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Contemporary Takarazuka Revue
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Takarazuka Kagekidan

As both a barometer and forerunner of Japanese culture, Takarazuka Kagekidan (henceforth called Takarazuka Revue, Takarazuka, or the Revue) has more than a little to say about Japanese culture. Either taken at face value, with the intended purpose of the company, with the effect gleaned from fans, or with the broader effects based on Takarazuka, this theatre company often performs insights on Japan (and humanity) politically and culturally. After the World Wars and under occupation, Japan felt a great sense of loss. Loss of identity and loss of control. In response, the Japanese sought to reconstruct their identity. Takarazuka Revue is a great example of such a reconstruction. While Western theatre influences Takarazuka, they have adapted the styles to be completely their own. Some of the more pressing subjects that Takarazuka encounters, on stage or by nature of the company in the public sphere, are that of imperialism, capitalism, feminism, homoeroticism, and propaganda.

Kobayashi Ichizo (a/n Japanese names as written in this essay follow the Japanese style with the surname preceding the given name) founded the Takarazuka Revue in 1913 with the first performance following in 1914. As the name suggests, this theatre company sets its headquarters in the city of Takarazuka near Umeda Station, the last stop on the Hankyu Takarazuka Train Line. Originally, Takarazuka Revue was a sideshow of chorus girls founded by Kobayashi, also the founder of Hankyu Railways, to bring more customers to the final destination on the line in the hot springs of Takarazuka. Although an avid theatre fan, Kobayashi believed traditional Japanese theatre such as Noh and Kabuki were much too elitist and aging. With a pastiche of Japanese tradition familiar to audiences, western influences recently

introduced and popularized, and a peculiar cast composition of young girls and women, Takarazuka Revue was born.

Since its inception, Takarazuka has expanded and grown with shows and tours all over the world. Currently, there are five active troupes: Flower Troupe and Moon Troupe (1921), Snow Troupe (1923), Star Troupe (1933/1948), and Cosmos Troupe (1998). An additional “sixth troupe” comprised of senior members of the company with specialized roles and appearances across all other revue performances is considered separately: Senka Troupe (‘Specialized Course’ in English). Each troupe comprises roughly 80 Japanese actresses, also called Takarasiennes. Takarasiennes attend The Takarazuka Music School, run by the company, for two years of rigorous performance training before joining the Takarazuka stage between the ages of seventeen and 20 (Brau 6). During their education, the company splits takarasiennes into two roles, otokoyaku (masculine roles) and musumeyaku (feminine roles), and generally stay in these roles throughout their careers with few exceptions.

Otokoyaku are to Takarazuka as onnagata are to kabuki. These two types of characters have a large draw, particularly for women audiences considering what seems to lie at the core of each (Brau 12). Brau claims it is the idea of the “feminized (‘sensitive’) man” that is the most “exciting.” However, the attraction of the masculinized woman may be just as exciting in the eyes of fans who feel empowered by the performance. The discussion of Otokoyaku—and Takarazuka in general—teems with controversy, contradiction, and confusion. Traditional Takarazuka scholars focus on the aloof, ideal form of the performance going so far as to call the otokoyaku “sexless” as well as critiquing any sexual view of the performances (Solander 7). The company’s motto and behavior also support this traditional view of performance. Kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku (modesty, fairness, and grace) are the three virtues meant for all

takarasiennes to exemplify (Brau 14). However, other scholars, typically Western such as Jennifer Robertson who penned the first English monograph on Takarazuka Revue in 1998, as well as Takarazuka fans worldwide approach the performances from a more political position. There is a difference between the intended effect, on the executive side, and the lived effect on the players and fans.

Bodies on stage are inherently political. It is difficult to change the perception of these bodies in the context of society, even on stage. The typical content of a Takarazuka performance is romance, a fantasy played on stage with women dressed as men romancing other women, sometimes even women dressed as other men. Many fans and scholars have noticed an undercurrent of homosexuality in these stories. Rather than homosexuality, Tove Solander characterizes this behavior as homoeroticism and homosociality given that there is no, or very little, explicit sexual content in Takarazuka performances (3). Criticism in nearly all forms speaks against Takarazuka for staging too much homoeroticism or not representing enough queer identity and women's stories in a theatre performed entirely by women. However, more and more women writers, directors, and executives have joined the company since the 1990s. More women's voices and queer identity are becoming heard on the Takarazuka stage.

Takarazuka, from the beginning, was made to be a theatre for ordinary people. Kobayashi made Takarazuka an accessible theatre that is easy to watch and understand, and affordable compared to other Japanese theatre forms. Kobayashi created this intentional foundation to reach and entertain everyday people (Brau 6). However, that was not the only aim of the Revue. Kobayashi wished that the theatre would function to educate its audience along with the players. When the takarasiennes are ready, they "graduate" from the company to pursue careers as mothers and wives. This tradition, at least functionally, continues today in the Revue with

Kobayashi's principles (modesty, fairness, and grace) in mind. In this way, it is still pushing older Japanese patriarchal ideals onto the Takarazukians both in private and in the public light.

On the side of the audience, Takarazuka functions more covertly in their education practices. In 1998, Takarazuka Revue formed the newest troupe in the company: the Cosmos Troupe (sometimes referred to as the Sky Troupe). As a younger troupe, Cosmos is not bound by the traditional expectations of fans as compared to Flower and Moon Troupes. There has been a sort of freedom to experiment with topics and writer-directors. Maria Mihaela Grajdian wrote an article with a theatrical analysis of mostly Cosmos Troupe shows featuring creative interpretations of the two critical countries of the Cold War. Takarazuka attempts to "situate [itself] and as such Japan as a credible successor to the world's last two great empires, the Russian Empire... and United States of America" (Grajdian 10). The idolization of empire along with the solidification of Japanese identity marks a return to form of Kobayashi Ichizo's original wish for Takarazuka Revue to be a mode of education for audiences as well. Grajdian focuses on performances of *Anastasia*, *Oceans 11*, *Land of Gods*, and *Once Upon a Time in America* (Snow Troupe). These performances, all staged by the Cosmos Troupe, except for *Once Upon a Time in America* staged by the Snow Troupe, demonstrate a shift away from more flowery fantasies toward political messages sent to audiences. As described in an article on the educational purposes of Takarazuka, the company performs as a "fundamental barometer of Japanese society" (Grajdian 2). Their performances respond to both cultural and political climates while influencing the culture.

Takarazuka has had an immense impact on Japanese culture and media. Not only has it provided a safe space for women to perform, albeit under strong patriarchal roots and rules, but it has paved its subculture of theatre that other troupes have found hard to compete with (Brau 6).

Their unique style has left traces of itself across Japanese media. Osamu Tezuka, the “God of Manga,” grew up in the city of Takarazuka surrounded by Takarasiennes who were friends of his mother (ComicTropes). Inspired by the romances and fairytales he wrote and illustrated the first long-form Shoujo manga (comics aimed at young girls), *Princess Knight*, featuring a princess born with both a girl’s and boy’s heart, reminiscent of otokoyaku. Takarazuka influences can be found in many other works as well such as Sailor Moon, Ouran High School Host Club, and the Rose of Versailles.

At times, these footprints have returned to Takarazuka Revue on their stage. Rose of Versailles, a popular shoujo manga heavily influenced by Takrazuka, came to the Revue stage in 1974 and is widely considered the quintessential Takarazuka show. It explores concepts of gender and class reflecting the company upon itself as a theatre of women performers for “average people” (Grajdan 5). This show also marks the golden era of Takurazuka Revue as well as the implementation of the “Top Star” System still enforced today (which may have taken its inspiration from Tezuka who also utilized a “star system” for his characters in his manga). Each troupe has two top stars, one otokoyaku and one musumeyaku. After the top stars is a codified hierarchy of players who serve different purposes in the company. Top stars, particularly top otokoyaku, tend to be paid the most and bring in the most crowds. Rose of Versailles is emblematic of the Takarazuka romantic-fantasy style: grand costumes, music, beautiful scenes, and beautiful performers.

A theatre company does not exist in a vacuum nor does it exist purely in a board room. Although the company is rightly criticized for having an exclusively male executive and directorial boards up until the 90s, Takarazuka is “a living mainstream institution” made up of thousands of women, present and past. These women have performed, idolized, and dreamt with

the stories put on display (ZeroReq011). A story is never over simply when the author ceases to write it. It goes through the hands of the actresses who have more than a little freedom in their interpretations of roles and ends up in the hands of fans who dream and fight and interpret well past the “end” of the story. There is dimensionality and complexity in the functions and behaviors of Takarazuka that transcend the fourth wall of the story where real life bleeds onto the stage.

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