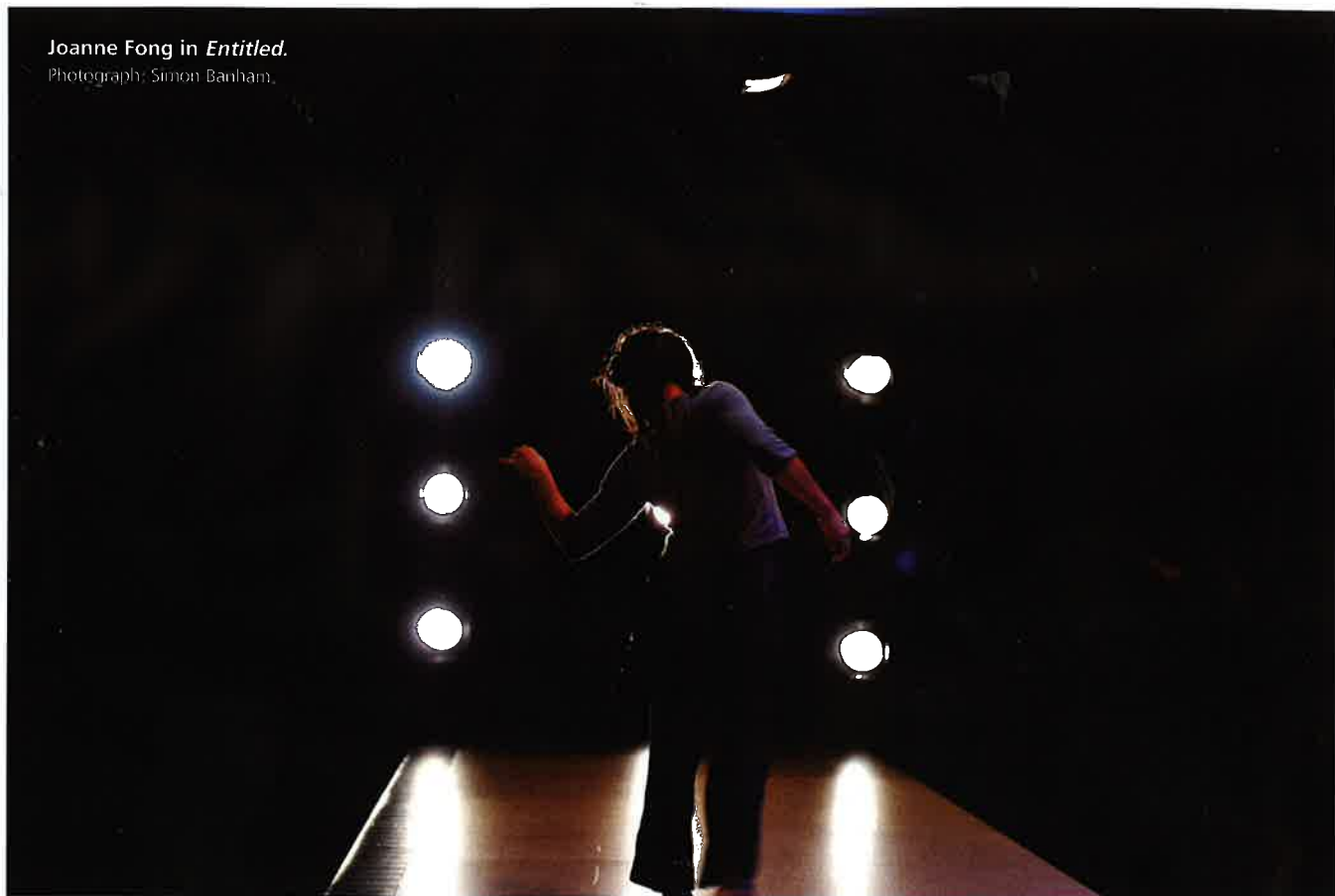


Joanne Fong in *Entitled*.
Photograph: Simon Banham.



Entitled

Quarantine, Lilian Baylis Studio, London – September 27, 2011

It's a rare show that begins with people talking cables. But Quarantine is a company that uses the texture of real lives as its core material and in *Entitled* those real lives begin with the stage crew and performers. They set up the stage, and then they clear it – there's no spectacle in between.

The crew – three friendly people in roomy trousers and comfortable sneakers – prepare for a show with unfussed precision. They know what they're doing. Greg Akehurst explains about sound checks. Chris Whitwood tells us about lights. Lisa Mattocks bangs on about adaptors (she knows she's obsessed). It's entrancing to hear people describe their expertise and then demonstrate it. Lisa and Chris ease along the floor to flatten the stage tape, and giggle when their toes meet in the middle.

This opening sequence becomes the

evening's overarching metaphor. They're raising expectations, getting their (and our) hopes up. Setting something up, knowing it can't possibly last, becomes very moving: the theme is amplified, but not deepened, when the dancers in this show we never see begin to speak.

While the crew discuss work, the artists wobble on about their existential crises. This may capture the difference between luvvies and techies – but their introspection is far less involving and seems incidental to the practical business of making sure the show goes on. When dancer Fiona Wright falls dramatically to the floor to test the sidelights, the only response is: "Can you die a little further downstage?"

What gives us purpose? Joanne Fong often looks perplexed, flexing her fingers while people do stuff around her. The dancer is lost without a function – no wonder she is apprehensive about her career ending. She scrunches up her face in confessional chuckles, then looks as if she might cry. "This could be my last dance," she says uncertainly. Are these snatches of dance (choreographed by Jane Mason), prancing and thrashing with quizzical delicacy, enough to end on?

There's a micro-trend in current

theatre: call it faux-interactive. Performers solicit an audience response only to ignore it (Tim Crouch's play *The Author* did something similar at the Royal Court last year). Sonia Hughes, the show's writer, asks us to create a moment that will last until tomorrow. Game spectators spring up to groove to "Jump to the Beat", but she soon points them back to their seats, looking monumentally disappointed. Wright squints into the light and asks if life is worthwhile, but is similarly unmoved by our answers.

After the mantling, the dismantling. Michael Frayn's brilliant farce *Noises Off* explains that life, like theatre, is about "Getting the sardines on, getting the sardines off." As it began, so the short evening ends, with the stoical crew going about their work. Between cables they look into the future – at first, just the next few days, but then they speculate about the years that lie ahead, full of love and children, ill health, mixtapes and mortgages. Through their marvellous, unforced performances, Richard Gregory's production orchestrates pockets of tenderness and quiet regret. As it closes, *Entitled* defies expectations and doesn't disappoint.

DAVID JAYS