

## Press Release – Lantern

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### Celebrate Chinese New Year with the Chens

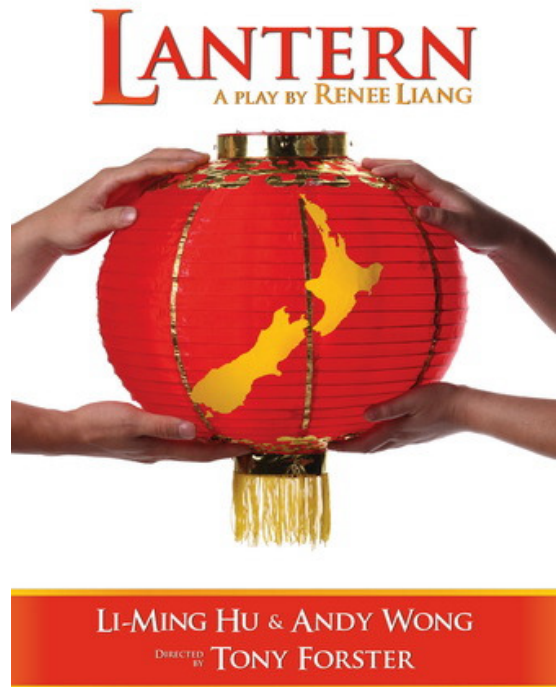
For those of you who didn't know, Chinese New Year comes to Auckland again on June 8! *Lantern* is a new play by poet and playwright Renee Liang. It features two of NZ's best known Asian actors, Li-Ming Hu (Shortland St) and Andy Wong (Ride with the Devil, No. 2).

It is rare enough to see Chinese actors on the stage, but *Lantern* goes one better - the two actors play ten characters between them, in a virtuoso performance lasting 85 minutes. "We've really enjoyed the challenge," says Wong. "It's rare to have the opportunity to take a leading role in a NZ play. It's hard work but it's also a chance to step outside our comfort zone."

After a successful premiere season at BATS in Wellington, where the show received a warm audience response, the Auckland-based production are looking forward to a home crowd. "People tell us afterwards that the stories in the play are their own," says Liang, the writer of *Lantern*. "We've had a lot of laughter and tears from the crowd every night." And though her initial aim was to reflect on the contemporary Kiwi-Chinese experience, Liang says that the themes in the play have turned out to be universal. "I think the play will strike a chord with anyone who has a migration story within their family or among their friends."

But *Lantern* is, at its heart, a play about family. "It's about the Chen family, set in present day Auckland," Liang explains. "Although the Chens are fictional, I think people will recognize their parents, friends or even themselves in the characters! The family face the same issues any Kiwi family face – but they approach it from their background as Chinese New Zealanders." To put the pressure on her characters, Liang places the play in the 24 hours leading up to Chinese New Year – a time when, traditionally, the whole family get together to eat and sort out any issues before entering the New Year. "Yes, there's a lot of talk and food," she laughs. "It wouldn't be a real Chinese play otherwise!" The play is bilingual – although the majority of scenes are in English, there are a few lines for Chinese speakers, as well.

*Lantern* is both a comedy and a drama. Underneath its many lighthearted moments are ideas about family, culture and identity. As well as researching Chinese NZ history such as the old 'Chinatown' in Greys Avenue in Auckland, Liang also drew on events happening in her own life. "One day when I was



writing the play this (white) religious lady knocked on my door and tried to speak in bad Mandarin to me," she says. "I can't even speak Mandarin – so I wrote the encounter into my play."

According to Lantern's director, Tony Forster, *Lantern* illustrates the universal experience of many families. "When I first read the script, I was surprised by the similarities to my own culture (Pakeha New Zealand)", he says. "It's an exciting play because it adds new layers to the conversation about being a New Zealander."

Some quotes from the premiere season of Lantern, presented at BATS Theatre April 21- May 2 2009:

*"LANTERN can be seen and praised as Asian version of Toa Fraser's Bare – not at all a copycat, but a rich tapestry of characters and an ambitiously epic story, performed by just two actors."*

- Lynn Freeman, Capital Times

*"..subtly traverses a range of binaries: male vs female; East vs West; young vs old"*

- Helen Sims, Lumiere Reader

*"..moments of absolute joy and hilarity."*

- Hannah Smith, Salient

Before and after the show, audience members are invited to add their words to a poetic lantern installation in the foyer of The Basement.

[www.lanternplay.com](http://www.lanternplay.com)

**The Basement** June 8 -13, 8:00 pm as part of STAMP at THE EDGE

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