



TRUSTEES'

ANNUAL REPORT

ZOOCO

1 AUGUST 2022 / 31 MARCH 2023 (8 MONTH PERIOD)

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AIMS

Our Charitable Aims are to advance public education and appreciation of the arts, in particular but not exclusively:

- Through the presentation of performances and the development of new work
- By developing accessibility in the arts through innovative, tailored engagement programmes for marginalised groups or individuals in particular:
 - Young people aged 7-21
 - Deaf and disabled audiences and participants
- Through the provision of theatre in theatre venues or other performance spaces

The Trustees are satisfied that Zoo Co continues to serve these goals to achieve public benefit during this period, in line with guidance from the Charity Commission.



MISSION

01

RELEVANT PRODUCTIONS:

To create highly innovative, relevant, ambitious and visual live productions for local and national touring, amplifying stories from marginalised people in our communities, using co-creation + community consultation.

02

ACCESS CHAMPIONS:

To champion access across all our activities, celebrating its immense creative and social impact and sharing our creative access methodology with the wider industry.

03

SERVING CROYDON:

To empower children, young people and adults in Croydon to be creative, using co-creation and community consultation to build programmes that are impactful and informed/ led by our diverse doorstep community.



This report covers a shortened 8-month period as we align our reporting year with our financial year and prepare for our first year as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. In 2020-21 we created and tested a 4-stage model, showing how our work starts through development and engagement with our doorstep communities in Croydon and grows to have national and international impact from there. This year's report shows our process and organisational development within the model.

OUR MODEL

ROOTING:

We continuously root more deeply into our diverse doorstep communities through conversation, events & training. We really get to know our community whilst providing opportunities for locals to design & participate in creativity at every stage of their lives. We ask lots of questions, and we listen to the answers. Our Heritage Project and Young Company work falls in this category, as does the extensive training and development programme for emerging artists surrounding *Bossy*, our latest children's show celebrating Black female leadership and deaf culture.

AMPLIFYING:

From our rooting, we create ambitious, high quality shows, amplifying stories relevant to our community with full creative power. We use community consultation, co-creation & research to inform creation. Work premieres in Croydon, connecting communities with ambitious culture where they live that authentically reflects their experiences & brings locals together. 2022-23 was a standout year for this category, as we developed and launched the critically acclaimed, award-winning *Perfect Show for Rachel* for a sell-out run at the Barbican Centre, made possible by a grant from the Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust. We also R&D'd, developed and opened *Bossy* (which went on to tour nationally in late Spring 2023).

BRANCHING:

We strategically tour productions and engagement nationally, sharing these impactful stories beyond their roots; we develop relationships nationally with deaf and disabled communities. We loudly celebrate the artistic quality of creatively accessible art nationally, with strong partnership working to maximise impact. In 2022-23 our Branching work involved the final stages of touring for our children's show *Messy*.

CHANGE-MAKING:

We use our profile as creators of world class, accessible productions to affect sector development and social change, contributing to a more inclusive cultural landscape where everyone is invited. We took the creative model developed on *Perfect Show For Rachel* to a new setting, centring Croydon-based SEN young people, on *Perfect Hour for Us*. We also managed all access provisions for the Croydon Borough of Culture launch event, establishing our presence as Access Champions ahead of an important cultural year for our home borough.

COMMUNITY

Since 2013, Zoo Co has created high quality, innovative and inclusive live productions, and community engagement work.

As we approach our 10th year, we strive for excellence in access provision, which is at the heart of all of our work. All performances have been Relaxed As Standard since 2016 and have integrated BSL since 2018. Our core belief is that theatre is better when everyone is invited.

The 8 months of this report covers a very productive period for us, as we launched two ambitious new productions and prepared to begin life as a new ACE National Portfolio Organisation. We learned we would be welcomed into the Portfolio in Autumn 2023; a hugely welcome recognition of Zoo Co's significance in the national cultural landscape.

Our staffing structure has changed through the year. Our job-sharing producers left to pursue other opportunities, giving us room to reshape the organisation ahead of this exciting new NPO stage. We recruited a full-time General Manager, and brought Fleur Rooth, co-founder and Access Manager, into a full-time role ahead of beginning a year long Place Partnerships agreement to provide access provisions to arts and cultural organisations for Croydon's Borough of Culture. Towards the end of the year, our Community Producer left, as did Trustee Anna Arthur, having served nearly four years. We also welcomed a new assistant to the team and were well underway with Executive Director recruitment by the end of March.



Over the past 9.5 years, Zoo Co has toured across the UK and abroad (Indonesia), created digital work and programs within a global pandemic, funded and supported deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse-led work, and established a clear artistic identity for offering high quality devised, visual, and playful theatre.

We strive to serve our local community in Croydon. Our partnership with Stanley Arts in South Norwood enables us to deliver excellent art in Croydon by facilitating outreach, space, and guidance. Our status as trusted members of the Croydon arts community is evidenced with multi-year commissions from Croydon Music & Arts.

This document outlines what we have achieved, what we've learnt, and how the charity continues to develop its process, partnerships and reputation.

LETTER FROM FOUNDER & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,

ZOOCO

FLO O'MAHONY

Hello,

Flo here, Artistic Director at Zoo Co. Looking back over this year of activity, I am hard pressed to understand quite how we fitted it all in, let alone in the space of 8 months. This period saw a huge amount of brave change, ambitious growth, further reach into our community, deeper impact and so many people both in our core and freelance teams coming together to serve Zoo Co's mission and help us achieve some of our biggest dreams yet.

We created three ambitious theatre productions during this time - *Things I Shouldn't Carry*, *Perfect Show For Rachel* and *Bossy*. We also curated and commissioned *Un/Scene*, an immersive performance piece as part of our wider partnership with Stanley Arts.

We rooted more and more deeply in Croydon, connected with many local arts organisations, and got stuck in supporting the delivery of Croydon's London Borough of Culture programme.

As part of our work collaborating on Croydon's very own Access Manifesto, we coined the phrase 'Be brave and be realistic'. When you are doing too much of one, find balance with the other. I think this year is characterised by being very, very brave, allowing huge impossible dreams like *Perfect Show For Rachel* to unfold, but also sometimes pushing us just beyond our capacity as a small but mighty team. Looking back, I can really feel the push points we overcame as a company during this time, and I am deeply grateful for that, as well as being mindful that a year like this should be the exception, not the rule!

I strongly believe that the hard work and elbow grease of the team during this year has set the wheels in motion for Zoo Co to define and refine our process and creative practice into something that is growing more sustainable, as we move from the often fast and furious 'project mode' of being a project funded organisation, into a company finally able to come up for air and dream bigger, more long term, and with more stable ground beneath us to bring those dreams into reality.

I hope you enjoy reading about all the brilliant activities we delivered this year.

Very best wishes



FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ZOO CO CREATIVE LTD,

JAN 2024

AWARDED

Arts Council England Cultural Recovery Fund (Round 3 - Final instalment)	£13,355
Arts Council England Project Grants- <i>Perfect Show for Rachel</i> (Instalments 1 & 2)	£72,180
Arts Council England Project Grants- <i>Messy / Bossy</i> (part 1B & 2)	£68,436
Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust Award (<i>Perfect Show for Rachel</i> Instalments 2 & 3)	£17,500
Stanley Arts (Heritage)	£9,770
Croydon Music & Arts <i>Bossy</i> Co Creation Model	£4,000
London Borough of Culture Launch Event Grant	£2,897
Croydon Music & Arts C3 & Young Company Delivery	£29,251



DONATIONS &

SALES

Delight in the Woods Spring 2023 Instalment 1	£17,005
Supporters Scheme, Individual Giving & Gift Aid	£453
Access Consultancy	£4,425
Other Consultancy	£1,500
Workshop Delivery	£1,000

RACHEL

FACTS & FIGURES:

Audience	908
Creatives	33
Participants	139
Volunteers	4
Streaming audience	50
Digital Audience	4597

Perfect Show For Rachel premiered at the Barbican this year, having jointly won the Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust Award alongside *High Rise*.

This show has been a 'soul-journey' for Zoo; Rachel, Flo's learning disabled big sister, stole Flo's job as the live, onstage director of our largest ever production, to universal critical acclaim. If you'd like an insight into why we decided to make *Perfect Show For Rachel*, here is a [blog](#) that Flo wrote about the car journey with Rachel which inspired the show. (audio version is available [here](#)).

The road to production was a years-long process of dreaming, talking, worrying (!), researching and development, experimenting, driving technical innovation for our accessible tech-desk, and waiting for care homes to open up after lockdown, whilst also insistently waiting for the right theatre partners which could really embrace the risk and creativity of programming an artist like Rachel. The Barbican really took on the challenge, and offered a radically inclusive, supportive environment with a huge step up in terms of technical and creative resources. This allowed us to grow as a company creating our first major work since the pandemic.



RACHEL

Working directly with Lee Simpson, co-artistic director of Improbable and Flo's mentor, was something that has radically transformed Zoo Co's process. We incorporated principles of Worldwork, Process Work, Open Space and Keith Johnstone's improvisational techniques into working with Rachel, all of which are practices Improbable use to create their work. Collaborating with Lee offered a masterclass in letting go of control and fully trusting Rachel as a leader.

We commissioned three Disabled Peer Reviewers to witness the rehearsal room and generate artistic responses to what they saw. You can find those responses [here](#). We also captured a short [Rehearsal Room Documentary Trailer](#).



The show marked our first attempt to match [Theatre Green Book](#) standards for sustainability. We invested in sustainability training with Pigfoot Theatre, which inspired us to track materials and travel used for the show. We now have a solid benchmark from which to assess sustainability progress in future shows.

We'd like to take the opportunity to thank the partners who helped us get to the stage where we could make this bolshy, ambitious show: New Diorama, Brighton Dome and Arts Council England who really got behind this idea at its earliest stages.

Perfect Show For Rachel enjoyed a sell-out run at Barbican, won an Offie Award for Access (jointly with Graeae), received a 5 star review in the Guardian and overwhelmingly positive audience feedback..

PERFECT SHOW FOR RACHEL:

OFFIE WINNER: Access *(joint winners with Graeae)*

OFFIE SHORTLISTED: IDEA Production

Guardian ★★★★★

'Why can't more theatre be like this? Open, relaxed, fun and full of love.'

Broadway World ★★★★★

'A theatrical experience unlike any other, crafted with accessibility at the helm....Playful, jubilant and, at times, incredibly intimate'

The Stage ★★★★★

'A show that, rather than making the audience feel uncared for, makes us feel part of a family.'

The Times ★★★★★

'A disarming labour of love.'

Audience Feedback:

"Just thank you for such a beautiful, warm show - I've never been able to come to the theatre by myself before but the accessibility of this show made me feel completely safe."

"This is one of the most important, challenging, silly, wonderful shows I've ever seen. There's nothing else like it. Zoo Co's work needs to be supported."

"Each element of the show felt so focused on truly hearing Rachel - ensuring her ideas were at the centre - what a powerful, playful, highly joyful celebration. (Bonus points for the high-camp, live art feel, that was so high quality & inclusive)."

"One of the best shows I've ever seen. Totally reimagines what theatre can be."

"Quite speechless right now tbh but simply one of the best and most affecting things I've seen in any creative medium in my life. Thank you."



DEVELOPMENT

Following the success of our first touring family show, *Messy*, we set out to create a sequel to *Messy*, following the same two lead characters, focusing on the lead character's best friend, Beth.

Bossy explores Caribbean and deaf culture, linked to Beth's cultural identity. In order to tell this story, Zoo Co needed to invest in diversifying, and upskilling emerging Black and deaf artists in order to ensure authentic, representative creative leadership, as well as on stage in the cast.



We wanted to ensure that this story would land authentically with Black Caribbean children. In order to ensure this, in partnership with Croydon Music & Arts, we worked with 2 primary schools in Croydon to use co-creation methodology to inform the show's development.

We also held a research and development process with professional creative teams using the material young people had given us.

We wanted to ensure that this project offered creative development opportunities for Black deaf artists working with us. As a debut playwright, Cherie Gordon was supported to have 1-2-1 mentoring sessions with Emma Dennis-Edwards, an established Black Caribbean playwright, who offered a series of workshops and mentorship sessions throughout the writing commission period following the R&D. We also developed a trainee programme for disabled or neurodivergent creatives, ultimately working with five emerging creatives across creative, design and production. The show went into production in March 2023 and was premiered at our home base, Stanley Arts, as we concluded the financial year

DEVELOPMENT

We learned a lot about the ways that co-leadership models can inform Zoo Co's practice, and can also present challenges, creatively and politically. We're proud of the way this show spoke to local and national audiences, with Black Caribbean audiences reporting feeling seen and understood by this moving story.

Children who had participated in our co-creation programme gave us some really magic feedback:

On helping us co-create the show:

"I wasn't ever expecting a group of people wanting to make a show to come to our school. I really enjoyed it... It just feels really nice."

On how it felt to experience a show about Caribbean culture:

"I didn't really see much shows with much Caribbean (people). And I like seeing black people there because it really affects me, with my culture."

On how they felt watching the show:

"You can make your life just like the moral of the story... Be kind, be brave, be you, you are beautiful... You are you."

FACTS & FIGURES:

Bossy co-creation workshops:	120 students
Artists / Creative Specialists:	45
Deaf awareness training sessions for hearing cast, creatives & workers:	16

PROJECT

In Autumn 2022 we concluded our Heritage partnership project with Stanley Arts, activating the heritage of our Croydon home. The final creative offer of this year-long project was *Un/Scene*, an immersive promenade performance through the historic Stanley Halls, featuring a commissioned artist takeover. Areas of the building that are rarely seen by visitors were opened up as the artists created site-responsive pieces, ranging from a projection-mapped installation by video / projection artist and poet Rachel Sampley to a Visual Vernacular piece by deaf artist Zoe McWhinney. Audience members were guided by members of the hip hop dance group BirdGang; the commissions were rounded out by a solo performance piece by Justine Agbowu and a video installation by Jeremiah Brown.



Visual Vernacular performer Zoe McWhinney



BirdGang in the tunnels underneath Stanley Arts



Rachel Sampley's projection mapping art installation

FACTS & FIGURES:

Performances	17
In Person Audience	353
Online Audience	12,769
Artists	12

PERFECT HOUR FOR US AT MERIDIAN HIGH SCHOOL

After working on *Perfect Show For Rachel*, we were keen to apply the principles of working with Rachel to other settings where we felt this way of working might empower other artists who experience difference to be leaders of their own artistic outputs.



Through Croydon Music and Arts' C3 programme, we were commissioned to deliver drama workshops at Meridian High School in New Addington, Croydon. We joined the Year 7 and 8 pupils in the specialist SEN unit to co-create a piece of immersive/promenade theatre called *Perfect Hour For Us*, using similar methodology.

The students each had their own room in their building to design an experience which would reflect their 'ideal' way to spend an hour. It was eclectic! We had a Rage Disco Room (for expressing anger), a disco karaoke party, a room filled with plants where the audience were guided to breathe, a sweet inventor's kitchen, a manga themed shadow puppetry dark-room and finally, an abstract, slapstick birthday party for a platypus.

These aren't ideas we could have wrangled into a traditional piece of studio theatre. We had to rethink our usual co-creation model. Audiences were invited to explore the performance spaces on the young people's terms, following their rules. The young people wrote the script, designed the invites, invited only those they felt safe sharing with, and ran the performance themselves.

Extract from *Rage Disco* by Freddie:

*I don't want to break you
 Or anything
 Or your laptop.*

*I really don't!
 It just feels like I do.*

*But when I'm with this lot, these people here, in this perfect world, it feels better
 I'd go round the whole world with them
 And then I would feel like myself.*

YOUNG COMPANY

THINGS I SHOULDN'T CARRY: YOUNG COMPANY PRODUCTION AT FAIRFIELD HALLS

Our first full production with the Zoo Co Young Company, co-facilitated by Flo and brilliant theatre-maker Nikhil Vyas, was staged in September 2022 following two terms of skills development and devising activities. Award-winning writer Laurie Ogden collaboratively created *Things I Shouldn't Carry* for performance as part of the C3 Live at Fairfield Halls. Working with a professional playwright, the young company members created their own characters and devised scenes which were woven into a story that explored themes around the responsibilities and secrets young people 'carry' with them.

With this production under our belt, and a reflection session during the post-show pizza night (now a YoCo staple event in the calendar!) we could jump into 'the lab', dreaming up the next YoCo play to be performed at Stanley Arts as part of Croydon's Borough of Culture programme, and ensuring our planning incorporated leadership and design by the participants themselves.

The Young Company isn't separate from our professional practice but an integral part of our creative output, generating impressive ambitious work using Zoo Co'd devising methodology every year. It's a privilege to witness the creativity, connection and joy that this creative cohort brings each Monday night.



We also continued our weekly Neighbourhood Studios in partnership with Croydon Music & Arts. The studios take place in particularly deprived areas in Croydon: New Addington, Shirley, and Waddon, and are attended by children & young people. Sessions were attended by approximately 60 participants, empowered to co-create their own shows for public audiences in impressive arts spaces. Included in this was our Access Studio, which involves young learning disabled adult participants from Croydon. Participants decided that they wanted to work on short film pieces, so facilitated sessions built towards each participant developing a short script (filmed in early Summer 2023). Their parents and carers remarked on an increase in confidence resulting from the project.

FACTS & FIGURES:

YoCo & C3 Attendance:	62.5
Things I Shouldn't Carry audience members:	150

ACCESS OFFER

This period held a lot of discovery and growth for the access department at Zoo Co, as we mounted and rehearsed shows where access was, more than ever, at the core of the production.

Perfect Show For Rachel was the first time that Zoo Co had worked with a learning disabled director - Rachel. With Rachel being Zoo Co Artistic Director Flo's sister, (and their Mum Wendy being her on-stage carer), Rachel's access needs were already well known and vouched for. It allowed us to confidently step into planning a rehearsal day and room that would best suit her.

It did not come without its surprises, and this unpredictability became the essence of the show that excited audiences and cast alike. One day for example, we had commissioned a variety of disabled artists to join our rehearsals and offer an artistic response to what they witnessed. On this particular day Rachel joined rehearsals after having been feeling ill, and was not her usual bubbly self. She subsequently decided to go home shortly after arriving, meaning rehearsals were cut short. What was extremely obvious was the big impact that Rachel had on the room within such a short time frame. The commissioned artists responded richly with poems and drawings, and the cast remained invigorated and motivated by the desire to improvise around changing parameters.

Our first learning disabled director brought in a new audience base for Zoo Co, and we became aware of the extra needs that audience members to this show may have. To meet these needs, we set out to provide new, extra support on top of the visual stories, relaxed performances as standard and captioning that we have included with past productions.. We introduced a 'buddy system', where access-minded volunteers could be paired with audience members who wanted more support. This included practical support such as navigating the Barbican building and social support such as having someone to sit with during the show and debrief with after.

The success of this show both internally and externally was an emboldening start to Zoo Co's journey of working with learning disabled artists.

Perfect Show For Rachel was also Zoo Co's largest cast to date with deaf and neurodivergent performers.

Feedback from the PSFR team:

"...the most supported room I've ever been in and the delivery of access was incredible"

"The access was handled beautifully on PSFR. I certainly felt in very safe hands, and feel that it was a secure space to share any access needs".

The show featured our most diverse use of creative captions, designed by lighting and video designer Rachel Sampley. It also featured a set which was, from its inception, designed around director Rachel's needs, with the interactive tech desk (which controlled the show live) being the first of its kind. For this, massive congratulations need to go to Stella Backman, Chloe Stally-Gibson, Rachel Sampley and Kyle Watts.

ACCESS OFFER

After the Barbican performances had ended, Zoo Co organised grounding sessions at both Rachel's care home and family home, where members of the cast could spend time with Rachel. This was an opportunity to reminisce on the show, playing games from it if she wanted to, and watching back the show recording together.

The calibre of our Access work on *Perfect Show for Rachel* was very publicly recognised in January 2023 at the Off West End awards, where we won an Offie in the Access Category.



After winning the Offie, it was time to look towards our next deaf and hearing children's show - *Bossy*. During an R&D period in September 22 with deaf and hearing writers, directors, performers and choreographers, the room explored the intersectionality of disability and race. When the team came back together for rehearsals in March 23, the new cast had varying access needs. It was also the first time that Zoo Co had hired trainee roles within the production team, a recruitment which was offered to deaf, disabled and neurodiverse candidates. This was an ambitious aim, and saw the beginning of what would be a continuing relationship between Zoo Co and Jack Norris - a movement director with Cystic Fibrosis.

During this busy performance period for Zoo Co, the access team were also building on connections for offering consultancy outwardly. We participated in the Battersea Arts Centre's relaxed performance workshop, consulted on access for Croydon-based NPO Talawa, delivered further Access & Inclusion training at Stanley Arts, and offered ongoing 1-2-1 access support with artists; this laid the foundation for Fleur, Zoo Co's Access Manager, to join the team full-time.

This period ends right on the cusp of Fleur taking on the role of Arts Access Resource Manager for Borough of Culture, and of Zoo Co hiring Access Coordinator Hannah Skaili. Hannah brings experience of working in Visually Impaired spaces to the team, just as Fleur began her audio description training with blind consultant Yusuf Osman; the team is better placed than ever to begin to consider this access provision. Fleur delivered audio description for the first time at Zoo Co's Heritage project in Autumn 2022.

Croydon Borough of Culture [launched at BoxPark](#) in March 2023 with audio describers, BSL interpreters and extensive breakout space, organised, booked and delivered by Zoo Co, which then featured on BBC London's evening show.

DEVELOPMENT

Led by our Development Director, Tom Ryalls, our focus on this period was organisational development that would prepare us to articulate our activity better to significant stakeholders. This was the beginning of a longer-term strategy to diversify Zoo Co's funding model and launch an Individual Giving strategy in later years. We reflected on almost 10 years of making work and created a new Theory of Change for the organisation, which informed new guidelines on our Case for Support. This allowed us to write a significant number of core Trusts & Foundations bids which we had previously struggled to approach.

Jessica and Olivia, our job-sharing Senior Producers, brought a wealth of experience to the company, supporting several flagship projects including our Heritage offer and *Perfect Show for Rachel*, as well as implementing important management processes to ensure the smooth running of the organisation. They were also instrumental to our NPO submission.

As they moved on, we reflected on our organisational structure and introduced a freelance producer model, where producers are engaged for specific projects. We believe that this will allow us to flexibly produce new work as it comes, and will also give us the opportunity to meet and work with a range of new producers. Parallel to this, we welcomed Michelle Hudson as full-time Interim General Manager, building out our operational capability and company-wide financial management. Michelle has taken the role of Green Champion for Zoo Co, creating our Sustainability Policy and Action Plan, and leading on our first attempt at Theatre Green Book Baseline Standards for *Perfect Show for Rachel*.

We joined the Steering Group for Croydon's London Borough of Culture programme, and subsequently headed up the Access Advisory Group, feeding into the programme design and using the combined skills and expertise of local disabled artists and organisations to ensure deaf, disabled and neurodiverse communities in Croydon were front and centre for this year-long arts programme. Fleur, co-founder and Access Manager (now Creative Access Director), was appointed the Access Lead for Borough of Culture, and tasked with delivering the remit of the Access Advisory Group.

Finally, and crucially, we received the welcome news that we had been accepted into the Arts Council's portfolio of regularly funded organisations (NPOs), providing us with guaranteed core funding for the next three years. This represents an incredible endorsement of the quality and importance of our work, and will radically transform the organisation and deepen our offer. Once we received ACE's decision we set about the important mission of recruiting our new full-time Executive Director. We are delighted to have appointed the incredible Amy Smith into this role at the end of the financial year; her impact on the organisation since then has been utterly remarkable.

ZOOCO

**Thank
You!**



Office and Mailing Address: Stanley Arts, 12 South Norwood Hill, SE25 6AB

Twitter / Facebook / Instagram: @wearezooco

Artistic Director Flo O'Mahony: flo@wearezooco.co.uk

Executive Director Amy Smith: amy@wearezooco.co.uk

Interim General Manager Michelle Hudson: michelle@wearezooco.co.uk