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Lantern Theater Company Presents the Philadelphia Premiere of *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti, Sept. 7 – Oct. 8, 2017

Tony Award® Nominee Forrest McClendon Returns to the Lantern Stage as Famed 19th Century Shakespearean Actor Ira Aldridge

PHILADELPHIA (August 9, 2017) – **Lantern Theater Company** will launch its 24th season with the regional premiere of *Red Velvet*, **Lolita Chakrabarti**'s stirring play based on the true story of 19th century actor Ira Aldridge, who made history as the first African American actor to portray Othello in 1833 London. Longtime Lantern artistic collaborator **Peter DeLaurier** will direct a cast that includes Tony Award® nominee **Forrest McClendon** as Ira Aldridge, with **David Bardeen, Damon Bonetti, Liz Filios, Adam Hammet, David Pica, Ebony Pullum, and Lauren Sowa**. Theater critics and members of the press are invited to attend **opening night on Wednesday, September 13 at 7 p.m.** *A full schedule is included in the fact sheet below.*

Lolita Chakrabarti's debut play examines the role that theater plays in changing social milieus and the price that artists pay for challenging the status quo. *Red Velvet* opens in a theater dressing room in Poland, where famed Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge is preparing to play King Lear. The intrusion of a young journalist forces him to look back on the defining moment of his illustrious career. Thirty years earlier Edmund Kean, one of the greatest actors of his generation, collapsed onstage at London's Theatre Royal, and Aldridge was brought in to replace him as Othello. The American-born Aldridge performs the role brilliantly, but the reactions of the cast and critics are divisive and complex – and the experience changes the course of Aldridge's life.

Ira Aldridge was a real man. Born in New York in 1807, he began acting as a teenager at some of the earliest African American theater companies. He immigrated to Europe to escape the prejudice and discrimination he experienced in America, making his London debut in 1825 and achieving critical success in Dublin, Edinburgh,

and in the provinces. In 1833 he stepped into the role of Othello at the Theatre Royale in place of an ailing Edmund Kean. Critics savaged his performance, reflecting more their own prejudiced shock at seeing a black man play Othello as he wooed and then murdered a white Desdemona than an honest commentary on the merits of his performance. Aldridge played just two performances and was dismissed by the theater. He spent the next three decades acting professionally, mainly on the Continent, achieving critical acclaim and earning numerous awards.

Inspired by Aldridge's story, Chakrabarti has skillfully woven themes from William Shakespeare's *Othello*, the play-within-a-play, into *Red Velvet*. In both stories, white men feel threatened by the professional skills of a black man and by his physical interactions with a white woman. Chakrabarti shows how outsiders – Othello and Aldridge – are first valued and then rejected for their innovations and accomplishments, and how individuals who push their societies toward greater justice are often punished for their audacity.

In *Breaking Character Magazine*, Chakrabarti wrote, "I consciously created a world where the historical dilemmas mirrored the dilemmas of today. I did this because I believe history repeats itself and as we edge forward we are encumbered by old ideals. The same discussions are had again and again over time and they circulate around the same fundamental things – money, power, and entitlement. Theater is about telling stories that engage, challenge, and move. I took my personal experience of working in the theater and wove everything I love and loathe about the profession into Aldridge's life: the loneliness and exhilaration of touring, the intimate friendships that crumble in crisis, the politics of hierarchy, and the pure love of the craft."

In launching its 2017/18 season with *Red Velvet*, the Lantern is putting down a marker for a season in which the significance of an inspired individual's actions – for good or evil – can have a disproportionate effect on family, community, society, and state. "Every advance against prejudice and ignorance comes through the focused and determined efforts of individuals who carve a path for others to follow," said Lantern Artistic Director **Charles McMahon**. "Ira Aldridge was just such an individual, and his story is an inspiring example of artistry and humanity that changed that part of the world he moved through. He is one of innumerable heroes whose performances in a great drama are largely forgotten in the fullness of time, but without whom we would live in an uglier, less hopeful world."

Red Velvet director **Peter DeLaurier** is intrigued by the ways in which the characters Ira Aldridge and Ellen Tree, who play Othello and Desdemona in *Red Velvet's Othello*, move beyond their seeming tribal identities – Aldridge as an innovative African American actor and Tree as a rising young white actress in an established British theater company – to forge a new kind of professional relationship, magnetically and passionately engaged while unencumbered by prejudice and tradition. DeLaurier said, "the conflicts in *Red Velvet* between the tribalism of black vs. white and tradition vs. innovation explicitly invoke that theater is a political act. The

contrast between the characters who show courage in the face of these conflicts and the characters who sink into cowardice is what makes *Red Velvet* so compelling.”

Tickets for *Red Velvet* go on sale Tuesday, August 15 at noon. Tickets are \$26 – \$43 and will be available online at www.lanterntheater.org or by calling the Lantern Box Office at (215) 829-0395. Student tickets are \$15 in advance; \$10 student rush tickets are available ten minutes before curtain with valid ID. Discounts are also available for theater industry professionals (\$10 in advance or at the door), seniors 65 and up, groups of 10 or more, and U.S. military personnel. Lantern Theater Company is located at St. Stephen's Theater, 10th & Ludlow Sts. in Center City Philadelphia.

About the Playwright

British actress and writer **Lolita Chakrabarti** graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and has worked extensively in theater and on screen. Her first play, *Red Velvet* premiered in 2012 at London's Tricycle Theatre with her husband, Adrian Lester, OBE, in the role of Ira Aldridge. The premiere production was nominated for the 2013 Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement for an Affiliate Theatre, and Chakrabarti won the 2012 Critics' Circle Theatre Award for Most Promising Playwright and the Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright from the *London Evening Standard*. Chakrabarti was also honored with the Asian Women of Achievement Award for Arts and Culture in 2013.

About the Director

Peter DeLaurier's directing credits include Lantern productions of *36 Views* by Naomi Iizuka; *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, both by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona; and *Vigil* by Morris Panych. He has also graced the Lantern stage in productions of *An Iliad*, *Underneath the Lintel*, *QED*, *The Train Driver*, *Emma*, *Heroes*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Skylight*. DeLaurier is a seven-time Barrymore Award nominee and received the award twice: for his role as The Librarian in *Underneath the Lintel* at the Lantern and as Kent in *King Lear* at People's Light. He is an artistic associate at People's Light and has been a member of their resident company since 1991.

About the Cast and Production Team

Forrest McClendon returns to the Lantern stage as Ira Aldridge. His previous Lantern credits include *Julius Caesar*, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*. McClendon is a 2011 Tony® Award nominee for his performance as Mr. Tambo in Broadway's *The Scottsboro Boys* – a role he reprised in London's West End and in a Barrymore Award-winning performance at Philadelphia Theatre Company. A recipient of the Lunt-Fontanne Fellowship for accomplished regional theater actors, he has appeared locally at

Walnut Street Theatre, The Wilma Theater, and 11th Hour Theatre Company, and nationally at Sundance, Actors Theatre of Louisville, North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, and The Guthrie Theater.

Red Velvet cast members returning to the Lantern stage include **David Bardeen** as Bernard Warde/Terence (tenth Lantern appearance including *Coriolanus*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and *Oscar Wilde: From the Depths* for which he received a Barrymore Award nomination), **Damon Bonetti** as Pierre LaPorte (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*; also co-artistic director of Philadelphia Artists' Collective), **Liz Filios** as Halina Wozniak/Betty Lovell/Margaret Aldridge (*An Iliad* and *As You Like It*), **Adam Hammet** as Charles Kean (*Coriolanus*), **David Pica** as Casimir/Henry Forester (*36 Views*), and **Lauren Sowa** as Ellen Tree (title role in *Emma*). Cast member **Ebony Pullum** will be making her Lantern debut as Connie.

The design team for *Red Velvet* includes scenic designer **Meghan Jones** (*An Iliad* and *Coriolanus* at the Lantern), costume designer **Janus Stefanowicz** (*Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Coriolanus*; three-time Barrymore Award-winner), lighting designer **Lily Fossner** (*Informed Consent*), and sound designer **Christopher Colucci**, a seven-time Barrymore Award-winner whose many Lantern credits include *The Gospel According To...*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Oscar Wilde: From the Depths*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and *Arcadia*.

About Lantern Theater Company

Founded in 1994, Lantern Theater Company is launching its twenty-fourth season with a record number of subscribers, its largest-ever operating budget at \$1.5 million, and a growing community of theater artists engaged in its productions and audience enrichment events. The Lantern's innovative **Theater Artist Fair Pay Initiative** was recently featured in *American Theatre* magazine as a leading national success story for increasing artist compensation through a combination of fundraising and higher ticket sales. The Lantern seeks to be a vibrant, contributing member of its community, exposing audiences to great theater, inviting participation in dialogue and discussion, engaging audience members on artistic and social issues, and employing theatrical language and techniques to enrich learning in the classroom. Since the inception of the Barrymore Awards for Excellence in Theatre in 1995, the Lantern has received 94 nominations and 19 awards, including the 2009 Excellence in Theatre Education and Community Service Award for its education program, *Illumination*. Following *Red Velvet*, the Lantern's 2017/18 season continues with the world premiere of *The Craftsman* by Philadelphia playwright Bruce Graham, *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, and the Philadelphia premiere of *Don't Dress for Dinner* by Marc Camoletti and adapted by Robin Hawdon. More information is online at www.lanterntheater.org.

FACT SHEET

Red Velvet

WRITTEN BY:

Lolita Chakrabarti

DIRECTED BY:

Peter DeLaurier

CAST:

David Bardeen as Bernard Warde/Terence
Damon Bonetti as Pierre LaPorte
Liz Filios as Halina Wozniak/Betty Lovell/Margaret Aldridge
Adam Hammet as Charles Kean
Forrest McClendon as Ira Aldridge
David Pica as Casimir/Henry Forester
Ebony Pullum as Connie
Lauren Sowa as Ellen Tree

PRODUCTION TEAM:

Scenic Designer – Meghan Jones
Costume Designer – Janus Stefanowicz
Lighting Designer – Lily Fossner
Sound Designer – Christopher Colucci
AEA Stage Manager – Rebecca Smith

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TICKET INFORMATION:

Online: www.lanterntheater.org

By Phone: (215) 829-0395

In Person: Lantern Box Office, 10th & Ludlow Sts., Philadelphia, PA 19107

TICKET PRICING:

Tickets are \$26 – \$43

Discounts available for students, seniors, military, and groups of 10 or more

PREVIEWS:

Thursday, September 7 at 7 p.m.

Friday, September 8 at 8 p.m.

Saturday, September 9 at 8 p.m.

Sunday, September 10 at 2 p.m.

Tuesday, September 12 at 6:30 p.m.

OPENING:

Wednesday, September 13 at 7 p.m.

REGULAR RUN:

Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. on September 19 and September 26

Wednesday at 2 p.m. on September 20 [AIC], and September 27 [AIC], and October 4

Wednesday at 7 p.m. on September 20, and September 27, and October 4

Thursday at 7 p.m. on September 14, September 21, September 28, and October 5

Friday at 8 p.m. on September 15, September 22 [PUB], September 29, and October 6

Saturday at 2 p.m. on September 16 and September 23

Saturday at 8 p.m. on September 16, September 23, September 30, and October 7

Sunday at 2 p.m. on September 17 [AIC], September 24 [AIC], October 1, and October 8

Sunday at 7 p.m. on October 1 only

CLOSING PERFORMANCE:

Sunday, October 8 at 2 p.m.

SPECIAL EVENTS:

▪ **[AIC] Artists in Conversation**

Post-show discussions with the cast immediately follows 2 p.m. performances on Sunday, September 17; Wednesday, September 20; Sunday, September 24; and Wednesday, September 27.

▪ **[PUB] Lantern Pub Night**

Lively conversation over a complimentary pub beverage immediately follows the 8 p.m. performance on Friday, September 22.

PLAY SYNOPSIS:

London, 1833. There are riots on the streets protesting the Slavery Abolition Act. Inside the Theatre Royal, tragic actor Ira Aldridge is making history. Fresh from dazzling success in the capitals of Europe, he is about to become the first African American actor to play Othello in London, where the play was created. The conflict inside the theater mirrors that on stage and outside: what price will artists pay for their audacity?

PERFORMANCE VENUE:

St. Stephen's Theater, 10th & Ludlow Sts., Philadelphia, PA 19107

PARKING/TRANSPORTATION:

Ample parking is available at nearby lots and garages, including The Autopark at Jefferson (10th & Ludlow Sts.) and LAZ Parking (10th & Chestnut Sts.). Metered street parking is available during posted hours. Venue is also accessible by taxi, SEPTA buses and trains, and the PATCO Speedline.