

Ambassador Theatre Group founders break Stage 100 record

Howard Panter and Rosemary Squire named most influential people in theatre for seventh time



▲ Rosemary Squire (right) pictured outside the Harold Pinter Theatre in 2011. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

A husband and wife team who have built the largest commercial theatre company in the world have been named the most influential people in the sector for a record seventh time.

Leading the annual list compiled by the trade publication the Stage, and which includes the actors Sir Kenneth Branagh and Imelda Staunton as well as directors, critics, producers and writers, Howard Panter and Rosemary Squire are joint chief executives of the Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), which they launched in 1992.

The business has a portfolio that spans regional venues in towns such as Bromley and Southport to the West End, where its theatres stage shows such as The Lion King and Wicked. It has more recently expanded into venues in Germany, Australia and the US.

“They are now the most successful people we’ve ever had on the list over the 20 years it has been going,” said Alistair Smith, the editor of the print edition of the Stage. “It is amazing, especially bearing in mind they started the business from scratch. They’ve built themselves up to be this global powerhouse and probably are now the biggest theatre company in the world.”

ATG became a major player when it bought Live Nation theatres in 2009 for £90m. It currently operates 46 theatres worldwide, last year adding Sydney’s 1,187-seat Theatre Royal. Its biggest coup, however, came last month, when it announced it was to reopen Broadway’s historic Hudson Theatre.

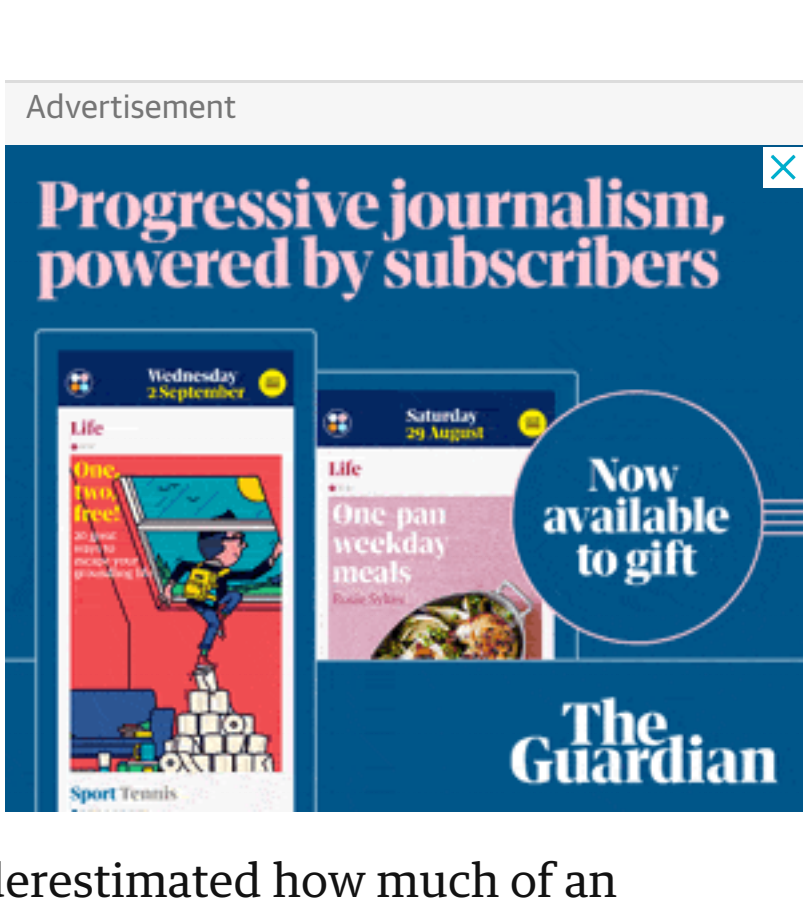
Smith said ATG’s rise may not be universally popular, but conceded that “any company which is so dominant in its market is never going to be universally popular”.



▲ Composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, whose Really Useful Group owns six West End theatres. Photograph: Christian Charisius/EPA

Panter and Squire have overtaken Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, who has topped the power list six times. Lloyd Webber, whose Really Useful Group owns six West End theatres, is at number four after a year in which he successfully opened his latest musical, School of Rock, on Broadway. Ahead of him at number two is Sonia Friedman, who produced Hamlet last year and will produce Harry Potter this year. Cameron Mackintosh and his righthand man Nick Allott are at number three.

Peter Bazalgette and Darren Henley, the chair and chief executive of Arts Council England, are a new entry at number five. The council’s high rating follows a better than expected spending review settlement last month. The arts world has been braced for heavy cuts but its funding was reduced by only 5% in real terms.



Smith said: “It was a surprise to everyone and I don’t think it can be underestimated how much of an achievement that was ... The test is now what they decide to do with it.”

Some big names are noticeably low on the list. Rufus Norris, at number 12, is the lowest ever for an incumbent director of the National Theatre, and the first time someone in the role has fallen outside the top 10 since 2001. Norris succeeded Nicholas Hytner at the NT and has had something of a bumpy ride with Tessa Ross stepping down as chief executive after less than six months.

“It is always tough when there is a change at a large organisation,” said Smith. “They are like ships to turn around, and I think he is trying to do something new and maybe it hasn’t quite landed yet.”

The highest placed actors are Benedict Cumberbatch, a new entry after his Hamlet at the Barbican became the theatrical event of the year, and Imelda Staunton, whose performance in Gypsy as Rose was widely acclaimed.



▲ Benedict Cumberbatch as Hamlet at the Barbican centre, London. Photograph: Johan Persson/PA

Big risers include Sarah Frankcom (the artistic director of Manchester Royal Exchange, who is up from number 50 to 21, and who is praised for “re-establishing the Exchange as one of the UK’s most exciting and vibrant producing theatres”).

New entries to the list include Kenneth Branagh, whose company has taken up residence at the Garrick Theatre, at number 23; Mark Rylance, who had success in Farinelli and the King, at number 29; and Sheridan Smith whose appearance in the Menier Chocolate Factory’s Funny Girl meant tickets sold out within hours.

The list is, on one level, a bit of fun, but it is also keenly pored over by the theatre industry. Smith said the process of compiling it was probably more thorough than it had ever been, with 50 leading industry figures asked to submit names anonymously.

That has led to fresher and more surprising names in the lower reaches of the list, including the playwright Chris Goode at number 86; Deborah Pearson, Andy Field and Ira Brand of Forest Fringe at number 88; and Rachel Edwards, whose Tooting Arts Club transferred a pie and mash shop Sweeney Todd to Shaftesbury Avenue.

The only critics on the list are the Guardian’s Michael Billington and Lyn Gardner at number 82. The Stage describes them as “two of the most consistently respected critics in the business ... [they] often inhabit different spheres of the industry, but both bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to their posts.”

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