

'Jade Heart' tackles questions of family, identity

 Comments

May 7, 2010

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Back in 2007, the Collaboracion theater company enjoyed a huge success with its production of Rolin Jones' "The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow," staged in the Chicago Dramatists' intimate space. Now, Chicago Dramatists itself is presenting the world premiere of Will Cooper's "Jade Heart," which might well be thought of as that play's smart, if somewhat less magical, twin.

Another tale of cross-cultural (specifically Chinese-American) adoption, it similarly suggests the deep psychic ache such an arrangement can trigger in both the adoptive parent and the identity-seeking child. Rich in pathos and wit, with some neat little plot turns and many zesty performances, "Jade Heart," deftly directed by Russ Tutterow, certainly exerts an emotional pull with its look at various notions of abandonment and alienation. But often Cooper's scenes seem too neatly constructed -- designed primarily to illustrate his ideas.

The play follows the tense mother-daughter relationship between Jade (the petite, pretty, energetic Christine Bunuan), who was abandoned by her mother as an infant in rural China, and Brenda (Ginger Lee McDermott, in an emotionally searing performance), the academic whose husband left her after they were unable to have children of their own. Brenda eventually headed off to a Chinese orphanage in search of a baby girl who might help stave off her overwhelming loneliness.

Hellbent on raising Jade as an American girl, Brenda is something of an emotional wreck and clearly is worried about her daughter having any divided loyalties. Though at one point she hires a Chinese baby-sitter (Eliza Shin is perfect here) who teaches Jade some rudimentary Mandarin and traditional songs and stories, the woman is dismissed as soon as the Chinese connection starts to become too strong in Jade.

As a rebellious teenager, Jade sees herself only as an "outsider," not even fitting the Chinese-American cliché exemplified by her overachieving friend, Mei Lu (playfully captured by Melissa Canciller). And later, as an American literature specialist applying for university teaching jobs, Jade believes her Chinese identity might be a subtle disqualifier.

Jade clearly hungers for her birth roots, and part of that hunger is satisfied when she meets Duan (the utterly delightful Gordon Chow), a Chinese-bred student in the United States who is just hip enough, and just rooted enough, in the real China to supply the missing element in her life.

Tom Burch's set -- an ordinary American kitchen that unfolds into a picture-book suggestion of Beijing's Summer Palace -- is an ideal evocation of this story about two cultures and the divided loyalties of nature and nurture.

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