



BIRDS OF PARADISE
THEATRE COMPANY



Annual Report
2023/2024

Introduction

This was a busy and undeniably challenging year for the company, and for the Scottish arts sector, as we operated within the landscape of an ongoing funding crisis and deep uncertainty about the years to come. Nevertheless, BOP was able to mark the start of its 30th anniversary year by maximising what we could deliver: a national tour, a new digital arts platform, and several festival appearances amongst our ongoing programme of strategic, international and artist development work.

Ahead of our 30th anniversary in Spring 2024, we took the dark comedy **Don't. Make. Tea.** on a UK national tour. We played to over two thousand people, were nominated for two Offie awards and received so many four- and five-star reviews we had trouble fitting them all on the posters.

BOP was an early arrival to the digital world, but this strand of our performance work kicked into high gear over lockdown and hasn't stopped since. Our hybrid production **The Super Special Disability Roadshow** travelled to Suffolk, England for the Latitude Festival, where it sat alongside big names such as George Ezra and Pulp. Meanwhile, the dance film **Orbits**, an international collaboration featuring Portuguese dancer Diana Niepce, was presented at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery and London's Liberty Festival. Finally, our custom-built accessible digital arts platform Locked World launched in November 2023 with three brand-new commissioned works; three more were added in February, and there are more releases and commissions planned for 2024.

BOP's development work provided opportunities for disabled artists across a range of ages and experience levels. BOP Youth Arts Online facilitated online arts sessions for 13 – 18-year-olds; meanwhile, three BOP Young Artists collaborated with SusTrans Scotland on the project Shapechangers. The BOP Writers group for emerging playwrights showcased work across a two-night event in which 12 new short plays were presented to an industry audience at the CCA in Glasgow. We also collaborated with Playwrights' Studio Scotland on the Disabled Playwright Support Programme and with Summerhall on the Mary Dick Award; these projects supported disabled artists to develop and mount new work. In parallel, our strategic work in training and consultation, advocacy, and the promotion of accessible performance supported disabled audiences and the sector staff who welcome them.

As a Creative Scotland Regularly Funded Organisation, we committed a significant part of this year to applying for a further three years of funding which involved developing our new business plan in consultation with staff, board and stakeholders. In April 2024 we successfully secured an Unlimited International Award for work in Nepal later in 2024, and we were also invited to make a full application to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for an exciting multi-year sector development project. As the year drew to a close, we were primed for the challenges and excitement of 2024/2025 with a robust strategic outlook for the next 30 years of BOP.

Snapshot:

In 2023/24 BOP...

Snapshot: BOP Theatre

- Toured the dark comedy **Don't. Make. Tea.** around the UK.
- Presented the Scottish–Portuguese dance film **Orbits** in Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery and at the Liberty Festival in Croydon.
- Took the hybrid production **The Super Special Disability Roadshow** to the 17th Latitude Festival in Suffolk.

Snapshot: BOP Development

- Launched Locked World, a new access-centred digital arts platform holding six new commissioned works to date.
- In collaboration with Playwrights Studio Scotland, presented a showcase of 12 new plays by emerging disabled playwrights.
- Supported the production **A Spectacle of Herself** at Fringe 2023 through the Mary Dick Award. Supported the development of new work through the Disabled Playwright Support Programme.

Snapshot: BOP Strategic

- Launched **House Lights Up!** in partnership with Federation of Scottish Theatre.
- Access Scottish Theatre promoted accessible performances across Scotland via print, website and monthly emails.
- Training and consultation work continued remotely and in person across Scotland, UK and as far as Bangladesh.
- Robert visited China to promote BOP's work and disability equality in the arts.

At a Glance: 2023/2024

489 people attended our training sessions

1 new play commissioned

17 artists supported through long-term development programmes

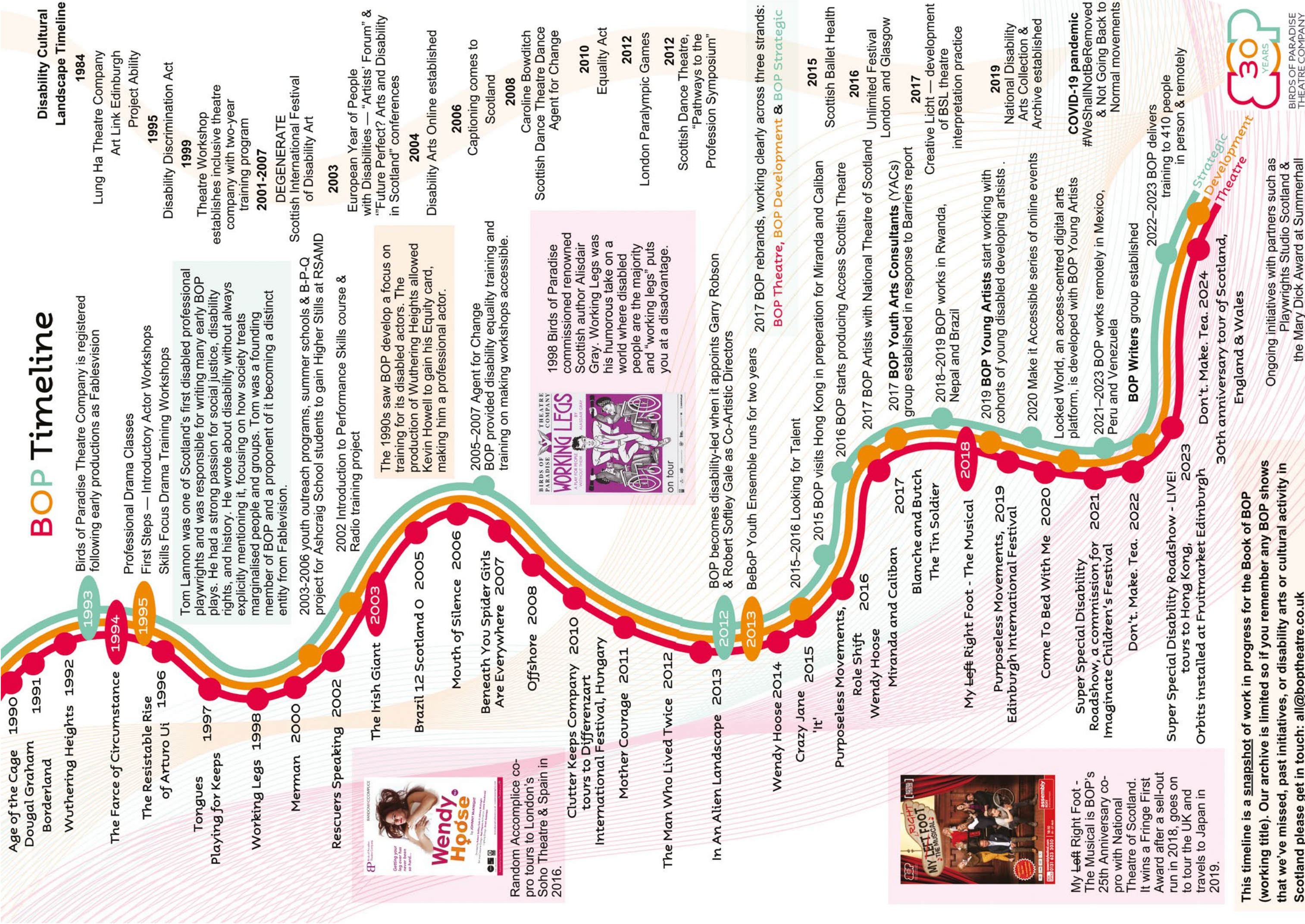
23 live performances reaching 2285 audience members

10 film screenings reaching 987 audience members

6 other arts and disability focused events

47% of our work was in Scotland, 45% was elsewhere in the UK, and 8% was online or international

BOP Timeline



This timeline is a snapshot of work in progress for the Book of BOP (working title). Our archive is limited so if you remember any BOP shows that we've missed, past initiatives, or disability arts or cultural activity in Scotland please get in touch: all@boptheatre.co.uk

BOP Theatre

Don't. Make. Tea.

Writer: Rob Drummond

Director: Robert Softley Gale

Don't. Make. Tea. is a dark comedy by award-winning playwright Rob Drummond. A witty ridiculing of the welfare state, the show explores a near-future benefits regime through the assessment of Chris as she is forced to claim benefits within 'Accessible Britain'. With bitingly satirical dialogue and cutting-edge accessible staging interwoven throughout the show, **Don't. Make. Tea.** confronts the lengths disabled people must go to in order to preserve themselves in an unjust system.



To celebrate BOP's 30th anniversary, **Don't. Make. Tea.**, which was originally developed and staged in October 2022, was remounted for touring in Spring 2024 for the company's first UK tour since **Wendy Hoose** in 2016. The production was supported by Assistant Producer Anne Kjaer, a role funded by a Federation of Scottish Theatre bursary.

"...excellently satirical, ridiculous and genuinely funny..."

Jasmine P, A Young(ish) Perspective

★★★★★

Despite the economic challenges of mounting a UK-wide tour, over two thousand people saw the show over twenty performances from London to Ayr. The show was well-received by reviewers and audiences alike, and scooped up Offie nominations for Best Access and Best New Play.

"@BOPTheatre already set a high bar for wickedly funny theatre that hits you in the gut and I think they've raised it with this. So glad I booked."

Audience member

20 performances

6 venues

2051 audience members

2 award nominations

"Go see this. It's effing BRILLIANT."

Audience member

★★★★★

NorthWest End, thespyintheatalls, Adventures in Theatreland, A Youngish Perspective, Ryan Lenney, Lisa in the Theatre



★★★★★

Corr Blimey, Reviews Hub, Curtain Call Reviews, Broadway World, Lou Reviews, Everything Theatre, Operation Live Theatre, Rev Stan, Broadway World, RatedReviewed

Disability Benefits in the UK — What's the Answer?

Alongside the **Don't. Make. Tea.** tour, BOP hosted two discussion events titled "**Disability benefits in the UK — a serious response to a dark comedy**". The first event was held in London and the second was a national online conversation.

Participants from across arts, social care, disability rights and activism were invited to discuss the difficult questions: How do we, as a society, support disabled people? Why do we have a benefits system and what can we do to make it better? Is it just about money?

"Young people need to know what has come before them if only to know what not to let go of!"

Participant

Supported by Graeae Theatre Company, CRIptic Arts, Tourettes Hero, Disability Benefits Consortium and Disabled People Against Cuts, BOP hosted these events to ask big questions that have no simple answers. With key provocations from Jess Thom, Dr Sally Witcher and Ellen Clifford of Disabled People Against Cuts, we held space for discussion, allegiance building and action planning.

"We inspire and motivate you, but then you call us scroungers"

Participant

While in Wales (supported by Arts Council Wales) BOP collaborated with Ramps Cymru to hold a sector engagement event at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff.

4 events

4 venues

310 participants

Orbits

Director: Rachel Drazek
Dancer: Diana Niepce
Filmmaker: Hugo Glendinning
Composer: Scott Twynholm
Co-collaborator: Mairi Taylor

Dedicated to Pete Edwards,
1963–2022

Orbits is a new film work featuring Portuguese dancer Diana Niepce and presented by Birds of Paradise Theatre Company. The project began as a collaboration between the artists in early 2021 and was filmed by Hugo Glendinning in Lisbon, December 2022. **Orbits** is a film about how we feel and what we experience when we lose something we have been in orbit or relationship with. **Orbits** was presented over two installation periods in 2023. The installed film was played on a loop with no text or spoken word, accompanied by an immersive original soundtrack by Scott Tywnholm. The **Orbits** album is an electronic instrumental suite in seven movements of textural experiments, incorporating slowly shifting tape loops and a palette of piano and electronics.

Two additional events were held alongside the opening at the Fruitmarket Gallery: a creative access event during which artist Juliana Capes was commissioned to perform a creative audio descriptive response to the film — which was also captioned and sign language interpreted — and a movement workshop for anyone interested in exploring the themes within the film **Orbits** — ageing, materiality, relationality. As a non-narrative, non-scripted work, creative access for **Orbits** is unique to the work and less straightforward to navigate than with BOP’s stage plays.



“Film installation that is a seductive meditation on something indefinable but still powerful”
The List ★★★★★

Installations

Liberty Festival 2023, Croydon
(1–3 September 2023)

- 3 exhibitions
- 235 audience
- Approximately 25% of the total audience identified as deaf, disabled and/or neurodivergent

Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
(28 April–5 May 2023)

- 7 exhibitions
- 752 audience
- 1 creative access interpretation event
- 1 movement workshop

The Super Special Disability Roadshow

Writer: Robert Softley Gale
Director (film): Joe Douglas
Director (live): Robert Softley Gale
Original songs: Sally Clay
Commissioned by Imagine for the 2021 Edinburgh International Children’s Festival



The Super Special Disability Roadshow is BOP’s first hybrid production, available as both a live show and a film. It was originally commissioned in 2021 for the Edinburgh International Children’s Festival, and has since been reimagined into a hybrid format and presented around the UK and internationally. In July 2023, **The Super Special Disability Roadshow** travelled to England for two shows at Latitude Festival — where it was programmed alongside such household names as George Ezra, Paolo Nutini and Romesh Ranganathan!



The original film version of **The Super Special Disability Roadshow** jetted off to China in April 2023 and was presented at the Spring Disability Arts Screening Season. This was a large hybrid event which included a Q&A with Robert and Michelle after the showing.

“... a collision of memories, bickering, songs, animations, jokes and serious commentary.”
Mark Fisher, The Guardian ★★★★★

“...distinctive comedic take on society’s attitudes towards disability, using humour to bring important conversations into the limelight...”
Edinburgh Magazine

Latitude

- 2 performances
- 204 audience

Spring Disability Arts Screening Season

- Live and Hybrid event
- 2,535 people engaged with the show



New work from the BOP Writers programme presented as a rehearsed reading.

BOP Writers

BOP Writers is a collection of spaces - virtual and not - where disabled playwrights can come together to share and develop their work with a supportive group of like-minded individuals. The sessions are facilitated by [autistic playwright Nelly Kelly](#). The 2023 BOP Writers Showcase, produced by Birds of Paradise Theatre Company in partnership with [Playwrights' Studio Scotland](#), presented new writing from 12 emerging disabled playwrights who had participated in the BOP Writers programme throughout 2023. The works were presented as rehearsed readings directed by Robert Softley Gale, Emily Ingram and Caitlin Skinner.

"He enjoyed sharing things he is interested in with others and to talking to them...It felt safe"

(parent of a participant)

[Click here to learn more about the BOP Writers and read their scripts.](#)

BOP Young Artists

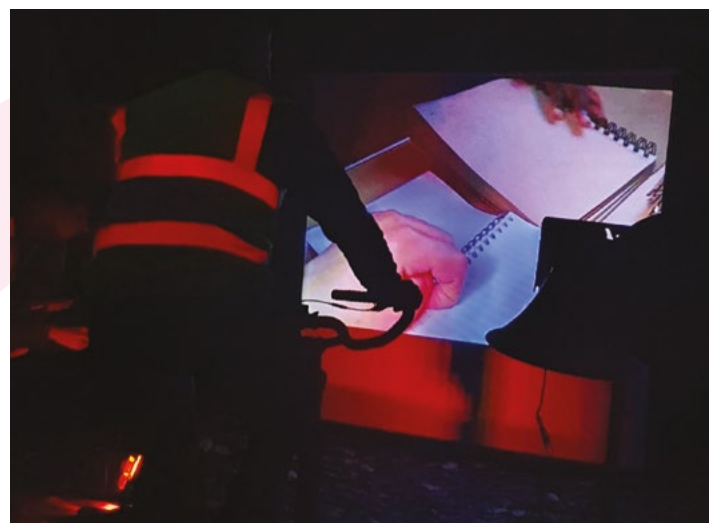
Youth Arts Online

In July 2023 we piloted BOP Youth Arts Online, led by artists Ink Asher Hemp and Mal Fraser. The young people involved really enjoyed these online arts workshops, and we plan to run this as a summer project again in future.

BOP Development

ShapeChangers

In collaboration with SusTrans Scotland, three disabled young artists were commissioned to create an exciting public artwork on the National Cycle Network. Melissa Cassidy, Lloyd Darko and Cleopatra Gabriel were supported by theatre-maker Ink Asher Hemp to create an outdoor performance exploring stories of community change and envisioning what the future might look like. The outdoor performance was filmed by film-maker Mal Fraser, and was then screened on the National Cycle Network via a bicycle-powered cinema!



An audience member operates our bicycle-powered pop-up cinema during a screening of Shapechangers film 'People are Hope'

"This project made me realise how confident I am when I feel like I'm in a space that accepts me. I've always wanted to create and perform but a lot of mainstream creative spaces are just too competitive and inaccessible so this opened my eyes to what is possible for me. It's also reignited my passion for creativity and the arts."

(artist)



BOP Young Artists Melissa, Cleo and Lloyd sitting in the outdoor set of Shapechangers.

BOP and Playwrights' Studio Mentoring Award

We teamed up with Playwrights' Studio Scotland to deliver our annual Disabled Playwright Support Programme. The selected writer was Sarah Farrell. As part of the opportunity she received a cash bursary, skills workshops and community building opportunities. Additionally, she received one-to-one mentoring sessions with professional playwright Clare Duffy.

[Click here to find out more about the Disabled Playwright Support Programme.](#)

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.

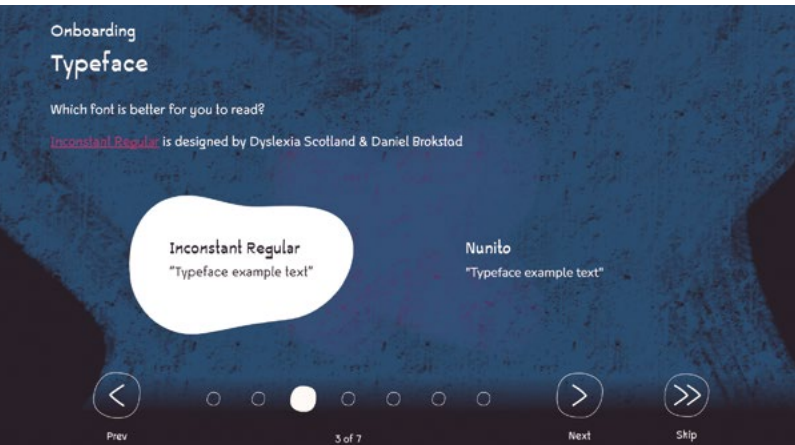
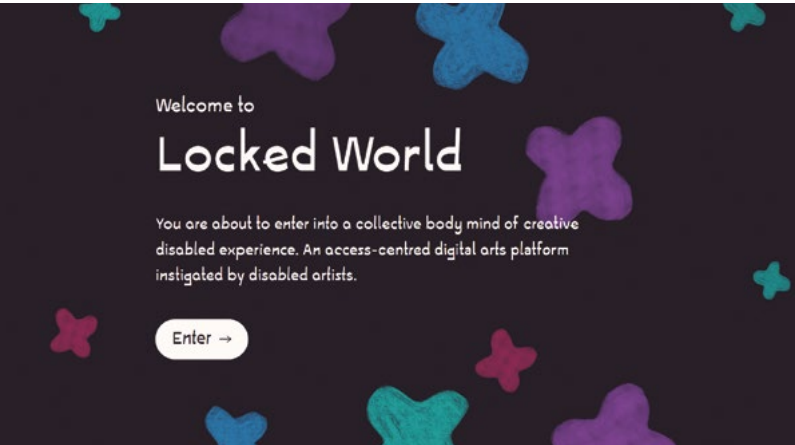
The 2023 winner was Laura Murphy's **A Spectacle of Herself**, "a bold, cinematic, acrobatic odyssey through the frontiers of mental health, queerness, rage and the 21st Century space race." **A Spectacle of Herself** was presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival from 2 to 13 August 2023 by Contra Productions, and has since toured around the UK and Europe.

[Click here to find out more about the Mary Dick Award.](#)

Locked World

In November 2023, we launched our disability-centred digital arts platform Locked World with an online event at which commissioned artists Sandra Alland, Rylan Gleave and Georgia Holman each shared reflections on the experiences of making their artworks.

Locked World Part 2 was released in February 2024, with artworks from Emily Beaney, E Ingram and Andrew Robertson. The artists spoke about their experiences of making work for the website at an online release event: "...It's created as a 'no, thank you' to the pressures that are particularly put on women and AFAB individuals to perform disability prettily..." - E Ingram



A collective online bodymind of creative disabled experience, the different elements of Locked World exist in relation to different parts of a collective online brain. This concept blurs the line between the medical/scientific explanation and the embodied lived experience of disability.

Locked World is unique in its ability to hold and deliver accessible experiences to all users. The first encounter with Locked World is an 'Onboarding Experience', where you are welcomed and introduced to how the webspace works before you enter. This experience exists in BSL, audio, and large captions.

Each user is then invited to engage with the 'Access Panel', which asks you to choose what font is easiest for you to read, whether you wish to activate additional BSL content and more.

[Click here to visit Locked World.](#)

"I found the whole experience really calming, to be honest. I liked how it was very tailored to the individual, how you can turn the music on and off. Also liked the intro at the start for people who might not understand how it works. Really easy to follow, which is really good. Overall a very relaxing sensory experience."

(feedback on Locked World)

"Everything works great with using a screen reader and the alt text is fantastic!"

(feedback on Locked World)

"This is the homepage. It shows a cross-section of the human brain in a graphic style...Scattered around the brain, there's a number of buttons which link to either artworks or other spaces in Locked World, like the library..."

excerpt from the human-read audio description for Locked World homepage.

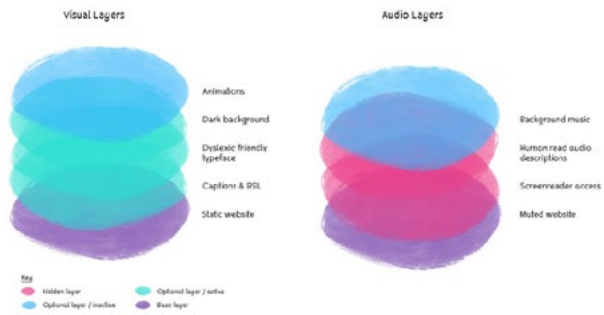
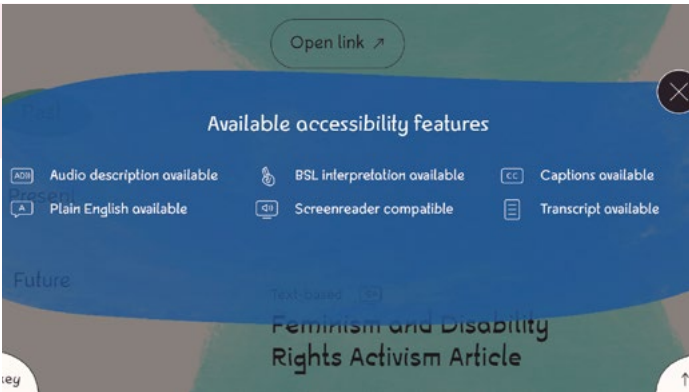
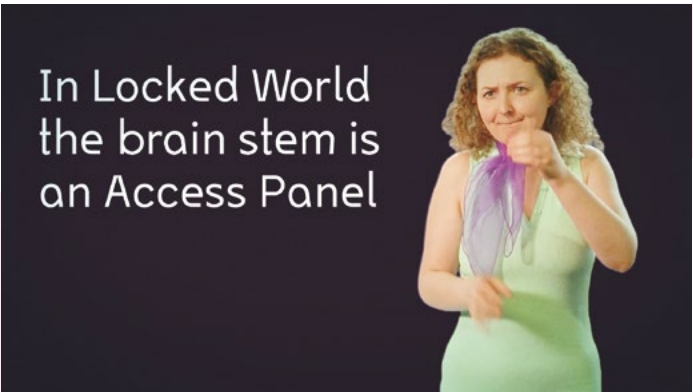
Current artworks include:

- Contextualisation (BOP Young Artists Pilot Cohort)
- Writing from the Groin (Sandra Alland)
- untitled autism manual (Rylan Gleave)
- I want it for us, and I also want it from us (Georgia Holman)
- The Body as it is Lived (Emily Beaney)
- [this is not] a piece about my disability (E Ingram)
- Glitch in the System (Andrew Robertson)

Other areas to explore:

- Library
- Creative Response
- Sensory Space
- Access Panel
- Events

More artworks will be added in Summer and Autumn 2024.



Layering of visual and audio elements on Locked World

- 7 artworks
- 40+ disabled creatives
- visited by audience in 30 countries

Access Scottish Theatre

Access Scottish Theatre is a guide to BSL-interpreted, audio-described, captioned and relaxed performances across Scotland. The guide listings are available on the website, social media, an e-bulletin, and in a biannual printed guide which is sent to venues and distribution points around the country.

The landscape of accessible theatre has changed massively in the 15 years since Access Scottish Theatre began. In 2023 and early 2024 we spoke to audiences, artists and our partner venues to find out what they needed from the guide today. Their feedback is helping to ensure that Access Scottish Theatre continues to evolve and share accessible theatre with audiences across Scotland for years to come.

AST is managed and produced by BOP on behalf of Federation of Scottish Theatre, with funding from Creative Scotland.

[Click here to visit the Access Scottish Theatre website.](#)

House Lights Up!

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

House Lights Up! was a project investigating the uneven and under-resourced provision of relaxed performance in Scotland. It was undertaken during the first years of the pandemic, when venues were closed and Access Scottish Theatre resources could be redeployed to this research. Neurodivergent researchers and artists Aby Watson, Thom Scullion and Zoë Halliday conducted interviews with culture sector workers and neurodivergent and learning-disabled audience members to learn more about their experiences with relaxed performance. The final project report was published in May 2023 and launched at a sector event.



House Lights Up! Launch Event

- 44 attendees
- Live and recorded BSL interpretation

[Click here to read the full report on our website.](#)

Researchers Zoë Halliday and Aby Watson speak at the House Lights Up! launch event.

Culture sector workers attend the House Lights Up! launch event.



What is relaxed performance?

Relaxed performance (RP) describes productions and events that have been made accessible to audiences who are usually excluded from theatre environments because they find it difficult to follow the restrictive conventions of traditional theatre etiquette. This can include — but is not limited to — people with autism spectrum conditions and other neurodivergent conditions such as Tourette’s syndrome or ADHD, those with a learning disability, those bringing children to the theatre, and people with dementia or Alzheimer’s. For the **House Lights Up!** research project, we focused on relaxed performances for audiences who identified as neurodivergent, with or without a diagnosis.

House Lights Up! key findings

From industry

- There is great passion and buy-in from industry staff to undertake this work and get it right.
- There is a lot of variation in knowledge of RP within the industry. Even when staff have experience of working with neurodivergent people, this may not translate to an arts setting.
- There is a focus on productions being adapted rather than on the venue and experience surrounding the performance.
- Production adaptation is generally inconsistent and often outwith the venue’s control.
- Staff capacity and confidence is a common barrier.
- Managerial buy-in is crucial.

From audience members

- Neurodivergent audiences aren’t always aware that there are RPs aimed, designed for and marketed at them.
- There is an assumption among neurodivergent audiences that RPs tend to be aimed at children and families only.
- Performance venues can be overwhelming, noisy and stressful spaces regardless of the performance.
- Noise is a big issue — both in the experience of it and/or the need to produce it.
- Following and understanding the content and context of productions is key to the overall experience.
- The attitude and behaviour of venue staff is, and remains, fundamental to attendance and the overall experience.

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. Disability Equality Training saw 236 individuals trained across 14 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, the National Theatre of Scotland and Scottish Youth Theatre.

As part of BOP's 30th anniversary celebrations, training delivered via the Federation of Scottish Theatre attracted 59 participants across two free sessions, which were offered to give back to the sector.



Participants at a training session in Haarlem, the Netherlands.

More in-depth training and consultation work was undertaken with Stellar Quines Theatre Company, looking at equality practices, and with Graffiti Ireland, exploring creative access in productions. In November, we contributed to the Arts Management Masters programme at Queen Margaret University, and in February we worked with Suisha Arts in Cork to explore accessible practice in performance making. Finally, we supported Prism Arts in Cumbria to develop a new Equality Action Plan for their organisation.

"We asked BOP to undertake staff training, review our existing practices and processes and then create a new action plan, policy and EDI statement for the charity. 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. A fantastic and insightful price of work – thank you!"

Catherine Coulthard, Director of Prism Arts

"Honestly one of the best training sessions we've ever done. The team are buzzing and are looking at all of our shows' accessibility provisions after the session. They provided practical and useful suggestions that we can implement easily!"

Training participant

International Work

International work in this year included remotely delivered training and consultation. Engaged by the British Council Peru, we collaborated with the Peruvian disability arts company Capaz to deliver a policy session for the Ministry of Culture Peru in December. We also started work remotely supporting the British Council Bangladesh and policy partners IID to develop accessible approaches for the design and delivery of a symposium in Dhaka in spring 2024, which will be the culmination of the DARE programme of work.

On the International Day for Disabled People, our Artistic Director Robert travelled to Guangzhou, China to speak at the 5th UK-China Disability Arts Forum, hosted by the British Council and Beijing Body On and On Cultural Exchange Centre.



Artistic Director Robert Softley Gale in Guangzhou for the 5th UK-China Disability Arts Forum.

Edinburgh Fringe Festival Access Partner

Our ongoing training and consultation work with Edinburgh Festival Fringe expanded to include training for artists as well as front-of-house staff. Three sessions were delivered in the run up to the festival and in August.

"I think a lot was covered and all very useful and important... [the trainers] were both amazing and made it very accessible and engaging."

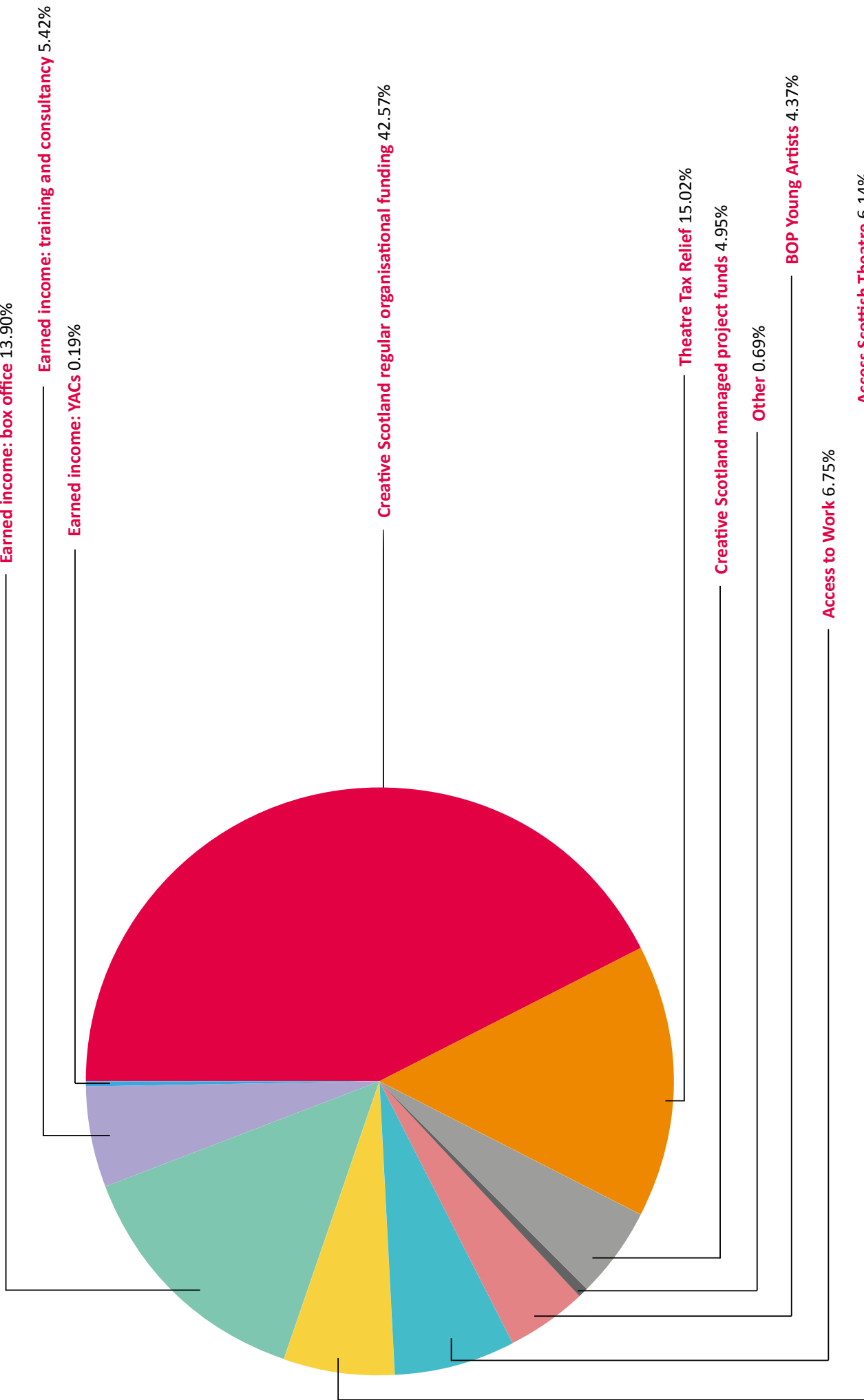
DET participant, Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society Staff

BOP and the Environment

In this year, BOP took some time to consolidate our approach to environmental sustainability. To underpin our decision-making with concrete guidelines, we developed a new climate justice policy that integrates our commitments to sustainability, justice and advocacy across the breadth of our work. We also became members of the Theatre Green Book initiative: all BOP productions will now meet the Green Book Baseline standard at a minimum, while working towards Intermediate and Advanced production standards in the years to come.

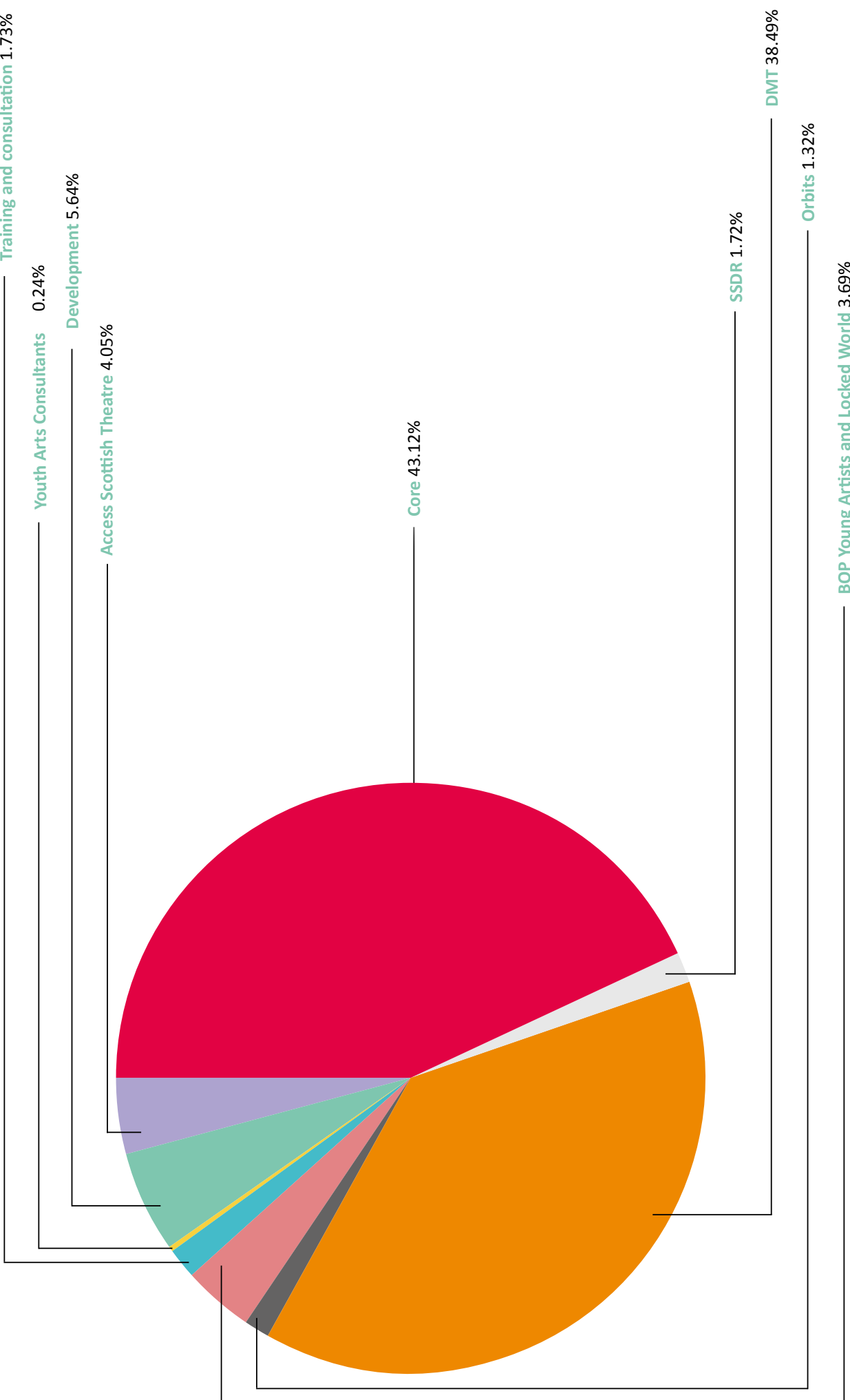
BOP: the Numbers

Income



BOP: the Numbers

Expenditure



Staff 2023/24

Robert Softley Gale:

Mairi Taylor:

Michelle Rolfe:

Kerry Lane:

Morna McGeoch Fergus Arnott:

Anna Richardson:

Anne Kjaer:

CEO & Artistic Director

Executive Director

Producer

Office and Communications Officer

Development Manager

Training Coordinator

Assistant Producer for Don't. Make. Tea.

Board 2023/24

Miles Harrison (chair)

Jai Hutchison (vice-chair)

Wezi Mhura (treasurer)

Amy Conachan

Nic Reid

Janet Tam

Jack Hunter Nicholson

Sarah Marie Mooney

Andrew Henry

Funded by:

Creative Scotland

British Council

With thanks to:

Traverse Theatre

Green Arts Initiative

Access Scottish Theatre

Federation of Scottish Theatre

Fringe Festival

PiPA

Fine Day

Playwrights Studio Scotland

Summerhall



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



SUMMERHALL

Access Scottish Theatre