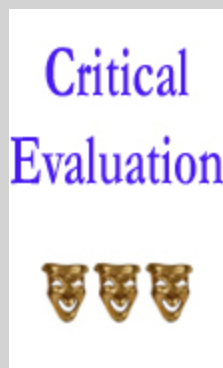


Steadstyle Chicago

May 2010 Theatre Review by Alan Bresloff



Jade Heart

Most of us are aware of China's "one child policy" established in 1979 in order to control the population growth. Women were forced to abort or were heavily fined unless the second child was a son. Many were even sterilized. But some mothers, finding their second child to be a girl brought them where they would be found and hopefully have some type of life. This may be a woman's greatest sacrifice, to give up their child. What happened to one of these girls is the story told by Will Cooper in his "Jade Heart", now in a World Premiere at Chicago Dramatists Theatre.

This 95 minute play takes us through several journeys of a mother, Brenda (a powerful portrayal by Ginger Lee McDermott), an unmarried woman unable to have her own child, who goes off to China to bring home one of these unwanted children who she will raise as an American. With the baby, she brings home a heart made of jade but cut into two pieces. The tradition is that the baby is left with one part and the mother wears the other. The hope is that one day, they will find each other and will know for certain if the two parts fit.

Jade is the name she has given this little girl who is now a rebellious teenager as the play opens. Jade is played by the very tiny Christine Bunuan, who can appear to be a little girl or a grown woman with just her acting ability and her powerful energy on stage. There are great number of flashbacks in this story directed by Russ Tutterow and a few instances that may seem confusing if you don't stay in focus. Jade sees her babysitter (Eliza

Shin, who also plays the symbol of Jade's birth mother) and the stories of China. Brenda decides not to allow this to be part of the routine. "Jade is American, not Chinese-American". The set designed by Tom Burch utilizes the small stage to perfection with a kitchen that converts to China with great ease. Here again, there were two scenes in the second act where half the kitchen and half the China set were both visible. This may have been for an effect as the content of their discussion dealt with Jade being torn as to what she really wants.

We follow Jade into her womanhood, finishing Grad school, and meeting Duan (deftly handled by Gordon Chow, who also takes on two other roles) who becomes her true love. He is Chinese, in America for his education. The adorable Melissa Canciller handles multi roles as well, one of which is Jade's best friend who at a tea party explains the proper way a Chinese girl drinks her tea, causing Jade to be even more confused. Is she not an American? While there are roots in China, Brenda has raised her as an American and wants her to forget about the jade heart and finding the other half. In fact, as the story evolves, there are some surprises relative to this special piece of jewelry, this symbol that allows a woman to find her daughter or vice-versa.

I found this to be a story that should be told, knowing a young lady who was brought here as a baby and who did return to seek her birth mother only to find that even after great expense, the birth mother denied being so. Many adopted children do opt to find their birth parents, while others understand that their family is the parent or parents who raised and cared for them. I can see where being a different race may cause more confusion in their lives. They look different and often feel the need to know their heritage. We all ask "Who am I?" from time to time and I am sure that those that have been adopted even more so than the norm. Just think about those adopted from another culture and what must be going on in their heads. I think Cooper has captured the emotions of both the mother who without Jade would have been an empty woman and the daughter, who needs to know more just to satisfy her curiosity.

I love the story and the production with the exception of being uneasy with some of the flashbacks not being

clear. The only other possible change would be to just run the entire play with no intermission. It runs about 95 minutes and by not taking the break, the audience would not lose the storyline or focus. The lighting by Jeff Pines, costumes by Samantha C. Jones, sound by Michael Griggs and props (of which no detail was spared) by Jennifer J. Thusing all made this a tight, powerful story and just in time to kick off Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Chicago Dramatists, now in its 30th year, has done it again.

Remember, this is a very intimate space and this production will only run through May 30, 2010, so order your tickets as fast as you can. The performance schedule is Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$25 for Thursday and Sunday and \$30 for Friday and Saturday. To order tickets call 312-633-0630 or visit www.chicagodramatists.org. The theater is located at 1105 West Chicago Avenue and easy to reach by public transportation. They have made arrangements with a parking lot around the corner at 810 N. Milwaukee Avenue for free parking. You need to either print a pass from the Internet or stop by the box office before parking so you can display this pass.

About Alan Bresloff



Alan Bresloff, once an actor himself, has been covering the Chicago Theater Scene since 1993, first as the Theater and Arts critic for LaRaza newspaper, then with

Salsachicago.com and then onto Extra Newspaper and The Epoch Times. He also writes for ElImparcial and TeleGuia. His reviews can also be seen on www.theatreinchicago.com. Alan does not call himself a "critic" but a "reviewer" as he tries to educate the reader about theater itself, what is a good value, what to look for in a play or musical and more.

"Exposure to theater is a very important part of a young person's life" he says. "Learning about the arts and culture is in fact learning about life" and he tries to explain more in his reviews than just if it is good or bad. Even some of the poor productions have some value, he often says and he would love your feedback on shows that you have seen. You can write him here or at albresloff@sbcglobal.net.