



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Network" Has A Star, But No Show

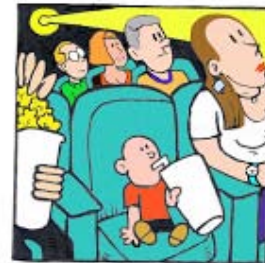
NETWORK * 1/2 out of ******BELASCO THEATRE**

Mediocre talents fail in dull, uninteresting ways. They mount a play, you shrug and forget it the next day. Bold, visionary talents fail in spectacular fashion. What were they thinking, you wonder, jaw agape? But at least you know they were thinking, striving, doing *something* or at least *trying* to do something. Director Ivo van Hove and his team of collaborators fail in marvelous fashion with this stage adaptation of Paddy Chayevsky's all too prescient film *Network*.

That movie was a scathing cry from the heart about the commercialization of journalism. A once-sacred area of television was becoming a profit center. Instead of providing a public good, corporations realized they could provide product in the guise of news and make money. A lot of it. Chayevsky saw it happening and created a wicked satire that showed news anchors expressing opinions on air! The more shocking their opinions...the higher the ratings. It was absurd, over the top, ridiculous...and now seems quaint in comparison to what TV news has actually become.

At least with the terrific Bryan Cranston present, you're never in confusion as to *why* they tackled it in the first place. His supporting character -- newscaster turned prophet Howard Beale -- is fatally turned into the star of the show. It's like watching a second banana in a sitcom get their own spin-off; that rarely works and it certainly doesn't here.

For one thing, the adaptation by Lee Hall doesn't give Beale a bigger story or any sort of arc. In the film, he has a mental breakdown and those on-air rants he delivers ("I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!") are terrific thunderbolts. They break up the main



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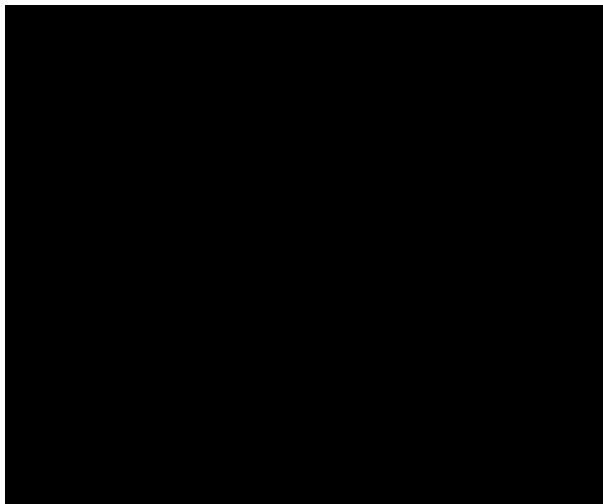
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story, which is really about an aging newsman cheating on both his wife and his journalistic conscience. (In the film, that character of Max Schumacher is played by William Holden; here it's Tony Goldwyn.) Beale doesn't change or grow -- he has a breakdown and that's about it.

Unfortunately, the same is true in this play. Beale has a breakdown early on...and that's about it. But this time around he dominates the action; in fact, whenever we interrupt his mania for a peek into Schumacher's disintegrating marriage it's kind of a jolt. Oh yeah, that's happening too. And Beale's rants grow increasingly predictable in every way. Playwright Hall jazzes up Beale's show a la the film with an elaborate new presentation. He's given a late night talk show sort of intro (rather than the sober air appropriate to a newsman) and an announcer and crew member urging applause give an elaborate spiel asking us to repeat Beale's catchphrase and then applaud loudly. That's fine once; it's even ok twice. But when they do it again and again and again it goes beyond making some sort of point and just feels lazy. They've made Beale the star of the show but they realize he has nothing to offer. If they're driving home the emptiness of the spectacle, well we got it the first time.



Cranston does what he can with the part. A skilled TV actor (as well as a Tony winning veteran of the stage), the part is in some ways perfect for him (if only it were better). He plays to the camera beautifully and if you feel drawn to watch him on one of the many video screens adorning the stage, well that makes perfect sense. After all, the TV is where Beale comes alive and that's rightly where Cranston pitches his performance.

Fans of the film may be aghast at how tepid the heart of the movie comes across here. Goldwyn and Tatiana Maslany of *Orphan Black* can do nothing with their doomed romance. And the corporate politics on display barely make an impression as the cameras whirl back

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around to another spiel from Howard Beale. They are sideshow to the prophet and he is sideshow to the real star of the show and the real tragedy: the directorial vision of van Hove and his team.

For years now, van Hove and a crack team of production talent have dominated theater and opera. Here it's Jan Versweyveld (scenic and lighting design), Tal Yarden (video design), An D'huys (costume design) and Eric Sleichim (music and sound). No matter what Van Hove tackles, it's sure to have a bold vision, a striking conceit that dominates his take on a classic of stage or screen. You may not always agree with his take on a piece (my personal favorite is his *View From The Bridge* as boxing match) but by God you had to deal with it.

Here they have come a cropper. As one might expect, this production of *Network* includes lots of tv cameras, lots of video screens and a stage that usually includes an announcer's desk front and center with a studio booth on stage right. What one doesn't expect is that stage right is dominated by...a bar facing the wall? With a few scattered tables and audience members who eat a meal while watching the show? And a couch from Schumacher's home? Now, the handful of audience members sitting on stage -- almost as if by accident -- aren't a studio audience. That would have made sense, I guess. Nor are they people in a bar or restaurant who might be coached into becoming glued to TVs playing in the bar when Beale goes on a rant. No, they're just sitting on stage, watching the show and eating dinner brought out by wait staff during set changes while we watch them and wonder what the heck they're doing up there.

The bar is used in maybe one and a half scenes, including a very early one where Cranston and Goldwyn sidle up to the bar for a heart to heart and stand in a far, far corner with their backs to the audience (though of course we can watch them on camera). Other than a sex scene that took place either in the bar or somewhere else (I wasn't quite sure), I can't for the life of me imagine why they had the bar onstage in the first place. Making matters worse, the studio booth is so narrow and cluttered (and so poorly covered by the cameras), that virtually nothing that happens in it is dramatically interesting or even visible, except for one brief line by Maslany late in the show. It's literally a jumbled mess that's ignored 90% of the time and a deeply awkward set when van Hove does try and stage some action there.

In short, one third of the stage is taken up by a jumbled studio booth that's hard to see into, the other side of the stage is taken up by an unnecessary bar and theater goers are seated in the midst of this, chowing down on food and drinking wine. If that's not enough, multiple scenes are staged out of sight entirely. You can (almost) always see the actors on a video screen but you also waste a lot of time peering around the set, wondering where in fact the actors who are talking to one another might actually be. One scene is actually set in front of the theater for no good reason, though it was nice to see New Yorkers know enough to not look at a camera and just keep walking,

even if Tony Goldwyn and Tatiana Maslany are making out in front of them.

It's so...ugly, such a godawful mess, so unsatisfying and cluttered and so very, very different in every way from what van Hove and his team have done so many times before that it's hard to believe this was staged in London, they saw it...and then kept it intact for New York. What were they thinking? I haven't a clue but undoubtedly they were thinking of something and Cranston's magnetic if wasted turn as Beale let them think they were onto it.

As a final head-scratcher, the show ends, the cast takes its bow, the lights come up...and as the audience gathers its things, the video monitors begin to show news footage of Gerald Ford being sworn in as President of the United States. Huh? Maybe it's a testament to the power of TV or maybe the audience was just intrigued enough by the sheer randomness of this, but most everyone stayed put. Ford was followed by Jimmy Carter being sworn in and he was followed by Ronald Reagan. Well, it's clear where this is headed and you get no points for predicting like I did how the audience would react. George Bush Sr. got some polite applause (since he'd just died) while Bill Clinton received notably modest clapping himself. (His stock has fallen hard in recent years.) George W. Bush was mostly ignored, Barack Obama of course received thunderous applause and Donald Trump even louder boos. (Except for one yahoo in the orchestra who applauded. Tourists!)

It was admittedly a fascinating bit of tracking the popularity of recent US Presidents. But surely if they wanted to make some point connected with the show we just saw, they should have shown footage of Geraldo Rivera and Jerry Springer and Glenn Beck breaking down in tears on air à la Howard Beale and Rush Limbaugh and Lou Dobbs and Bill O'Reilly and Megyn Kelly and Sean Hannity today. Sure, they could have ended with Trump though that seems too obvious to bother. Presidential swearing-in footage? It's just one more missing piece of the puzzle that is this messy, confused, mixed message of a show from one of the most noteworthy talents in theater. Like Beale, van Hove might fall on his face sometimes, but he's never boring.

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Network * 1/2

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