

Most expensive West End tickets selling faster than cheap seats as people crave live performances

Premium tickets costing as much as £150 are being snapped up over £13 seats as theatre-goers seek to be 'closer to other human beings'

By Dalya Alberge
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Quiet streets outside theaters in the West End district after the capital was placed into Tier 3 restrictions | CREDIT: Betty Laura Zapata /Bloomberg

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The most expensive tickets for West End productions are selling faster than cheaper seats for the first time because theatre-goers are missing live performances so much, a leading producer has said.

Sir Howard Panter, whose forthcoming productions include Jersey Boys, the Tony and Olivier award-winning hit musical, said premium tickets costing as much as £125 and £150 are being snapped up over seats that can be had for as little as £13.

Sir Howard told The Telegraph: "You're talking really expensive tickets that frankly one would pause on. But people want them. The best seats are selling fastest because people have decided that, if they're going to go out, they want a really good experience and they don't want to sit at the back. The live experience is about being close to other live people singing to you, talking to you, telling you stories. Human beings would rather be closer to other human beings than further away."

He said: "Everyone's been living their lives through a screen. They want to be close to other people who are entertaining them. Covid has frightened so many people. Life is precious and 'live life well' is coming through this."

Sir Howard and his wife, Dame Rosemary Squire, are among the industry's most influential figures. Over 30 years, they built up the Ambassadors, the world's largest commercial theatre company - with over 50 venues in Britain, the US and Europe - and they founded Trafalgar Entertainment, staging live productions and distributing live-streaming performances from the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Opera House, among others. They also have extensive educational schemes and give free access to those who cannot afford tickets.

Their long list of acclaimed productions includes Carmen Jones at the Old Vic, the first major black musical, The Rocky Horror Show, which was well before its time in promoting sexual liberation and tolerance, and A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, Peter Nichols's classic drama starring Toby Stephens and Claire Skinner.

They had just opened Death Drop, a comic whodunnit, at the Garrick Theatre, when the curtain was brought down days ago by Tier 3 restrictions, just as it was about to sell out. The move prompted the Society of London Theatre to warn that closures would cause "catastrophic financial difficulties" for venues and thousands of workers.



Sir Howard said: "It's illogical that people can travel on the Tube, which is slightly more confined than the theatre, or go into shops. It doesn't seem very scientific. I know of no science related specifically to theatre. I'm sure there isn't any. It appears to be a generalised view that socialising is intrinsically bad. But people aren't rolling about raging drunk in the theatre. They've gone to see a show and they behave in rather an orderly manner"

He added: "Theatre is something we do well in Britain. So why are we penalising it? We're very fortunate that our company has other irons in the fire. For an independent producer, this could absolutely wipe them out."

Social distancing within theatres leaves a metre between heads, while groups sit together, all wearing masks. The vaccine will be "game-changing," Sir Howard believes.

Beyond Jersey Boys - which will open in the newly-refurbished and extended Trafalgar Theatre in April - forthcoming productions include the 2021 World Tour of The Rocky Horror Show and Anything Goes, the Cole Porter classic musical, an award-winning production directed by Kathleen Marshall, which opens at the Barbican in May ahead of a nationwide tour.

In the past couple of weeks, bookings were reaching sales of between £50,000 and £60,000 a day, suggesting a "pent-up demand that people have for a good night out," Sir Howard said, noting that the level of sales is still continuing for spring and summer performances.

Jersey Boys alone has sold £800,000 in advance tickets, he said: "It's been a huge hit in London, New York and all around the world... People know they will have a wonderful time."

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