



Entitled: A piece of work in a theatre by Quarantine

at The Studio, Royal Exchange Theatre

Directed by Richard Gregory, designed by Simon Banham, text by Sonia Hughes

Reviewed by Simon Belt July 2011

Quarantine describe themselves as having developed a reputation for working with 'real people' as opposed to actors on stage portraying fictional characters. There's a feeling from that self-promotion that Quarantine's scripts give their characters a more grounded, grittier depth. The pitch for *Entitled* by its Director, Richard Gregory, states that he 'wanted to explore some of the real stories of its performers - somehow turning theatre inside out'.

Abracadabra, and the pockets of the Royal Exchange's audience were turned inside out by some highly skilled and adept performers with some super technique. Was it that I just didn't get it or maybe aren't quite sophisticated enough for the highbrow irony and double bluff of Quarantine? Maybe, happy to hold my hands up to that, but you know, where's the benefit to society in treating audiences with utter contempt just so a performer can feel clever?

This was the first performance by Quarantine I've seen, and as they present themselves as quirky and innovative I was hoping they'd capture something of the moment, or an insider view of developing quality theatre, and be able to bring that out through some novel production. Indeed, all of the theatrical performances I've reviewed for the Manchester Salon have displayed technical skills of a most excellent quality, and the ones in the main theatre at Royal

Exchange have been tremendous, so bringing theatre technicians on stage to expand on their story tantalisingly offered some great insights to why technique is so good when insightful scripts seem to be in decline.

'Entitled' as a title of the performance offered the potential of laying open the process of creating a theatrical production, inviting the audience to see into how techniques are developed and refined in creating elegant finished product. It could also of course simply express the lack of clarity about the content and lack of purpose resulting in not being able to come up with a title that summarises the story, though gatekeepers of quality at the Royal Exchange surely wouldn't progress with such meandering so let's see what I got from the story.

The production starts with Greg Akehurst, the Production Manager, explaining to the audience that a set will be built in front of them - with sound checks, lighting checks, and marking out the stage area for the performers by the technicians as they ready for a show. With great dexterity and slick choreography, speakers are brought in, cabled up to the control deck and sound checked by Greg, lighting is checked and focussed by Chris Whitwood against dance performers Joanne Fong and Sonia Hughes. Lisa Mattocks provided Stage Management functions helping to complete lighting and sound checks, marking out the stage and setting up the props.

Adding some complexity to stage construction and providing a mechanism for some exchange between performers, we're also treated to a superb personal performance by Manchester-born musician John Kilroy, who trained at the Rambert School of Ballet and worked as a professional dancer until the age of 30 before turning to songwriting. Irritatingly he presents himself as just another audience member a few years ago and decided to get on stage - just like we all could, and with an unfortunate overtone of condescension, should.

So, the stage is constructed and whilst each cast member performs their tasks, they talk to us about what they're doing and tell us something about themselves. Although the techniques of what they do are most excellent, the script is banal and if anything actually obscures and distracts from the insights and knowledge we could be offered from their stage activity. This comes across as we're so active and good at this, but you're just a passive audience and should be doing this with us, though the script and physicality of on and off stage clearly indicate the separation between audience and performers is a real and not a false one. And that's the story, just that, not any intimacy or insight into the process of developing performance but banal everyday chatter, and that's better done by people who have intimacy.

And it's this tension between the idea that the performers are 'real people' just like the audience, as opposed to actors on stage, that is resolved in a way that treats the audience with contempt. There is a display of elegance, command of technique and choreography that clearly sets the 'real people' on stage apart from the audience yet none of the delight of technique is explained to the audience so are excluded from the technicians club rather than included, and all we're offered is inanane chatter to us rather than even between the performers. We could learn so much about how the technicians help decide on and develop the rigging and kit they use. The sound check for example, just happens with techniques performed but none of it explained - like the school child who's learnt some trick and performs it but won't explain it or reveal the truth behind it for fear of losing control of the one thing that sets them apart them from their school cohorts.

The stage was built, setup and then because there was no other offering than process, it was dismantled and the audience left to decide when they were so bored by it they would just leave. Not clever. And at the end of a week of having three high calibre school students from New Mills on [work experience](#) , it reminded me of the sort of thing that less imaginative kids would do to wind adults up because they can't easily think of something profound or insightful to offer by way of a script. Dull.

For all the talk of being experimental and innovative, the title 'Entitled' really does sum it up, a first draft of filling a script book with some interchange yet having a story at the end of it and not being able to decide on a title. That a theatre company feel they can serve such vacuity up to actual real people in the audience who no doubt want to have their experiences challenged and hopefully learn something new about the human condition, represents an awfully low view of how important other people's time is. The gatekeepers at the Royal Exchange who surely must have consciously decided to programme this are perhaps more culpable by trading in their very high reputation for a production that offered nothing to paying customers. As a demonstration of some theatrical techniques this was superb, but the story was shockingly bad and displayed more contempt for an audience than any of the manufactured punk of the late 70's and early 80's.

Editor's Note: Whilst we're on the subject of the relationship between art and politics, you can listen again to the recent Manchester Salon discussion entitled '[Valuing the Arts](#)' looking at 'how the arts sector can ensure quality in the midst of dramatic budget cuts'.