

# LANTERN

A PLAY BY RENEE LIANG



## A Guide for Teachers

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### Suitable for Years 10-13

**This play could be used in studies of NZ History; Social History; Drama and English. A guide for NCEA drama reviews is included below.**

### About the play

Chinese New Year's Eve is when families get together, eat like gluttons and sweep the house clean of any bad-luck issues before the New Year. Unfortunately for the Chen family, there are a *lot* of issues.

Henry is a broken man, consumed by memories of war and immigration. His children Jen and Ken are still struggling to figure out who they are. And then his wife Rose, who walked out of their lives a year ago, reappears just in time for dinner...

The play is done in the 'two-hander' style, where two actors play all the characters between them while making it clear which character they are by means of voice and gesture. It is a play which explores the interrelationships in a Kiwi-Chinese family and their response to living in New Zealand. This is a story inspired by the many Chinese immigrants who made their home in NZ and the experiences of their children who grew up in New Zealand.

## Characters

Lantern is a play about a Kiwi-Chinese family. The members of the family are:

- Rose, whose family emigrated to NZ from China in the 1920s and worked as market gardeners and labourers;
- Henry, who was born in China, fled the Japanese as a young boy during the war and grew up in Hong Kong, emigrating to NZ in the 1970s when he married Rose;
- Jen and Ken, the two children who were born in NZ.

There are a number of side characters also, both Chinese and non-Chinese. In total there are ten characters.

### **Questions:**

1. Which character do you most identify with, and why?
2. Are there any family stories which you would like to write about?
3. Are there any migration stories in your family history? How many New Zealanders come from migrant backgrounds? Which backgrounds do you know the most about?
3. How does telling these stories as drama make them more interesting?
4. Have you ever had similar experiences to the ones the characters in the play experience?
5. How 'Kiwi' is the Chen family?
6. How 'Chinese' are each of the individual characters, Ken, Jen, Rose and Henry? How does that affect the way they behave?
7. What is the role of the minor characters?

## Time and place

The play is set in two different times and places:

1. Auckland in 2009
2. Auckland/Hong Kong in the 1970s.

### **Questions:**

1. How can you tell that the time has changed during the play? What theatrical devices are used to indicate this? Where else are there clues?

2. How is music used to indicate the time period?

3. Do you have any memories of living in a place and watching it change over time? How do different people adapt to change over time?

## **Language**

*Lantern* includes some dialogue in Cantonese. There is also some buried meaning in the Chinese writing on the lanterns.

### **Questions:**

1. Have you ever been in situation where you did not understand the language spoken? How did that make you feel?

2. When Henry speaks in Cantonese, do you understand what he means even if you don't understand the words? Why is that? What techniques are used by the actors to help you to understand?

3. How important is language to the characters in the play?

4. What does Henry mean when he says to Rose "You don't understand. You'll never understand"?

5. How important is poetry in the play? Does poetry only have to be written?

## **Staging and Theatre Technology**

The production of *Lantern* you have seen has a professional lighting, sound and stage design. However, it could also be staged in a school hall with borrowed furniture.

### **Questions**

1. How much does staging contribute to your understanding and enjoyment of the play? Identify the different technologies of staging.

2. What significant symbols were used in the play?

3. How did the set relate to the story? Was it symbolic?

4. Were there any scenes that you particularly liked in terms of staging? Why?

5. How did the colours used in the play add meaning to the stories and ideas in the play?

6. If you were staging *Lantern*, how would you stage this?

7. What kind of music would you use?

8. What kind of lighting would you use? Explain your choices.

### ***Acting Technique***

*Lantern* is staged in the “two-hander” style, where two actors play all the characters. In this production, the decision has been made not to change costumes and indicate the character change by means of voice and gesture alone.

1. Do you enjoy this style of theatre? Why/Why not?
2. Did you understand when the actors changed characters? How did they help you to understand?
3. Do you think the ‘two-hander’ style fits *Lantern*, or would you prefer to see it played with more characters? Why do you think the writer used this style?
4. How did this style affect the way you watched the play?

### **History of the Chinese in New Zealand**

*Lantern*’s four main characters come from very different backgrounds, all of which are ‘Chinese’ and ‘New Zealander’. Henry is a first-generation new migrant, while his wife Rose is fourth-generation. The children who were born in NZ see themselves as very Kiwi but somehow also don’t fit in.

### ***Questions***

1. How much do you think appearance affects the way you relate to others?
2. How much do you think appearance affects how others treat you?
3. Can you relate to the language problems of any of the characters?
4. Do you think that the way they acted is morally right?
5. Language is also used in different ways in the play. Identify the different ‘languages’ used and then discuss what they tell you about the character.
6. What are some things that you know about the history of Chinese in New Zealand? What does seeing this play make you want to ask?
7. “I think a little foreign culture is very good for us New Zealanders.” Explain your reaction to this statement in the play.
8. There is racism in the play, both intended and unintended. Is unintended racism bad, or merely a mistake? What examples of racism and discrimination can you give? Can you classify them into type?

## Themes

People watching *Lantern* have said different things about what the play means to them. We'd like to find out what the play means to you.

## Questions

1. What do you see as the main themes of the play? Why?
2. What are the most important themes in your life right now?
3. Does the play make you think differently about something that is happening in your life?
4. If you wrote a play, what would it be about?
5. How important are stories?

## Review

If you were to write a review for NCEA of *Lantern*, here are some things to think about:

- What are the themes of the play?
- What is the genre (comedy, tragedy, drama) of the play? Can you think of any similar examples of this type of play? How does this play stack up against them?
- Narrative – what is the opening premise? How much does that suit the themes of the play?
- What is your opinion of the story? Is it a strong story, or confusing, exciting, boring? What makes it that way?
- How does the story develop?
- Who is the main character(s) and what drives them?
- What acting techniques do the performers use?
- How do the staging technologies (set, costume, sound and lighting) add to or detract from the piece?
- Is there anything unique about this play that you've never seen before?
- What was your response to this play? Did you love it, hate it? Why? What parts did you like or not like and why?
- Would you recommend that others see this? Why/ why not?

## **Lantern – plot synopsis (for use in full or in part)**

Summer, Auckland, 2009. Jen, thirty-going-on-forty, is contacted by her estranged mother Rose, who left the family home without explanation a year ago. Rose announces her intention to turn up for dinner – but forbids Jen to tell anyone. The day happens to be Chinese New Year’s Eve, where traditionally families get together for a meal, a last chance to sort out any issues and to “clean the house” before the start of the New Year.

Rose’s father Henry, originally an immigrant from Hong Kong, is confused and bitter about Rose and still traumatised by memories of the Sino-Japanese war and its aftermath. Jen’s brother Ken is also confused about who he is. Jen and Ken are involved in a car crash whilst arguing about their parents.

Act 2 takes us back to 1950’s Hong Kong and New Zealand, where a young Rose and Henry are courting. Rose is a headstrong, 3rd-generation NZ Chinese who ‘does the right thing’ by going back to Hong Kong to marry a boy her family have selected for her. Despite this, the two fall in love and return to Auckland only to face the realities of adapting to their two very different world views. Rose gives birth to a daughter, Jen.

Act 3 takes us back to the present day, to the midst of chaotic preparations for dinner. Jen and Ken are trying figure out how to tell their father that the car has been destroyed. Rose appears and confronts each of her children in turn, and then finally Henry. Dinner is served and Ken and Jen find the bravery to tell the truth about the car and about a number of other things. The two children disappear to light lanterns leaving Rose and Henry alone together. Henry declares his continuing love and forgiveness of Rose and begs her to return, but after hesitating she decides she cannot. In the ensuing struggle a precious vase, Henry’s last link to his family in China, is smashed. As Rose leaves, we return to Jen and Ken lighting lanterns and making wishes for the future.

## **Further Reading for teachers**

[http://www.goingbananas.org.nz/papers\\_2005.php](http://www.goingbananas.org.nz/papers_2005.php) (and other years)

<http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/>

(multiple downloadable papers)

Ng, James. *Windows on a Chinese Past* (4 volumes) Otago Heritage Press, Dunedin, 1993

Ng, Eva Wong. *Chinatown Girl*. Scholastic, 2006

Further information about *Lantern* is available by visiting the website <http://www.lanternplay.com>. Further copies of this Teacher's Guide are downloadable from the Inspired Learning tab.

Copies of the Lantern script (in full or in part) are available by contacting Renee Liang, [docrnz@gmail.com](mailto:docrnz@gmail.com), 021 265 9131. Renee is also available for school visits and workshops.

### **Auckland performances of *Lantern* – June 8-13 2009**

The Basement, Lower Greys Ave, Auckland CBD

#### **8 pm evenings**

Bookings: [buytickets.co.nz](http://buytickets.co.nz) (09)357 3355

Tickets \$22/\$18/\$15 Student Tuesday - Service fees apply

#### **12.30 pm School Matinees including Q+A with cast and writer**

June 9 & 11

Tickets \$8 - Service fees apply

Book at <http://www.the-edge.co.nz/About-THE-EDGE/THE-EDGE-Programmes/Education/Inspired-Learning.aspx>