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PLAYWRIGHT IN FULL BLOOM

RENEE LIANG ARRIVES FOR OUR INTERVIEW WITH A FOLDER BURSTING WITH COLOURFUL CLIPPINGS AND ARTICLES THAT HELP TO EXPLAIN WHAT MAKES THIS PROLIFIC WRITER TICK.



PHOTO BY: MARK GIUCINA

Renee's Chinese name is translated as 'Literary Blossom'. As is the tradition, she was named by her grandfather, who said his choice of name was because there were too many doctors in the family. Ironically, Renee was first told this story by her

mother when she was attending medical school, around the time she rediscovered writing. She now writes and practises medicine side by side.

Renee started writing plays three years ago after she picked up a brochure for *Flip the Script*, a writers' development programme. Her first five-minute play was accepted, and she describes seeing her work performed as an amazing feeling.

“You feel like a creator. In my play I wrote a fight scene and a kiss scene in five minutes, and they did it. The actors just did it. I wrote ‘they kiss’, they kissed. So it was just amazing, and I was like – wow, I’m hooked.”

Renee was offered her first slot at *Read Raw* in February 2008 and *Lantern* was born. Following a packed *Read Raw* session, she decided to develop *Lantern* further, and the play was performed twice in mid-2008 with innovative theatre company Smackbang.

“Both shows were completely packed out, with people waiting down the stairs hoping to get tickets. At that stage I thought, okay, this probably has a life,” Renee says.

This full season of *Lantern* has retained the core team that has worked with Renee since the

beginning, including director Tony Forster and actors Li Ming Hu and Andy Wong who play nine characters between them.

Lantern covers the 24-hour period leading up to Chinese New Year, featuring what Renee describes as a mucked-up family that happens to be Chinese.

“They’re just a normal New Zealand family but their Chinese background really informs who they are and what they do. There’s a tradition about Chinese New Year that you’re not allowed to carry over anything that’s bad from the old year. So you have to sort out all your arguments, have settled all your debts, cleaned up your whole house and everyone gets together for a big family meal.”

Renee is also involved in the *Metonymy* exhibition at the Aotea Gallery in May. She says that her creative endeavours and practising medicine go together extremely well.

“In both, the story is the most important thing to get. In medicine, it’s said that 90% of the diagnosis comes from the history, and everything else – all the flashy tests, all the examinations – give you the other 10%. You’re always trying to look for something under the surface. You’re always trying to lock onto that core thing that makes them human.”

Truly living up to her name of ‘Literary Blossom’, this promising playwright’s first full-length play assures a deeper insight into a festival that is more about family and forgiveness than about colour and lights.

Read Raw is part of STAMP at THE EDGE®, a programme dedicated to developing and presenting Aotearoa’s hottest dance, music and theatre.