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Romeo & Juliette: Takarazuka Revue's adaptation of Gerard Presgurvic's *Romeo et Juliette: de la Haine et l'Amour*

The “star-crossed lovers” is an archetypal story generated across many cultures for centuries. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most prominent iterations of such a trope, given that the phrase “star-crossed lovers” is a direct reference to this play and applied to others of a similar nature (Shakespeare 7). Since it was first performed, *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted by writers, composers, and other storytellers into innumerable tales: *& Juliet* (2019 musical) and *Rosaline* (2022 film) being two more recent spins. Shakespeare's play seems to have run the gamut of potential, from classical renditions to modern retellings to zombie apocalypses. Yet, audiences and creatives still return to *Romeo and Juliet* time after time to tell the story in traditional or groundbreaking ways.

One such retelling belongs to the Takarazuka stage of Japan. *Romeo & Juliette* (*Romeo to Juliette* in Japanese) was first performed by Takarazuka Kagekidan (henceforth referred to as “Takarazuka Revue Company,” “Takarazuka Revue,” “Takarazuka,” or “The Revue”) in 2010 as an experimental Star Troupe piece, exploring topics of violence, sexuality, and society. This particular adaptation of Shakespeare's play has become a curious case study in how Takarazuka adapts Western stories into a Japanese performance context. Intergenerational violence and solidarity with a subliminal anti-power sentiment are the prevailing themes found in this cross-cultural adaptation, occasionally overpowering the love story. These themes appear covertly in the musical's hybridity, construction of generations, and the Takarazuka Metanarrative.

The musical *Romeo & Juliette* isn't entirely original to The Revue. It originated in France, written and composed by Gerard Presgurvic as *Romeo et Juliette: de la Haine a l'Amour* (henceforth referred to as *Romeo et Juliette* exclusively). Presgurvic's rock-opera adaptation of the classic Shakespeare play world-premiered on January 19th, 2001, at the Paris Palais des Congres (Grajdian, 5:30). Since 2001, Presgurvic's musical has been translated into more than 12 languages and has been performed in Canada, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Portugal, Japan, and more. As Maria Grajdian points out, this Shakespearean musical based on *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most prolific compositions, with the ability "to break boundaries of western adaptations" and reach diverse audiences (Grajdian, 20:25).

For clarification, the three versions of the play we are discussing will be differentiated as so: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Presgurvic's *Romeo et Juliette*, and Koike Shuuichirou's (Takarazuka's) *Romeo & Juliette*, the last being the focus of this paper. The boundaries *Romeo et Juliette* have crossed are more than just physical. In each adaptation and translation, the musical transforms in meaning and substance. "The central narrative line of a tragic romance between two star crossed lovers remains unchanged, though, so that the main characters gradually turned into human archetypes and their story into a symbol of 'ideal love' (despite being a doomed love story)" (Grajdian 3:50). The story and "human archetypes" soak up the cultural context and adapts to prescribed meanings according to the translator(s) and direction. Takarazuka Revue's *Romeo & Juliette* is one of the more boundary-breaking versions.

Takarazuka is notorious for adapting stories all over the world, earning the title of "hybridite" in their unique and iconic style of image and performance (Holledge, Tompkins Chapter 4). "For hybridity to remain a productive form, the two parts must generate an energy that is almost chemical in its recombinative effects" (Holledge, Tompkins Chapter 4).

“Chemical” is one way to describe the success of the experimental *Romeo & Juliette*. Since the original production in 2010 (Star troupe), Takarazuka revived the musical in 2011 (Snow Troupe), 2012 (Moon Troupe), 2013 (Star Troupe, same cast as 2010), with the most recent production in the 2021 season’s Star Troupe (Grajdan 4:50). Each production directed by Koike Shuuichirou, the writer and translator.

Koike Shuuichirou’s translation and direction does more than simply regurgitate Presgurvic’s French words into Japanese. Much of Presgurvic’s themes and staging remains as it is fairly true to source, but Koike alters much of the lines and storytelling, fusing more of the original Shakespeare with Presgurvic’s composition and a quintessential Takarazuka flair. “Aimer” (“To Love”) exemplifies the combination as Koike opts for lyrics similar to Romeo and Juliet’s vows from the play rather than the sensually charged lyrics of Presgurvic (Koike 28). This hybridite show was transformed into a Takarazuka show, testing the waters of a Japanese audience in the middle of a neo-conservative swing. There are some clear appeals to the traditional values of family and society that Takarazuka generally incorporates into their shows, as well as oppositional views that could be interpreted as challenging the dominant narrative (and metanarrative) of a tragic love story.

Japan’s precedent of theatrical love stories ending in double suicide harkens back to the 1700s in bunraku (puppet theatre). Suicide in Japan’s history is a well-known topic, the ritual death of samurai (seppuku) often coming to mind, however, there is another form of suicide that has a rich history in Japan, particularly in literature and drama. Shinju (double suicide) is most notably featured in the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon. The classical definition of shinju is “two parties willingly and deliberately choosing suicide to extricate themselves from a miserable and oppressive situation” (Heine 368). Koike’s *Romeo & Juliette* pulls on the implications and

meaning behind shinju, which is the Japanese social concepts of “giri” (social obligation) and “ninjo” (human emotion).

Chikamatsu’s shinju plays often explore the values of giri and ninjo within the storylines. It is not too far of a stretch to see these values at play in *Romeo & Juliette* as the titular characters struggle between fulfilling their love and obeying their families “as the tragic outcome of the conflict between the hero’s social duty (giri)... and his all-too-human passion (ninjo) for his lover” (Heine 368). Another interpretation lies outside of the main couple and within their families. The true tragedy of Koike’s *Romeo & Juliette* lies in the giri or social responsibility of the “adults” who failed their children rather than in the children failing society.

“The adults” is a motif in Koike’s translation that appears in three distinct moments. Although Shakespeare’s and Presgurvic’s works include the setting of intergenerational violence, the generational separation is not so explicitly explored across families as it is in Koike’s *Romeo & Juliette*. The first mention of the “adults” is by Romeo, Benvolio, and Mercutio, the second by Tybalt, and the final by Lord Capulet, who identifies himself as an adult. This demarcation of adults does a couple of things to the story. It is first to be noted that “the adults” are the families (Capulet and Montague) who encourage and instill the generational feud into their children. One important change that Presgurvic’s does not emphasize is creating a separation between the adults of the play (Lords and Ladies Capulet and Montague, and The Prince) and the children (Romeo, Juliette, Tybalt, Benvolio, and Mercutio). This differentiation is important in the pursuit of furthering the message of solidarity because, as much as it separates the generations, it also unites them horizontally across family lines. “La Haine” (“Hatred” sung by the Ladies Capulet and Montague), while not explicitly discussing the role of “adults,” begins with Lady Capulet singing, “The first word learned by any child born to our house is hatred, hatred!” (Koike 5). The

adults are defined by their encouragement and fulfillment of the feud, while the main characters and their peers are defined as the next generation raised within the violence. Another reason why the differentiation is important is that it is a reminder of how young the main characters are. These are children fighting battles for adults.

On the side of the adults, Lord Capulet has one solo in the musical, “Avoir une Fille” (“To Have a Daughter”), which acts as an insight into his behavior. A key difference between the Lord Capulets of Shakespeare and Presgurvic and the Lord Capulet of Takarazuka is that Koike Shuuichirou fashions Lord Capulet into a much more aggressive character, almost a villain in his treatment of Lady Capulet and Juliet. Lady Capulet screams at him over Tybalt’s corpse, “And where were you? Gambling? Drinking? Womanizing?” (Koike 36). The Capulet family is in debt, which further fuels Lord Capulet to force Juliette into marriage from the very beginning without reservation, and, it is also shown, he is unfaithful to his wife. Before his solo, he strikes Juliette across the face, which does not occur in Presgurvic’s version, nor is it in the text of Shakespeare. “Avoir une Fille” isolates Lord Capulet on stage as he sings about how he knows what is best for Juliette and just wants her to be happy. His line “I am considering things as an adult” shows that he identifies as an adult and must have knowledge and power over his family, all while he acknowledges his failure as a father (46).

“C’est Pas Ma Faute” (“It’s Not My Fault”) is the second instance in the show where “adults” are discussed explicitly. Tybalt’s invocation of adults assigns blame: “Whatever I do, the adults drove me to it. The real me is different” (Koike 19). Tybalt typically has one solo, however, Takarazuka composed a second solo, “Tybalt,” for the 2010 Star Troupe production to bolster his character’s prevalence. Takarazuka’s Tybalt takes on a rather analogous role in the story, distilling the greater struggle between families into a single character. He represents

society (Verona, or arguably broader) with his proud, violent behavior. However, his songs convey his internal thoughts and dreams, which he recognizes as unreachable. Takarazuka's additional song becomes the first solo of the first act as Tybalt explains how he suppresses his true nature: "If I abandon myself to loneliness, can it still be called living?" (10). In both songs, there is a sense of desperate mourning, as if he already knows how his story will end well before fate begins to guide it. Often, his juvenile word choices once again mark his youth while he sings about the loss of childhood that society and violence took from him: "I had a dream when I was little where I became a brave hero. I fought a dragon and rescued a princess from a tower" (19). However, he never shares his inner thoughts with anyone, friend or foe. Even his death occurs in silent violence, having no lines or verses for more than a page before he is killed (36). As an analogy for society, it can be inferred that Tybalt's journey is symbolic of a larger sentiment that people wish for peace and love, but often are brought up in violence until it becomes their instinct.

The "adults" theme also has the potential to be read within the broader metanarrative context of Takarazuka as well. "Les Rois du Monde" ("Kings of the World") is the first song to explicitly discuss "the adults." It is also the song that expresses the most desire for solidarity before the major dramatic action, closely following the number "La Haine." Sung by Romeo, Benvolio, Mercutio, and a vaguely Montague ensemble, "Les Rois du Monde" celebrates friendship, youth, and subversive power. In supporting the theme of solidarity, the song is a large ensemble piece with a constantly repeating chorus often sung with a descant of the leads:

From morning till night, for all the time we have,
We want to feel alive in this moment with love for each other.
We won't to lose to the adults!
We are our own kings! (Koike 14)

The music underneath thrums, lively and pulsing like a heartbeat, emphasizing the feeling of being alive and in love. The desire and belief in solidarity are most obvious in this song, which feels separated from the setting of violent Verona yet suits the themes of the show. It shows off how the youth are claiming their autonomy and lives as they attempt to cast off the shadows of power that are held over them.

For the themes of *Romeo & Juliette*, this is one of the most vocal songs actively dismissing those with power for people “down on earth” to live freely (Koike 14). However, knowing the blurred lines between the Takarazuka stage and reality, the words of the characters can, at times, seem to bleed into the mouths of the actresses. While it is widely acknowledged that the directing board of Takarazuka Revue Company controls many aspects of these young women’s lives and performance, even being likened to a military academy, some actresses have expressed places where they find freedom (Holledge, Tompkins Chapter 4). “Tsurugi Miyuki, top otokoyaku star of the Moon Troupe, indicated that the otokoyaku is fairly free to interpret a character as she wishes” (Brau 86). The main goal of an otokoyaku (actress playing masculine roles) is to appeal to her spectator and communicate with the audience. In a song like “Les Rois du Monde,” the actresses sound as if they are singing a rebellion against the executive “adults” who are like the “kings running the world are up above the clouds” that Romeo sings about in the first line of the song (Koike 14). The song continues, “Romeo:...But down on earth / Romeo and Benvolio: We’re the heroes!” (14). On stage, it is the actresses who make the story, despite how executives may attempt to control them from above. On stage, their voices are heard, and the audience listens.

The dominant metanarrative of Takarazuka often, and rightly so, points out the patriarchal systems in place in which a primarily male directorial board wields power over the

female troupe. This system is highly controversial for its conservative functioning and its desperate demand to “educate” its largely female audience. But as Brau argues, the actresses are not simply puppets; they are in communication with their audience, speaking a language unique to each other. Although the company may be designed to subjugate women and create “good wives and mothers,” from the perspective of the players and audience, “we may discover-especially in the Takarazuka otokoyaku...a display of power and desirability that may, in turn, empower the women who adore them” (Brau 84, 92). *Romeo & Juliette*, because of its experimental and free nature, becomes an avenue for the actresses of Takarazuka to free their voices and experience solidarity within the powerful ensemble voice of the troupe and the resounding echo of the audience, much like the characters find solidarity with each other.

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