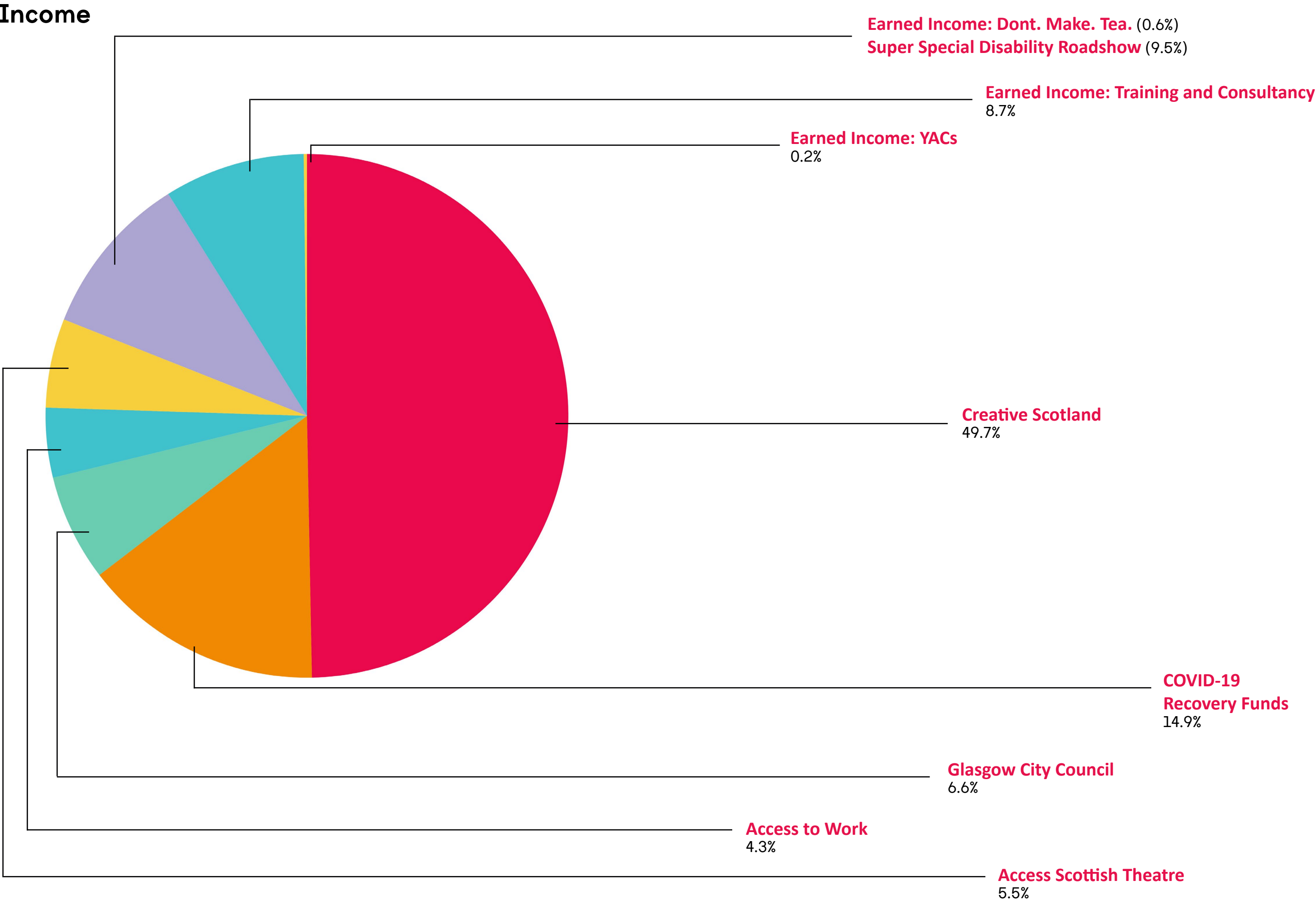
Rebeca Estefano, training participant, Venezuela

“BOP make learning about disability and accessibility dynamic and enriching because they deliver a solid framework of theory combined with outstanding creative examples of how accessibility can enrich the experience of disabled and non-disabled audience.”

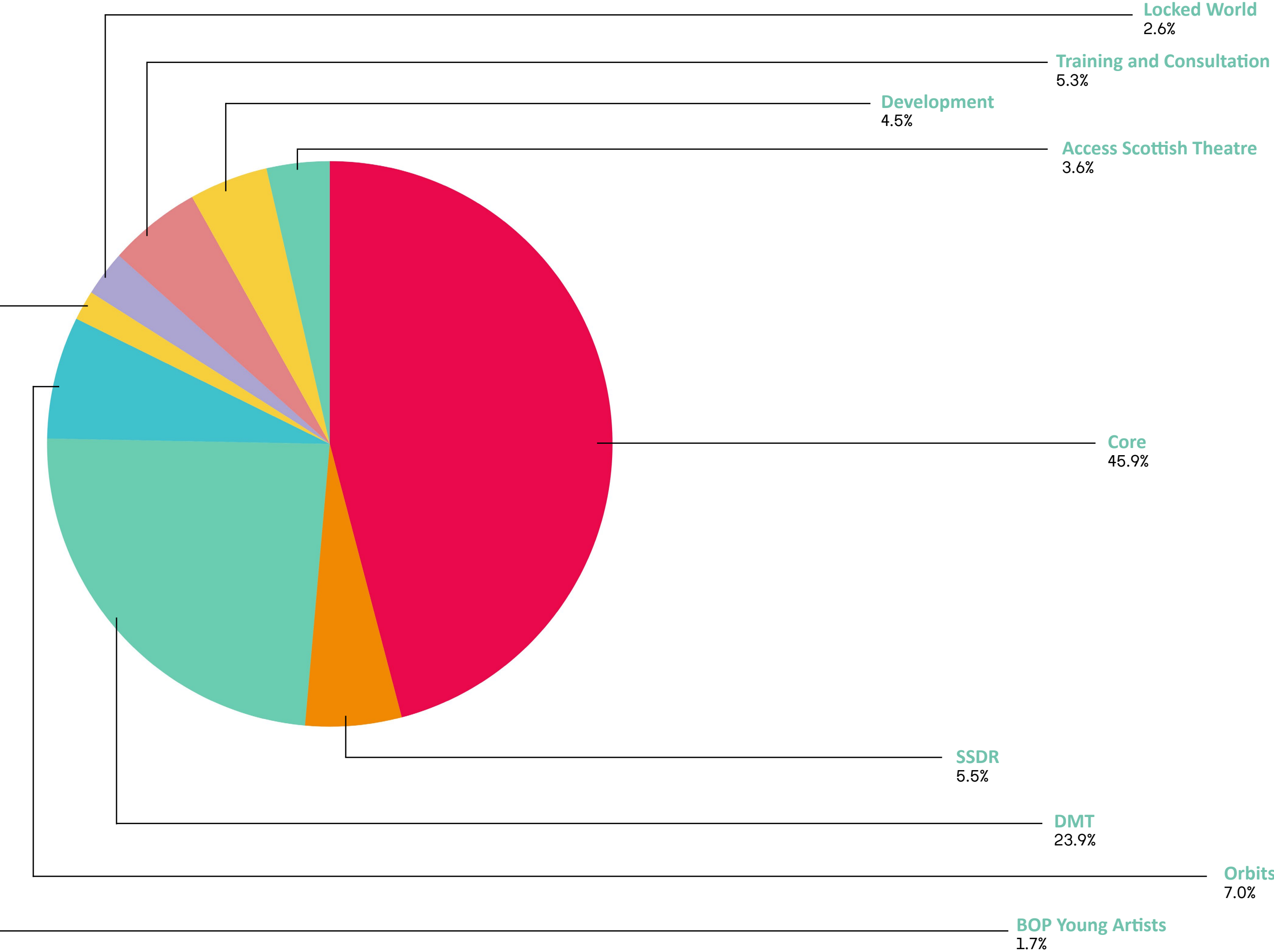
Lucy Ralph, British Council, Peru



BOP: the Numbers



Expenditure



Staff 2022/23

Robert Softley Gale: CEO & Artistic Director
Mairi Taylor: Executive Director
Michelle Rolfe: Producer
Callum Madge: Engagement Manager
Morna McGeoch: Development Manager
Anna Richardson: Training Coordinator

Board 2022/23

Miles Harrison (Chair)
Jai Hutchison (Vice Chair)
Wezi Mhura (Treasurer)
Amy Conachan
Jack Hunter
Dr Andrew Henry
Janet Tam
Sarah Marie Mooney
Nic Reid

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Espaço Alcantara
Traverse Theatre
Green Arts Initiative
Access Scottish Theatre
Federation of Scottish Theatre
Fringe

Sanctuary Queer Arts
PiPA
Imagine
Urbancroft Films
Fine Day
Bijli Productions
Playwrights Studio Scotland
Summerhall
The Scottish Ballet
Prism Arts
Indepen-Dance

