

The Stage

Network starring Bryan Cranston review at the National Theatre – ‘savage and timely satire’

by [Sam Marlowe](#) - Nov 14, 2017

The USA in 1975: year of two assassination attempts on President Gerald Ford, the capture of Patty Hearst, and the Thriller in Manila.

Now look closer at the background of this picture – terrorism, a widening wealth gap, and deep political disillusionment. Sound familiar?

Paddy Chayefsky's *Network*, the multi-Oscar-winning 1976 movie directed by Sidney Lumet, could hardly feel more timely – more than that, it seems spookily prescient. Its satire on TV current affairs anticipates so much of today's media landscape: Fox News, reality television (which gave us Donald Trump), Twitter spats and Reddit rants, clickbait, alternative facts.

Ivo van Hove's theatrical version, with a script adapted from Chayefsky's screenplay by Lee Hall, hurls its elements into thrilling collision. Stage and screen, past and present – van Hove smashes them together until the sparks fly, while turning the show's gaze on us via the electronic eye of its multiple screens and cameras, so that we watch ourselves watching. Apt that at the centre of this spectacle should be a TV star: *Breaking Bad*'s Bryan Cranston as Howard Beale, an ageing anchorman who comes adrift and plays a leading role in a truly televisual tragedy.

Told he's to be fired due to low ratings, Howard uses a news broadcast to announce his intention to commit suicide live on air. He's disintegrating but defiant, and fearsomely ambitious young exec Diane Christensen (Michelle Dockery) spies an opportunity: Howard could be the voice of America's anger.

With his new rallying cry – “I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore” – he's suddenly a crazed TV prophet. Cranston becomes a newsroom Lear, lost and ranting in his pistachio pyjamas, his face streaked with snot and tears, in pitiless close-up. His friend and career long colleague Max Schumacher (Douglas Henshall) looks on, appalled, while sliding into an adulterous relationship with the voracious Diane.

Van Hove's production is visually dazzling. Cameras swarm over the studio floor and production gallery of Jan Versweyeweld's set, with video footage spliced with garish advertisements. There's a pulsing soundtrack of bombastic theme tunes and Kraftwerk electronica. One side of the stage is occupied by a working kitchen and

restaurant, where ticket holders can dine during the play. This makes an astute point about 21st-century viewing habits, but it can be distracting, and at times everything's so hectic that you're not sure where to look.

Yet Cranston's performance supplies the human heartbeat amid the staging's shiny machinery. Diane is a soulless creature, but Dockery plays her with appetite, and Henshall's Schumacher has the slumped, bitter despair of a man who knows his time has passed. The whole glossy, hectoring, lurid package has an undeniable charge and compulsion.

It's not always a pretty sight. But it's almost impossible to look away.

4 stars