

The Telegraph

Meet the power couple saving local theatre from collapse

Howard Panter and Rosemary Squire have just acquired 11 regional venues in a new deal. It's a statement of faith for the struggling industry

By [Dominic Cavendish](#), THEATRE CRITIC 30 March 2021 • 5:00am



Howard Panter and Rosemary Squire of Trafalgar Entertainment at their theatrical headquarters in London's West End CREDIT: David Rose

Despite the playhouses remaining closed, and uncertainty still rife as the mid-May prospect of live shows slowly advances into view, a husband and wife team often known as UK theatre's "power couple" have delivered a morale-boosting vote of confidence in the future of British theatre. The Telegraph can exclusively confirm that late on Saturday afternoon, [Sir Howard Panter](#) and Dame Rosemary Squire acquired 11 regional theatres, an unmistakable affirmation that the sector will bounce back. "I think this deal is a real statement of faith in our industry, and the resilience of the sector," the latter tells me.

Given lockdown, there was no quaffing of bubbly or enthusiastic handshakes for those involved – just a few exchanged champagne glass emojis. The exact details, in terms of the financing involved, are being kept off-limits. But at a stroke this makes their relatively new company Trafalgar Entertainment Group the second largest theatre-operator in the UK.

The organisation takes its name from the West End playhouse they have run since 2016 – the newly named Trafalgar Theatre, (formerly Trafalgar Studios). The venues they've acquired (from Qdos Entertainment group's subdivision HQ Theatres) include G Live, Guildford, the Wyvern Theatre, Swindon, Crewe's Lyceum and the

Churchill in Bromley. They represent the nuts and bolts of mainstream activity that give the industry its buoyancy in normal times, whether that be musicals, plays, comedy shows, or concerts. The Group's combined capacity is about 15,000 seats a night, potentially about 5.5m seats a year.

Regional theatre tends to attract a much keener sense of loyalty from its potential audiences than do the often grander (and pricier) venues of London's West End. While that can lead to assumptions about parochial tastes, the less glamorous side of the sector could be in pole-position to roar back as the public looks to nearer destinations for its cultural fix, keeping transport health risks at bay.

Is there a snobbery towards regional theatre? "Yes, I think there is," says Panter, 71, on a video call from their marital home in Surrey. "But we know that people who live in High Wycombe are as interested in culture as people who live in Kensington. We also think that there's scope for more people to come to regional theatres than currently do." Their commitment to regional theatre is total. "We're driven by the thought – why shouldn't people out of London have the best?" he says.

Those familiar with the business side of British theatre will know that Panter and Squire, 64, previously founded the UK's biggest theatre operator, Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), which now runs more than 50 venues in the UK, US and Germany. "I think once you're an entrepreneur, it's in your DNA," Squire says. "You could describe us as serial entrepreneurs."



All being well, Jersey Boys will reopen at full capacity in July CREDIT: Joan Marcus

Panter – a bearded, ebullient, somewhat larger than life figure beside his quiet, thoughtful, sometimes inscrutable spouse – points to the economic rationale behind this new venture. "We're not being naïve. The pent-up demand for tickets to productions we're involved with has been remarkable, given the uncertainty about when we're coming back and how safe it's going to be. People are saying: "I want to go out." And we've been driven by this continual belief that theatre will come back."

Squire grew up in Nottingham, finding early inspiration in Richard Eyre's trailblazing regime at the Nottingham Playhouse in the mid-1970s, and gaining experience in administrative roles in London's theatreland. Panter spent his early years in Australia, was educated in Dorset and cut his teeth in technical and stage management jobs. They met in 1979 via a theatrical flop – CP Taylor's *And a Nightingale Sang*, which Panter was producing at the Queen's (now the Sondheim), where Squire was working in the box-office. "No one came," he laughs. "I mean nobody. It was a catastrophe." She chips in: "He used to come and see the box-office returns and they were so pathetic that to ameliorate the stress he bought large G&Ts." They married in 1994 (after Squire's first marriage, to the literary agent Alan Brodie, came to an end).

Both regard themselves as outsiders, and self-starters. As Panter puts it: "We didn't come from money, we didn't have a silver spoon in our mouths." In the early days they even had to run their office out of a car parked near the Duke of York's. He shudders at the phrase 'power-couple' – "Oh god, that sounds awful, a wee bit scary. We're just a couple of people who are married who do theatre."

Such personal passion helps allay the fear that their empire-building is all about the bottom dollar. Some are suspicious of theatre chains, regarding them as top-down and squeezing the local character out of venues with their underlying corporate ethos. The pair robustly defend their track record at ATG in preserving the identities of each playhouse in their portfolio, and say this proves they'll do the same this time around. "Each of the theatres here has a director rooted in the local community," says Squire.

"We will not only be doing more producing in the buildings than has been the case but the shows we've produced will go more and more into them," Panter explains. "We're growing the business for audiences." Squire indicates some could benefit from their streaming division, too – getting screenings of theatre, opera and the like.



Trafalgar Entertainment Group takes its name from the couple's flagship West End theatre CREDIT: David Bradbury

Given the apparent win-win situation, affability is the hallmark of their chat as the pair speak the day after the deal is done. But a slight irascibility creeps into Panter's tone as he weighs up the miserly amount of government help that has been forthcoming, via the Culture Recovery Fund, for theatre's commercial sector; in England less than one per cent of the £1.57bn has been awarded as grants to commercial theatre producers. "I think it's terrible – it's clearly inequitable for such a small amount of taxpayers money to go to the commercial theatre when that's serving the vast majority of theatregoers. More than ever, and without any government-backed insurance, producers are taking a huge personal risk trying to kick-start shows. For them to be ignored because they're not jewels in some metaphorical crown is not on!"

He's speaking on behalf of all producers but in the couple's own case, he stresses, they're not part of a super-rich, super-elite. "There are plenty of people who are a lot wealthier than we are. Most of our money is invested in our companies." They've poured "millions" into keeping their enterprises afloat during the pandemic, and into the refurbishment of the Trafalgar Theatre. All being well, that will open, from July, with full audience capacity and the Sixties jukebox musical *Jersey Boys*. The regional venues will stir to full life in the autumn. Meanwhile, Squire lets slip that there may be further theatre news to follow: "We're the preferred bidder on one central London venue we hope to be announcing after Easter."

We've been stuck in a gloom pit for so long, their talk seems to hail from a bygone time of sunlit optimism, which is where they'd like to take us. "By this time next year, hopefully we'll be back to the good old days," Squire says. And overseas markets, they say, are just gagging for our theatrical exports. Panter flies the flag: "We shouldn't forget that we're still considered the best in the world for theatre. Perhaps it's all to do with Shakespeare but it's held round the world that we're really bloody good at it."

Jersey Boys runs from July 28. Info: call 0844 871 7632 or book [online](#)