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SILK ROAD SOLOS: The Genealogy of a Timeless Genre



From the desk of
Artistic Director Jamil Khoury

For years we've been planning a special commitment to solo performance artists, and the time for that commitment is now. To this end, I'm pleased to announce the first four [Silk Road Solos](#) artists (more will soon follow).

Solo plays occupy an important space in the canon of plays suitable for Silk Road Rising, and for reasons that align conspicuously well with our mission of harnessing one's own representation.

Many writers and performers of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds are afforded greater artistic freedom and more robust opportunities in the arena of solo performance than in traditional theatre. Solo performance levels the playing field by enabling artists to tell their

stories as they wish to tell them.

Solo work is the ultimate bootcamp for theatremakers—it forces artists to exercise their writer muscles, actor muscles and, in many cases, their producer muscles.

While some may deride solo performance as a “substitute” or “consolation” in lieu of a “regular” play, it is anything but: it is a genre of theatre that puts the individual artist in control and transforms the deeply personal into the profoundly theatrical, introducing voices all too often suppressed or denied. When executed with skill and integrity, the cathartic, empathic potential of solo performance is boundless.

When curating *Silk Road Solos*, we set out to assemble a group of female artists who would share meaningful stories that are honest, entertaining, illuminating, humorous, and courageous—artists who could translate personal experience and fieldwork into emotionally compelling theatrical journeys.

In Kim Schultz's [No Place Called Home](#), Minita Gandhi's [Muthaland](#), Rohina Malik's [Unveiled](#), and Puja Mohindra's [A Great Dive](#), we found precisely those artists and stories.

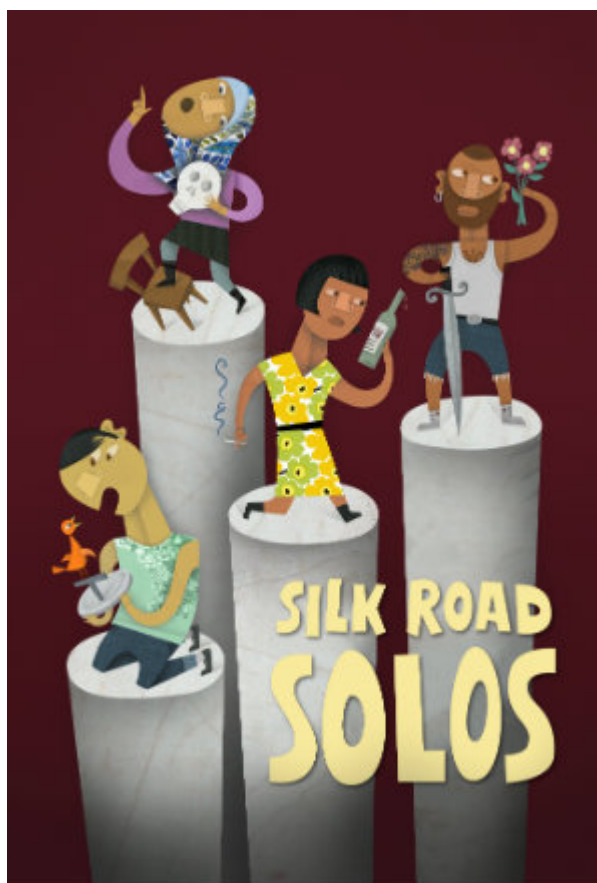
That all four artists are women is of great significance to us, as stories focused on and written by women are far too rare on America's stages, and all too often silenced in our Silk Road communities.

The antecedents of these four powerful plays are found in three great traditions, one rooted in “Old World” antiquity, the other two in American civil rights struggles which gained momentum in the 60s and 70s. The three traditions are:

1. Oral storytellers and epic poets of the historic Silk Road (roughly 200 B.C.E to 1600 A.C.E):

Blending spectacle with learning and morality tales with mischief, and traversing China to Syria and beyond, the oral storyteller embodied a whole canvas of characters and conflicts, ideas, events and dreams, using only his voice and body, and a few props at best. The storyteller would enact narratives—both simple and elaborate—before audiences hungry for entertainment, knowledge, and contact with the outside world. The celebrated Silk Road storyteller assumed many roles, including artist, ethicist, interpreter, translator, historian, ambassador, adjudicator, social commentator, and soothsayer.

2. The feminist performance art movement: Inspired by agitprop theatre, women's liberation, and radical activist politics, feminist performance art begins with the assumption that the personal is political, women's lives matter, women should be respected and heard, and that women can love their own bodies. As a performative genre, it questions and subverts our assumptions about women,



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expressions, body types, and socio-economic backgrounds to blend art with activism, imagination with strategizing, and righteous anger with outrageous rebellion.

3. The Asian American solo plays movement: In empowering Asian American theatre artists to reclaim the mantle of their own representation, Asian American solo plays have become a vital force in constructing identity, building community, resisting racism, and challenging invisibility. Fodder for artists include: deconstructing stereotypes and the myth of the “model minority,” disrupting orthodoxies of Asian American identity politics, airing tensions between individual desires and family expectations, marrying non-Asians, balancing assimilation and cultural heritage, being Hapa (mixed blood), being an Asian adoptee, honoring and reinventing traditions, navigating intersections of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia within immigrant and second generation communities, and battling Orientalism of both the external and internal varieties.

Looking forward, we envision *Silk Road Solos* as an ongoing project—a rolling festival of sorts. As evidenced by the lineup, we’ve committed to producing a diverse and eclectic group of stories seldom heard on Chicago’s stages, and already we’re making plans with additional artists.

As an organization, we see solo performance becoming an integral component of Silk Road Rising’s repertoire, along with traditional full-cast plays, video plays, staged readings, documentaries, public school arts education, civic engagement initiatives, screenings and presentations, community outreach, and panel discussions.

The strong link between contemporary solo performance and the historic Silk Road acts as a vivid reminder: the present is best served when we honor the past and imagine a just future.

See you at Silk Road Rising,

Jamil Khoury
Founding Artistic Director



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