

Interview: Jennifer Zhang for ‘A-Squared’ Asian American Performing Arts Festival From Oct. 20-23, 2016

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CHICAGO – Chicago’s cultural scene is diverse and expansive, and nothing proves that more than the “A-Squared” Theatre presenting the Asian American Performing Arts Festival – now through Sunday, October 23rd, 2016 (link below). One of the performers at the fest is Jennifer Zhang, who is a musician, actress and model, and has also represented the city as “Miss Friendship Ambassador of Chicago” through the Asian community.

Jennifer Zhang was born Zhang Yuqi in China – Chinese students often adopt English names when they begin to learn the language – and came to the U.S. when she attended Northwestern University. Prolific in piano and bamboo flute, Zhang decided to pursue a performing career full time after she worked in the financial industry for about a year. She works mostly as a musician, but will be acting in the Performing Arts Festival, doing the lead role in a one act play called “A Girl’s Gotta Do, etc.” by playwright Julia Izumi.



Jennifer Zhang (center) in ‘A Girl’s Gotta Do, etc.’ at the A-Squared Asian American Performing Arts Festival

Photo credit: JenniferZhang.com

In anticipation of her performance, Jennifer Zhang spoke to HollywoodChicago.com about the A-Squared festival and her own successful career.

HollywoodChicago.com: What will be your role in ‘A Girl’s Gotta Do, etc.’ and what is the play about?

Jennifer Zhang: I play the lead role of Melana, one of three teenage girls who make a pact to lose their virginity before their senior year ends. She struggles with it, because she’s not sure how she feels about her current boyfriend. It’s mostly about the friendships between the women in the play, and how they connect.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you like about your character in the play, and what do you think you give to her as an actor that nobody else would give her?

Zhang: Melana and I resemble each other, because when I was in high school I was the popular girl like her and had a lot of friends. She’s smart and cool, but when she falls in love she gets a bit blinded – which I can also relate to. The director [Brian Balcom] and the cast teased me a bit because they said that they could ‘see the Melana in me.’

HollywoodChicago.com: How has A-Squared Theatre expanded Asian culture in Chicago, and in your view, how is that scene growing and evolving?

Zhang: In the entertainment business, it’s fairly well known that Asian Americans are not being given many roles. But really there aren’t that many Asian actors, because culturally their parents want more schooling and more stable careers.

A-Squared Theatre has helped our community by getting the Asian performers and writers together to put on quality shows for Chicago. I was actually in the audience when I first saw a play that A-Squared produced, and was very impressed. I always wanted to work with them, but was focusing on my music, until they approached me to do this role.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a musician, actress and model. Which one of those three professions do feel most true to, and how does that one feed the other two?

Zhang: I am definitely more a musician, I’ve been studying the piano since I’ve been five and have been playing the bamboo flute since I was a teenager. I’ve spent my life consciously and unconsciously in music, and it feeds my overall creativity and happiness. Most of my work is as a musician. All the three main performing things I do feed on each other – as a musician, I’m comfortable on stage, which helps the acting and modeling, and it has made me used to the spotlight. I also have a fan base that is supportive, and that has helped me in all three professions.

HollywoodChicago.com: In reading a background biography of you, you’ve always seemed to be an outsider in every new challenge you’ve taken on. What is the biggest obstacle to overcome when you are an outsider, and what techniques do you believe worked the best in you overcoming it?

Zhang: One of the reasons I was an outsider so many times is because I like a challenge, and I like to overcome those challenges. I throw myself into unfamiliar environments, and adapt. I don’t know if it’s a ‘technique,’ as much as being as nice as possible and open to adapting. In every environment, you can take a part of it, and learn from it, to make yourself better. As long as we’re coachable and adaptable, it happens anyway.

HollywoodChicago.com: Often when somebody is a model, they are labeled as all looks and no substance. What do you do to overcome this perception?

Zhang: I’ve been fighting that for awhile, but my parents have always stressed education. Even though I’ve heard it from others, my mother would never tell me that I’m pretty. The best I’ll get from her is ‘okay.’ [laughs]. She’s a business woman, and is very independent and business minded, and has always told me to be independent and not rely on a man or relationship to make my way. The way that you look eventually fades, but what you create in life will always be there to represent you.

HollywoodChicago.com: Speaking of which, what is your opinion on the social status of women in China?

Zhang: To me, it’s better than other Asian cultures, like Japan and Korea. There is a slightly better equality in China, mostly because of the revolution. Once the country eliminated the feudal society, it demolished the old sequence – wives had to listen to their husbands, children to their parents, and subjects to their king. In a way, it helped the equality between men and women in China.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what do you think Americans don’t know about Chinese culture that would surprise them?

Zhang: It’s a much more indirect society. For example, if you want to turn something down, it’s more difficult to say ‘no.’ You’re more likely in China to make a grand excuse, rather than a direct rejection. There is also a bit more individuality in America because of the diversity, because in China there are still behaviors as a woman that has to be followed. I can always tell a Chinese-American woman in the way they laugh. In China, nobody really laughs out loud in public or especially in photos, but when I meet someone here who does, I know they were raised in America. [laughs]

The A-Squared Asian American Performing Arts Festival is going on now through October 23rd, 2016. [Click here](#) for more information and to purchase tickets. Click [JenniferZhang.com](#) for more on Ms. Jennifer Zhang.



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Jennifer Zhang

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