**Artist Pass /Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen**



The award-winning play, 'The Mookcake and the Kumara', by
Maori-Chinese playwright Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen will have its world
premiere at Q Theatre's Loft in March 2015 as part of the Auckland Arts
Festival. We caught up with Mei-Lin to find out about the inspiration
behind the play...

**Where did the idea for ‘The Mooncake and the Kumara’ come from?**
This is an ‘extended’ version of a 10 minute play I wrote with my cousin
 Kiel McNaughton back in 2008.  Both of us, at separate times in our lives,
 had wanted to write a play about our Goong-Goong (from Southern
China/Guangzhou) and Nan (from Taranaki via Wanganui via Waikato), so we got together on weekends and worked on the 10 minute version of the play. We submitted it for a collection of plays being produced under the banner Asian Tales and it grew from there.

I remember being told three stories about the moment my grandparents met.  This is a version of one of those versions of the story! It’s a wonderfully magic, yet entirely real story.

This version (now around 1 hour 30 minutes with 3 new characters) digs deeper into the story of my Goong-Goong and my Nan and their parents and imagines how they came to be together.

**How did you find the process of writing a play using English, Maori and Cantonese text?**
Very difficult – especially considering that my reo is very basic, my Cantonese non-existent and my English not much better!  It’s been a very collaborative process – my cousin, close friends, actors, producers and producers’ friends have all very kindly donated their time to help me get the language just right. I have used a lot of idioms and aphorisms (there are lots in Māori, Cantonese and English) and these have been either translated by me using a dictionary or by my many wonderful, generous helpers.
I’ve just had to let go and trust that we’re all moving in the same direction with the intention of the words and the meanings behind them.
It’s definitely made me feel like getting back into my reo and also I’m keen to do something about learning Cantonese (the native tongue of my grandfather).
The different languages have helped me to think about character development and relationships in the play too.  About how characters grow together and learn from one another over time. During the course of the play, the characters come to understand one another’s language and even start interchanging Cantonese and Māori.

**Was there any historical content that took you by surprise during the initial research period?**
Plenty of the historical content gave me a heavy heart.  My Goong-Goong paid a poll tax to gain entry to an Aotearoa where he came face-to-face with social and economic policies, official and general attitudes and systems that were not supportive of his presence, nor of the presence of fellow Chinese. It would have been tough.
My Nan grew up in an environment which made being Maori really hard. Social thinking, commentary, laws, policies, the world of work and play – the way all these things operated would have signalled to her that the foundations and practices of her culture were holding her back and that it was better to discard what she knew for a more Pākehā way of life.
When my grandparents hooked up, around 1929, there was an enquiry into Māori women employed on Chinese Market Gardens (supported by Apirana Ngata).  It was the intention of the government at the time to encourage Māori women away from the gardens because they were partnering with the Chinese gardeners and there was the perceived risk – among other unnecessary worries – of them producing a ‘hybrid race’. I think this made me the saddest of all – that what was actually a union that worked for both my grandmother and grandfather was being analysed, questioned and challenged by people who had no idea about their lives.

**Tell us about some of the responses you received from the recent development workshop and public reading of the play?**
Our cast and crew took the play to the Mangere Chinese Community Centre, to Ngā Hau e Whā Marae in Pukekohe and to the Herald Theatre (thanks to Auckland Live and CNZ). The responses were very different and very special in each of the venues.  It felt like I’d written a straight-out comedy at the marae reading, a beautiful romance at the Chinese Community Centre and a little bit of a new, New Zealand fable at the Herald.

**Who would you love to see in the audience at the world premiere season of ‘The Mooncake and the Kumara’ at Q Theatre in March 2015?**
Well, it would’ve been great to have my Goong and Nan there – although, they’d probably tell me off.  Nan would’ve been a bit whakamā about all this. Goong wouldn’t have been able to hear it!
But since neither of them are alive…well, I would love to see all of their descendants there as well as all those Chinese gardeners from Pukekohe, Mangere, Palmerston North, Taranaki, Manawatu, Gisborne…all over. And, my Nan’s whānau from Whatawhata, Ngāruawahia, Taranaki and thereabouts.
And it’s really a play for people who love stories, love our country and its people and who want to find out about a piece of our history that’s not often explored. So if they want to come, kei te pai hoki tērā!