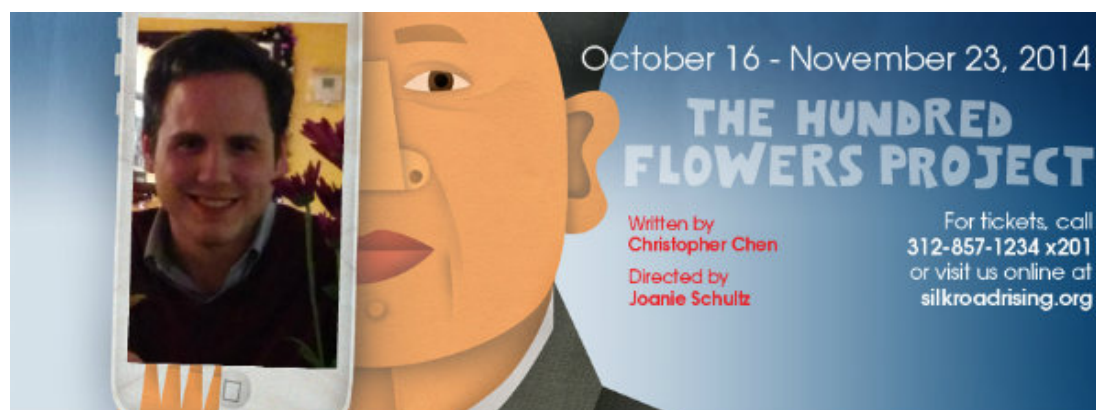


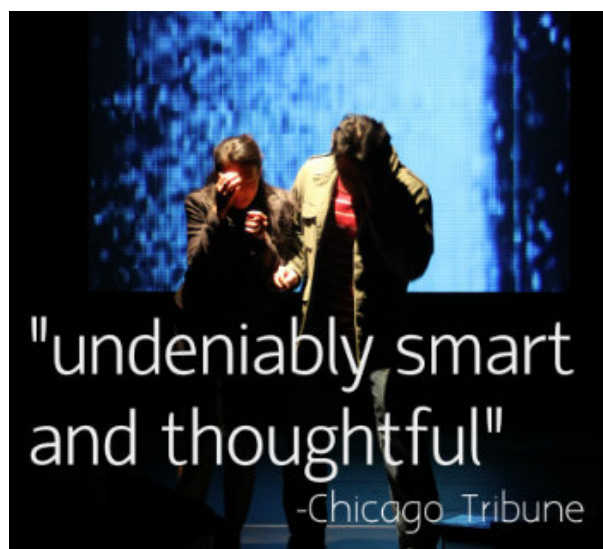
Hello Friend join us for "a fascinating spectacle." [View Online](#) Or [Forward](#) to a friend.



THE MILLENNIAL MAO

Thoughts on Viewing *The Hundred Flowers Project*
by Ethan Grant

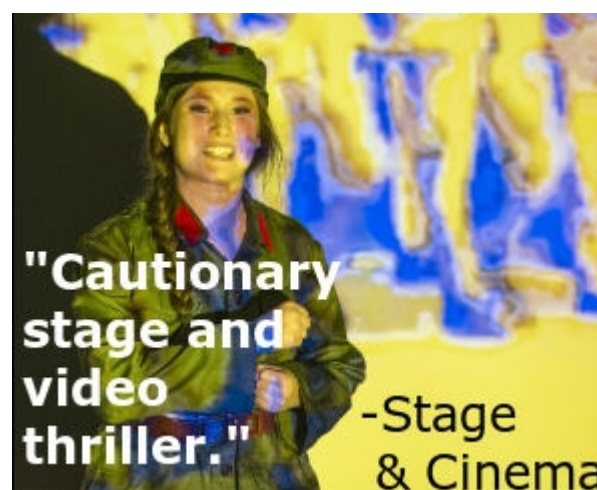
The night I saw Silk Road Rising's second preview of *The Hundred Flowers Project*, a group of some fifty university students also happened to be in attendance—so there we were, an audience largely comprised of young, educated, relatively sheltered millennials with no concept of oppressive regimes, settling down to view a real-world Orwellian horror the likes of which we've never had to face. At 24, I had a year or two on most of the students in attendance, but by all other accounts I fit the white, college-educated mold perfectly. I am utterly inexperienced in anything approaching the totalitarian oppression of Mao Zedong's China or the death toll of his Great Leap Forward.



But as we shuffled into Pierce Hall, it became immediately apparent that something unusual was taking place. Even before the title card appeared on the projector, the actors were already in character, milling about in our shared theatre space. The actors were themselves portraying actors in what seemed to be the familiar territory of Prince Hamlet—the play-within-a-play. And as the play (without-the-play) began, we were quickly introduced to the fictional troupe's unique mission: to create a work that would examine Mao's China through the contemporary lens of our social media-saturated age.

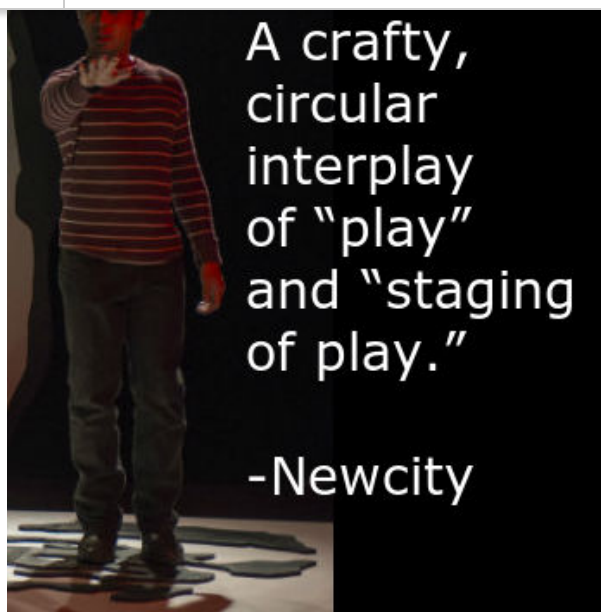
The actors took advantage the entire theatre space, tinkering with sound and lighting, consulting one another in the seats, even pouring coffee at a conveniently placed snack cart. It began to feel as though we were sitting in on a real rehearsal: there was no boundary between us and them. For all intents and purposes, we'd become a part of their cast—a seventh member of their troupe, silently watching as our colleagues toiled away.

Then the dynamics started to shift. Slowly it became clear that a third presence was at work. Something alien, malevolent, controlling, totalitarian was invading the set by means of the audio-visual components: the tech was becoming the terror. It was as though by evoking the spirit of Mao's regime in the already-fluid reality of theatre, his presence was granted permission to take residence among not only them, but us, like a vampire invited over a threshold. Technology had its own designs for the play, and it was growing more and more aggressively voyeuristic in its efforts to force them on the cast.



Early in the play, before technology completely took over, one cast member, Aidan, remarked on a U2 concert he recently attended. He observes that the arena was "a sea of iPhones, glowing screens." The audience at this concert was evidently too busy recording the event to experience the performance firsthand. Sound familiar? Every armchair, Wikipedia-educated social commentator has voiced an opinion about our "millennial" generation's proclivity toward sharing our lives on social media and engrossing ourselves in an increasingly digital world. That sentiment is old-hat, as fresh as a Monica Lewinsky joke. If *The Hundred Flowers Project* were saying nothing more than that, I doubt I would be moved to comment on it right now. But this was not the case.

Christopher Chen's is a far more worthy work with considerably more to say to us (and all through meta-narrative and our patented Millennial Irony). As I sat watching with fifty college students, Chen wove ingenious parallels between our contemporary modus operandi and the tactics employed by Mao—or



turned to Vine, to SnapChat: apps that satisfy our desire to share the minutia of our daily lives with those inside our circle (and even @ those outside our #circle) of friends. And I was reminded of how these social media narratives affect us, of the jealous pangs I and so many others feel when our Facebook newsfeed starts filling up with friends' joyous new relationships, career advancements, or otherwise good fortunes and happy times. . . .

But are these narratives strictly true? What grounding do they share with reality? Are we, like Mao, just manufacturing narratives to bolster our own esteem? Or are we simply using the tools at our disposal to craft these stories so judiciously that the line between fiction and reality becomes hopelessly blurred? I think of Fred Armisen's remark in the "Italy Trip" sketch on *Portlandia*:

"Everyone on the internet, they're not having as great a time as you think they are."

This disconnect between reality and narrative becomes the central conceit of the show, with the cast serving as unwitting guinea pigs in a sinister social experiment. Before our eyes the power dynamics evolved until the actors weren't writing the play—the play was writing (or rewriting) the actors. We were sampling, in the smallest degree, the perpetual fear and paranoia of life under a totalitarian regime, all as cast through the prism of our iPhone screens. By the end of this multimedia spectacle we left the theatre in a dazed, stupefied, utterly exhausted state. What we had just watched, we realized, was a reflection of our lives, as twisted and distorted in the funhouse mirror of history.

The greatest gift theatre can offer is to instill in its audience a sense of catharsis: a deeply personal resonance and almost physical unburdening that stems from experiencing a powerful work of art. In this regard, I found *The Hundred Flowers Project* to be a stunning success. Even if you don't initially grasp every detail of this sharply written, fast-paced work—even if you fail to recognize some of the historical figures and events being referenced—you will still be left in a place of understanding and familiarity. Nothing in the play is so specific as to be exclusive, nor so universal as to feel dilute. It walks a tightrope between the here and now, the there and then. For this reason, *The Hundred Flowers Project* resonates beautifully with the 21st century, globally-minded "millennial" audience. It is (to paraphrase the play itself) a catharsis for the modern age.



Photos by Michael Brosilow and Michael Stanfill.

***The Hundred Flowers Project* is performing at Silk Road Rising thru November 23rd**

Thursdays: 7:30pm

Fridays: 8pm

Saturdays: 8pm

Sundays: 4pm

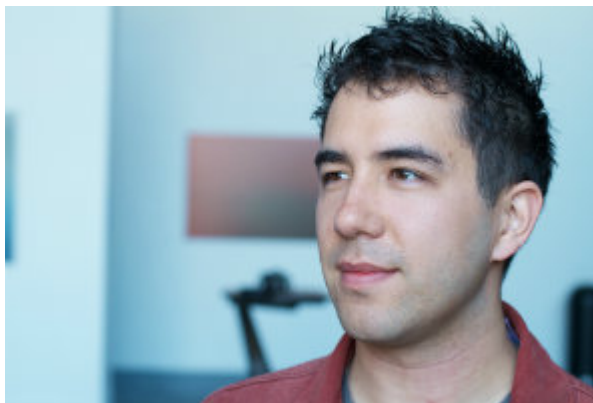
Tickets are \$35 Adults / \$15 Students

[Buy Tickets](#)

Meet Playwright Christopher Chen (this week only!)

The Hundred Flowers Project playwright, Christopher Chen, is visiting us from San Francisco this week. He will be attending all four performances (Thursday, October 30th through Sunday, November 2nd) and he looks forward to meeting our patrons.

Christopher Chen is an international award-winning playwright whose full-length works have been produced and developed across the United States and abroad, including at the American Conservatory Theater, Asian American Theater Company, Bay Area Playwrights Festival, Beijing Fringe, Central Works, Crowded Fire, Cutting Ball Theater, Edinburgh Fringe, Fluid Motion, hotNK Festival, Just Theatre, Lark Play Development Center, Magic Theatre, Playwrights Foundation, Silk Road Rising and Theatre Mu.



Chris is the recipient of the 2013 Paula Vogel Playwriting Award and is current playwright in residence at The Vineyard Theatre. Other honors have included the 2012 Glickman Award, the 2012

[Subscribe](#)

[Past Issues](#)

[Translate](#) ▼

[RSS](#)

Dramaturg for *Into the Numbers*; and, a Ford Foundation Emerging Writing of Color Grant. Chris was also a finalist for the Jerome Fellowship.

Our neighborhood partners provide generous support to Silk Road Rising throughout the year. Please help us show our appreciation by patronizing these outstanding businesses.



You are receiving this email because you are a Silk Road Rising supporter.
[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update your profile](#) | [Forward to a friend](#)
Copyright © 2014 All rights reserved.

Silk Road Rising
150 N Michigan Ave
Ste 1970
Chicago, IL 60601

[Add us to your address book](#)