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The Good, the Bad, and the Hopeful: Reflecting on Silk Road Rising's Induction into Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame

An Essay by Jamil Khoury



On November 12, 2014, in a ceremony at the Chicago History Museum, Silk Road Rising will be inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame. The significance of this honor, with its myriad of cultural and political meanings, cannot be overestimated. For it is not just recognition, it is vindication. Silk Road Rising is a non-profit theatre and media arts company founded by a gay male couple, inaugurated with a Palestinian / Jewish / Lesbian-themed play, and committed, in part, to the holistic integration of feminist and queer stories within the canons of Asian American and Middle Eastern American storytelling. It is a commitment that distinguishes our

organization, certainly, but also one that provokes backlash, particularly from within segments of our Asian and Middle Eastern communities. As the induction ceremony approaches, I feel compelled to reflect upon the journey of Silk Road Rising to Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame. The good, the bad, and the hopeful.

I think about the LGBT theatre artists, particularly those of Silk Road backgrounds, who've thanked us for creating safe and supportive environments in which to explore hybrid and shifting identities and "culturally taboo" subject matter.

I think about the death threats we received surrounding a certain production of ours (a play with a rather secondary gay storyline) and the presence of plainclothes police officers at our opening night party. I think about the unmarked police car parked in front of our theatre every night of the run.

I think about the LGBT audience members who've credited specific shows of ours for helping them come out to their families and friends. I think about the plays and the people they've empowered to challenge prejudice within their own cultural and religious communities.



I think about the high profile civil rights attorney of a Silk Road background who said to our faces "I'd rather be represented as a terrorist than as the father of a gay son."



I think about the community activists, campus organizations, and social service agencies that have turned to us for help addressing LGBT issues in their immigrant and second generation communities, assistance they deem both culturally informed and culturally sensitive.

I think about the artistic, financial, and emotional devastation wrought by anti-gay shunning and attacks on our integrity. I think about the partnerships and collaborations never realized due to bigotry and fear. I think about the glaring omissions of those that should have supported us but did not. I think about the solidarity given

but never returned.

I think about our LGBT-affirming, same-sex wedding officiating hosts at the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple, who demonstrate an understanding of human sexuality and gender expression that can best be described as "intentionally Christian."

I think about the time the Northern Illinois Methodist Conference was threatened with the termination of an important interfaith partnership if they did not "compel" our Chicago Temple hosts to "shut down" a production of ours featuring a gay character. To the great credit of the conference and our hosts, they elected to stand with Silk Road and our artistic freedom and against homophobia and intimidation.

I think about the many forums in which our work has been championed for creating social change, for building empathy, for expanding diversity, for strengthening communities, and for tackling politically charged issues through a decidedly artistic lens.

who runs this company. I think about those who've made it emphatically known that they'd be great advocates of ours —“big donors” even—if only we'd ditch “the gay agenda.”



I think about those “stealth moments” in which healthy and honest conversations about homosexuality have materialized under the cover of “discussing the play” as opposed to “discussing the community.” Whatever it takes.



I think about the anti-gay student walkouts at lectures and talk backs and the embarrassed dismay of our progressive allies. I think about the successful national college tour of the above mentioned lesbian love story and the behind-the-scenes hostilities and pernicious boycotts that “greeted” us on several campuses.

I think about the whispers, the muted accolades, typically uttered behind closed doors, best paraphrased as “I cannot support you publicly because I'm afraid, but I want you to know that I applaud everything you're doing. We need more Silk Road Risings.”

I think about the people who've accused Silk Road Rising of “being too gay” or of “not being gay enough,” and then proceeded to project their own priorities and “hierarchies of oppression” onto us. I think about being told that our focus on ethnicity, race, and cultural identity gets “diluted” when gender and sexuality is “thrown in the mix.”

I think about how grateful we are for theories of intersectionality, how both/and almost always trumps either/or, and how overlapping and interconnecting our lives truly are.

I think about the “umbrella organization” that recently mailed a “confidential” letter to over sixty affiliated organizations—key Silk Road constituencies—advising them not to cooperate in any way with Silk Road Rising because “its leadership is gay.” What they failed to consider is that some of those letter recipients might actually be inspired to work with us!



I think about two courageous women, feminists in a religiously conservative environment, who bucked “popular consensus,” jumped in a car, and drove ninety minutes to voice their support for us.

I think about the many conversations in which homophobia, sexism, and racism have been justified, defended even, as “part of our culture.”

I think about the outpouring of love and support and goodwill and generosity that we have received for refusing to allow closets and lies to fabricate respectability and for repudiating those who claim “there are no LGBT people in our community, that's a problem in other communities.” If gayness is a gift from God, then for Silk Road Rising it is the gift that keeps on giving.



In becoming a part of Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame, Silk Road Rising is not only entering truly great company, not only building upon those incredibly brave legacies, we are being affirmed by a beloved community of ours, a community that has our back against those who insist we bring nothing but dishonor and shame. In honoring Silk Road Rising, the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame is standing with those in our Asian and Middle Eastern communities, and beyond, for whom this organization is a source of hope and pride. Induction never felt so loving and right.

The Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame's Annual Ceremony will take place from 5:30 p.m. until 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 12, at the Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark St., Chicago. A reception begins at 5:30 p.m., and the program is scheduled for 6 p.m. The event is free and open to the public (reservations / tickets are not required).



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