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Jade Heart shines at Chicago Dramatists

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Sunday, May 30, 2010; Posted: 04:05 AM - by [BWW News Desk](#)

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The World Premiere of *Jade Heart* is running now through May 30th at the [Chicago Dramatists](#) Theatre. Written by Senior Network Playwright [Will Cooper](#) and directed by Artistic Director [Russ Tutterow](#), *Jade Heart* explores the universal question: "Who am I?" The piece goes further to ponder if this question answerable or does it just leave the questioner with more questions?

Abandoned as an infant by her Chinese mother, Jade McCullough, is adopted and raised American. She grows up in a white, middle-class home with only half a jade heart and half a world between her and the rubble of her past. As she grows into womanhood, Jade is on a quest to find the other half of that jade heart and with that, the missing pieces of her identity. It's like *Annie* for a new age (but without those mortifying songs).

I have to congratulate local playwright [Will Cooper](#) for this truly insightful original work. Although the show is a mere 90 minutes, he doesn't rush it. He takes his time in presenting a beautiful piece about one's struggle for identity. Not only does he give you a girl struggling in relation to her family and in relation to her culture, he also layers in attention to China's one-child policy (established in 1979 to limit population growth). Sure, our relations with China are far different than they were thirty years ago. Nonetheless, Cooper reminds us that the repercussions of this horrific human rights violation are something that we're only starting to really deal with today.

This production of *Jade Heart* is completely worthy of its Jeff Recommendation. Tutterow negotiated the space quite well, taking the audience from the quiet intimacy of the family kitchen to the sprawling fields of China with ease. The cast handled the dark and somewhat existential subject matter quite effortlessly. That's probably the easiest call of the day to make. Nonetheless, some special notice should go to [Gordon Chow](#) and [Melissa Canciller](#). Handling most of the ancillary characters in the show, they brought humor, compassion and three-dimensionality to many of these characters allowing Cooper's world to come to life. Mr. Chow was downright charming as the Duan, Jade's boyfriend, and Ms. Canciller was hilarious as Jade's nemesis, Mei. She brought humor to the downright nastiness known as your childhood best friend. (I shudder when I think of my own.)

Support your local playwrights doing good work like *Jade Heart*. Before you know, they might be the toast of Broadway. (Ask [Tracy Letts](#) how that turned out). This stellar cast will only around until May 30th, so catch them while you can.

www.chicagodramatists.org

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Trish Vignola is a writer/performer with the critically acclaimed "Best Church of God" and is an Alumni and Staff Writer for "Big News: Chicago". When she's not writing for the stage, she's publishing her skewed sports musings at www.bleacherreport.com. Trish has a B.A. from Fordham University and an M.A. from Rutgers University. She is a member of Actors Equity and is currently one of the Assistant Directors for the Second City National Touring Companies.

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Sahr Ngaujah, who plays Fela Kuti, is of African descent. His family is from which of the following countries?

- Nigeria
- Zimbabwe
- South Africa
- Sierra Leone

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