

He's mad, bad and scintillating to know

Theatre

Network

National's Lyttelton Theatre
London

★★★★★

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CHIEF THEATRE CRITIC



Audience numbers have bobbed up and down this year at the National – as dismaying flops have sat cheek by jowl with roof-raising hits. There's no surer way, though, of hiking up the viewing figures than by bringing out the Cranston.

By which I mean Bryan Cranston:

star of *Breaking Bad*, the insanely addictive TV crime-thriller series that shot him to Emmy-winning fame as chemistry teacher turned gangland crystal-meth peddler Walter White.

The 61-year-old is making his UK theatre debut in this stage adaptation of Paddy Chayefsky's 1976 Oscar-winning satire on the state (and future) of American TV. Box-office catnip.

Network is about an ageing news anchorman going nuts. Told he is being given the sack by his bosses at (the fictional) UBS because fewer folk are tuning in, Howard Beale blithely announces during the ensuing bulletin that he intends to kill himself on air.

Cue mayhem and a kerfuffle in the studio, but the guerrilla tactic gains

such traction he becomes a ratings sensation, the canny executives reinstating him to tell it like it is to a hollowed-out generation.

"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!" is his heartfelt,

rabble-rousing mantra. In one of the most famous scenes in the film, we watch as a whole neighbourhood seems to lean out of it collective window to join the rebel cry. The Belgian director, Ivo van Hove, can't match the raw, thrilling sense of a Seventies uprising that Sidney Lumet committed to celluloid.

At the Lyttelton, we get a chorus of disparate faces united in video-recorded ire, and there's even a vague call to armchairs as the invitation goes out to the wider auditorium to join in. My toes curled at that, but even those who find this cult auteur over-praised would have to concede that he seems to have found the perfect material for his modish aesthetic here.

Working with adaptor Lee Hall (the playwright who gave us *Billy Elliot*), he utilises an impressive technological box of tricks familiar to those who saw his Roman tragedies marathon. This is a world of constantly roving cameras,

all surface, shine and sterility (or if you will, stare-ility). The TV production control-room is a goldfish bowl of a booth. Tense countdowns are conducted to quasi-orchestral

warmings-up (a quartet of effects-operators are imposingly ranged atop a giant screen); everywhere there is motion, confusion, distraction.

Barring the minimising of the original script's fascination with the seizing on a terrorist atrocity as a ratings opportunity (by rapacious executive Diana Christensen played here by Michelle Dockery – Faye Dunaway in the film), this editing job is faithful to the original (down to the rolling period adverts) while pointing to today's unceasing blitz of infotainment – proving Chayefsky prophetic.

As might be expected, Cranston's Beale looks terrific in the many close-ups – thin-lipped, with haunted eyes, he starts off recognisably ordinary, almost invisible, certainly worn-down and moves by degrees from a wild-man in his underpants to an ethereal, inspiring presence unlocking the transcendental mysteries of eternal corporate power.

Is he mad, is he borderline bad? He's certainly scintillating to know. It works.

Until Mar 24. Tickets: 020 7452 3000;
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk



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Breaking bad news: Bryan Cranston as Howard Beale in *Network* at the Lyttelton.