

'I'm as mad as hell'- Lee Hall on bringing Network to the National Theatre

The playwright talks about working with Ivo van Hove and Bryan Cranston and explains why the 1976 movie resonates more than ever

When news anchor Howard Beale cracks up live on air, his old colleague Max sees a vulnerable man who needs help. Ambitious young TV executive Diana, however, smells ratings.

It's a pivotal moment in Sidney Lumet's 1976 film *Network*, written by Paddy Chayefsky. And for Lee Hall, adapting the script for a new stage version at the National Theatre, it's also the point at which Chayefsky nails a shift in contemporary culture. Hall, who wrote *Billy Elliot*, has longed to bring *Network* to the stage since he first saw it in the 1990s. Now his labour is bearing fruit in a production staged by the renowned director Ivo van Hove and starring Bryan Cranston (of *Breaking Bad*) as Beale. Chayefsky's script, Hall says, was extraordinarily prescient.

"It's a brilliant piece of futurology," he says. "It's prophetic. It's about the birth of our current moment. And what interests me is that what was very high satire for Paddy Chayefsky is now almost documentary realism."

In the film, Beale's wild pronouncements become an overnight sensation. When the newsman encourages viewers nationwide to fling open their windows and holler "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any more!" he is deemed a populist prophet: a national spokesman for his audience's simmering rage. Soon he is headline news, boosting the ailing TV network's fortunes and prompting a fierce battle in the corridors of power between those who see his continued on-air exposure as exploitation of a broken man and those who see it as ratings gold.

"Chayefsky takes a moment where there are two ideas clashing: an old, rather humanistic idea about the endeavour of TV and this other one which sees it as big business," says Hall. "And that clash, told through the emotional lives of people, seems very accurate about how we live. It could be written now about Fox News. He shows how quickly different forms of mass communication change — what their half-life is, in a way."

Though set in mid-1970s New York, the story's concerns certainly resonate with 21st-century audiences familiar with clickbait, reality TV, 24-hour-news, shrewd algorithms, "alternative facts" and presidential tweets that can dominate the global agenda. Beale's famous catchphrase could now be the refrain for a society in which disaffected citizens take to social media to rant and voters choose populist solutions. But Hall suggests that where Chayefsky is at his most astute and far-sighted is in his depiction of the viewers' anger being harnessed, repackaged and, in effect, neutered by the network executives.

"[It shows] the way that corporate life can incorporate the anger that it generates," he says. "It's a fable for our times."

Network is not alone in tackling onstage the shaping, role and influence of contemporary media. James Graham's play *Ink*, currently in London's West End, chronicles Rupert Murdoch's transformation of *The Sun* newspaper into a powerful populist voice. *Network*, however, is an iconic film that satirises, on-screen, the power of the screen. Won't that irony be lost on stage?

Hall, who has spent much of his career transposing works from one genre to another (Shakespeare in Love from screen to stage; War Horse from page to screen), argues that theatre's ease with metaphor and engagement of a live audience in the creation of story help to open up Chayefsky's concerns. "As soon as you put it on stage it becomes more layered," he says. "The stage is very good about having more than one thing happen at the same time, both figuratively and literally — particularly in the way that Ivo [van Hove] has conceived it . . . Chayefsky keeps laying bare how things work. Ivo does that in the theatre: he's not trying to create an illusory world, he's trying to show you how it works."

Van Hove's production has caused ripples in advance by promising a working onstage restaurant for which tickets have been sold by ballot. Successful entrants will be served dinner throughout the play, eating a three-course meal on the Lyttelton stage as the action unfolds around them. That sounds fun, but potentially distracting — not least for hungry theatregoers elsewhere in the auditorium. But Hall explains that it is not just a gimmick.

"Having people eating a meal very close to the action is really interesting," he says. "It is how we watch television. Sitting, eating, casual, oblivious to what is happening to the people . . . Onstage the story asks so many questions about your relationship to watching stuff. We're basically getting a thrill by watching somebody have a nervous breakdown on telly."

Van Hove has used interactive, immersive sets to superb effect in the past. His groundbreaking Roman Tragedies, which visited the Barbican Theatre this year, transformed the whole stage into a huge conference hall, complete with bar, sofas, screens and potted plants. The audience was invited to roam around it as they pleased, to eat, drink, log on to social media and choose how they watched the action: out front, up-close or on giant TV screens. The result was astounding, making you acutely aware of the way we consume news and how events are mediated.

While the audience won't be wandering about during *Network*, Hall suggests the principle of using multiple focus points will fuse form with subject, enabling viewers to analyse their own participation even as they empathise with Beale's plight. He adds that bringing the work to stage also highlights its relationship with American playwriting.

"Bryan [Cranston] is addressing the role of Beale as he would if he were playing Willy Loman [in *Death of a Salesman*]," he says. "It's about the tragedy of a small man — and the delusion that you can somehow be good and righteous in this environment."

Hall has always had an affinity with the outsider. His two most successful plays, *The Pitmen Painters* and *Billy Elliot*, focus on ordinary people caught up in larger ideological and economic shifts. That's also true, he points out, of *Network*: "Apart from being worth revisiting as a topical piece, it is a classic drama about a massive clash of values. What I'm interested in is seeing ordinary people dealing with huge forces."