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Jade Heart

Posted by [admin](#) • May 2nd, 2010 • [Printer-friendly](#)

By [Will Cooper](#)



Directed by [Russ Tutterow](#)

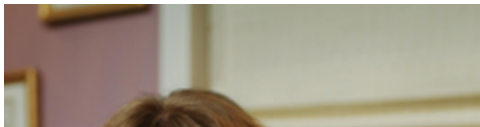
Strong 'Jade Heart' Pulses

Who rescues and who is being rescued?

Without doubt, a young, unmarried woman who takes the time, money, and effort to travel to China to adopt an abandoned baby girl certainly rescues the child. Playwright Will Cooper parallels this when the woman — herself abandoned by a man who rejected her infertility — is in turn saved by the infant who will fill her empty life.

The interplay between American Brenda (Ginger Lee McDermott) and her adopted Chinese daughter Jade (Christine Bunuan) — told in vignettes that swing from the Jade's winsome childhood, through her rebellious teens, to her ultimate maturity — reinforces a vivid, compelling look at personal identity.

In a play filled with neat nuances and plot shifts, Jade was not Brenda's first choice. That baby died. Brenda promises to raise Jade with knowledge of her Chinese heritage, yet reneges on this when she fears this information will separate her from being completely American. Jade continually struggles while attempting to come to terms with herself on multiple levels: as an abandoned child, as a beloved child, and then, in addition, as Chinese, as American, and as Chinese-American.





The time-line cleverly reinforces this split, continually shifting through Jade's years, as exemplified by the garments she plucks from an almost magical trunk. When she dons a silk embroidered jacket, she is a little girl. In a jean jacket, she becomes the picture of teen angst. At each age, each stage in her growth, she questions her past and seeks information. Why was she abandoned? Had she done anything to deserve it? Can she ever find the Chinese mother who supposedly left half a memory stone – a Jade heart — with the baby and kept the other half? Can these two halves, and the two women, ever reunite?

Linking East and West, Cooper creatively depicts the adult Jade as an English professor specializing in Chaucer. This enables the playwright provocatively to match her search for answers with pertinent references to the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*. In addition, he interlaces Jade's reality with her dreams and memories, so that she can confront her imagined birth mother (Eliza Shin).



Throughout, the background echoes the historic aftermath of China's one-child policy, with its increasing abandonment of girl babies in favor of sons.

Under Ross Tutterow's fine direction, Brenda and Jade provide wonderful foils for each other, moving from the extremes of love/hate to a wonderful rapprochement. Bunuan's mobile face captures a host of varied emotions and both her skill and small size make her believable playing any age. McDermott powerfully creates a brittle, troubled mother who cannot shape the relationship to her preconceived wishes. The excellent cast is rounded out by Shin, Gordon Chow and Melissa Canciller in multiple roles.

Tom Burch's effective set, as flexible as the actors, easily folds and unfolds in thirds moving from American Kitchen to scenic China. Often, it opens only partially to highlight and provide background for a specific character –and, by showing portions of each setting, once again juxtaposes the two, very different worlds.

Kudos to Cooper for a very clever, multi-dimensional drama and to Chicago Dramatists who mounted this World Premiere.

Highly Recommended.

Beverly Friend

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At the Chicago Dramatists, 1105 W. Chicago Avenue, www.chicagodramatists.org, 312-633-0630, tickets \$25-\$30, runs Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m., running time is 95 minutes with a 15-minute intermission, through May 30. Parking passes for a free lot at 810 Milwaukee Ave can be printed from the internet site or obtained at the box office and must be displayed.

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1 Responses »



1. *Sam Chang*
May 4, 2010 • 6:47 pm

This play was tedious and predictable beyond belief, and bordered on the offensive.

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