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# The Women's Theatre of Takarazuka

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*Lorie Brau*

Scores of dancers in colorful kimonos weave patterns on a huge stage, recalling the lavish spectacle of Busby Berkeley musicals. But when they glide off, the lights dim to reveal another mood, another century. A Heian period courtier in gorgeous robes postures to the strains of lush orchestral music that alternates with *noh* chant. Several set changes later, the tempo picks up as an ensemble of *shamisen*, three-stringed Japanese lutes, twangs a lively accompaniment for an Edo period festival scene done in kabuki style. The hero of the scene, a stylish man-about-town who flirts with two courtesans at once, is played by a woman. In fact, *all* the roles in *Takarazuka Odorisanka* (*Paeon to Takarazuka in Song and Dance*) and every production of the Takarazuka Kagekidan<sup>1</sup>—The Takarazuka Revue Company<sup>2</sup>—are played by women.

The 75-year-old, all-women Japanese theatre referred to as “Takarazuka” takes its name from the hot springs resort town where it is headquartered, about 35 minutes northwest of Osaka by train. In addition to its six-week runs at the 3,000-seat Grand Theatre in Takarazuka, and month-long runs at its 3,000-seat theatre in Tokyo, Takarazuka performs all over Japan, and all over the world. What began as a local tourist attraction, a hot springs “side show,” has itself become a big business promoting its own side shows and merchandising—recitals and dinner theatre featuring top stars; fan club tours to Takarazuka Familyland, the amusement park where the theatre is situated; TV broadcasts of performances and other TV appearances for stars; and Takarazuka souvenirs and publications. The company numbers about 400 performers and is divided into four troupes—Flower, Moon, Star, and Snow—that take turns performing the repertoire at the Tokyo or Takarazuka theatres, or on tour.

Takarazuka's repertoire includes pageants of Japanese song and dance reinterpreted in Westernized arrangements as described above; revues of Western music and dance; melodramatic *guran roman* (grand roman) short, original plays with music often based on historical events or literary works; and translated Broadway musicals. The theatre presents light comedy, history, fantasy, and tragedy through an aesthetic of opulent spectacle and dreamy romanticism.

For students of performance or Japanese culture, the Takarazuka Revue

Company offers a fascinating study of such issues as 20th-century Japanese theatrical history and its connection to popular European and American theatre and cinema, the paradoxical marriage of commercialism and amateurism in a theatre shaped and guided by its own training program and moral code, and the development of a new East-West theatrical tradition in a country blessed with several strong theatrical traditions such as *noh* and *kabuki*.

The way in which Takarazuka presents a pastiche of styles derived from European and American musicals and juxtaposes these against a variety of Japanese theatre and dance traditions engages our attention in a climate of postmodernism. We might also find Takarazuka of interest as a response to Japan's mid-19th-century dilemma of how to create an identity and participate in a modern world dominated by the West while remaining Japanese. For the Takarazuka organization in the early part of this century, this dilemma posed not only artistic, but also sociological problems, requiring a revision of attitudes about woman's place in Japanese society.

It is Takarazuka's cross-gender performance and the fan subculture generated by the theatre that merits particular attention as a case through which to examine the politics of representation. The Takarazuka actresses who specialize in male roles—the *otokoyaku*—garner most of the fans, the vast majority of whom, along with over 90 percent of the audience, are women. A Western feminist may be tempted to seek signs of revolt on this stage and in this audience filled with women. Is there anything about Takarazuka relevant to feminist discourse—Western or Japanese? Few of the Japanese women I spoke with think so. Some believe that Takarazuka's stories and its romantic aesthetic perpetuate stereotypes that they hope might disappear. Some even regard the theatre as a symbol of capitulation.

The production office and corporate structure that control Takarazuka are overwhelmingly patriarchal. The theatre's basic attitude toward women, embodied in the founder's hope that his actresses would, upon leaving the company, become "good wives and wise mothers"<sup>3</sup> (Shiraishi 1984:47), suggests that Takarazuka is not only *not* feminist, but almost reactionary in its views of women. One staff member remarked that a major goal of the theatre was to create *kenzen na onna*—"wholesome women" (Matsubara 1987).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that when it was created, Takarazuka represented some progressive and artistically avant-garde points of view. At least it gave women freedom to perform in an era when there were few respectable places for them to do so.

And even if Takarazuka does not address the inequities in Japan's sexist society, but reinforces the status quo and sublimates women's desires through its dreamy narratives, there remains some possibility that certain spectators find it empowering simply to watch women play men. The theatre offers up images of release from oppressive gender-bound roles.

The hit series of Takarazuka productions responsible for the theatre's "boom" in the mid-'70s, *Berusaiyu no bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*, 1974–1976), demonstrated the powerful attraction of being able to cross the gender barrier. In part two of the series, *Oscar and Andre*, Oscar, a girl brought up as a boy, is the object of the affections of her childhood companion, Andre.<sup>4</sup> On the eve of the French Revolution, Oscar's father decides it is time for Oscar to go back to being a woman and presents her with a prospective husband. Oscar rebels. She wants to fight in the revolution. Believing that he will lose Oscar to another man, Andre opts to poison them both. But when Oscar begs him to always stay by her side,

Andre has second thoughts and slaps the poisoned wine out of her hand. The night before they go off to battle, Oscar offers herself to Andre, urging him to make her his wife for one night. They can never marry, however; as the son of a servant, Andre is from too low a class. Not only does Takarazuka fuel the ideology of gender inequality, it reinforces ideas about class distinction.

One fan (and perhaps others) saw in the scene in which Oscar takes the role of sexual aggressor a possibility for women to take the lead in a relationship with a man, a possibility considered by some Japanese women to be remote in real life. *Berusaifu no bara* even grants women the capacity for aggression by having Oscar go off to fight a war. However, the message of the play is that for a woman to “act” she must dress and behave like a man (Ishitani 1984:75).<sup>5</sup>

Before jumping to conclusions about the latent political potential in Takarazuka’s cross-gender performance, certain larger questions must be acknowledged, even if they cannot be answered here. How does a Japanese person’s experience of theatregoing differ from an American’s? How do Japanese ideas about gender construction (in the theatre and in general) differ from American ideas? It goes without saying that my own observations about Takarazuka cannot possibly account for the experience of Japanese spectators; even my questions are framed through a Western consciousness.

From a Western viewpoint, Takarazuka, like kabuki, challenges the idea of rigidly differentiated gender roles. It suggests alternatives to the limitations of being male or female. The present analysis of the ways in which it does this is but one reading among a multiplicity of readings of the theatrical “signs” conveyed in a Takarazuka production. Whether these highly commercial productions actually allow for the culturing of alternative, perhaps even oppositional, lifestyles is another matter.

What is it about the Takarazuka aesthetic that attracts its massive audience of young girls and women? Expressions like *karei* (which embraces the ideas of “beauty” and “splendor”) and *hanayaka* (literally, “flowery”—festive, showy, bright, etc.) appear frequently in discussions of Takarazuka (see, for example, Ishitani 1984:79). A commentator on a television broadcast of a Takarazuka production remarked that it was because the stage was filled with women that Takarazuka was beautiful and *hanayaka* (Hamamura 1987).

But perhaps more than the music, the romance, the lavish spectacle, or the women playing women, it is the *otokoyaku*, with their beauty and their “sensitive masculinity,” who fill the house. One journalist remarked, “the style of the *otokoyaku* is not that of a man, nor of a woman, but of a molded, abstract being” (Takayama 1984:42). The *otokoyaku* does not represent a “*nama no otoko*,” that is to say, a “man in the raw,” but an idealized, “beautiful” man—a man without dirt, sweat, roughness, and a need to dominate. The *otokoyaku*’s female following see her as a version of this kind of androgynous, safe beauty rarely found in real men. This Takarazuka aesthetic finds a parallel in other popular culture media oriented toward teenage girls, as exemplified by the androgynous Japanese comic book heroes with their long legs and big, pensive eyes lined with long lashes. A high school girl commented on the two productions she saw of *The Tale of Genji*:

I had seen *Genji Monogatari* before, at *kabuki*. When *Genji* is performed with male actors, there’s even something dirty about the



1. Fans pose for a photo with their favorite otokoyaku before a performance at the Takarazuka theatre's backstage entrance. (Photo courtesy of Lorie Brau)

man who plays Genji—he doesn't fit my image of Genji. When I saw Takarazuka's *Genji*, I was really moved. I thought, "Yes, this is it!" Genji and Tō no Chūjō [. . .] were really handsome young courtiers. A man that handsome and wonderful doesn't exist in real life; Takarazuka is, after all, a fabrication. But as long as I'm watching this theatre of make-believe, I can forget reality. I can dream (Takarazuka 1984:42).

While the high school girls dream, the producers and directors plot strategies to develop stars and put on popular shows that will draw audiences. Takarazuka may have started small, but it is presently a major company of Tōhō,<sup>6</sup> one of Japan's largest entertainment companies. The theatre is also financially affiliated with Hankyū—owner of a baseball team, a few department stores, and a massive transportation network in Western Japan. One need only arrive at Umeda Station in Osaka, the starting point of Hankyū Railways' Takarazuka Line, to be aware of how closely related are the theatre and the mammoth conglomerate that

finances it. Along with advertisements for Hankyū Hotels and the Hankyū Department Store around the corner, enormous posters for current Takarazuka productions dominate the station. Top stars' pictures even appear on telephone credit cards. Hankyū advertises in Takarazuka programs and fan magazines.

Takarazuka souvenirs, the photographs of stars, and the fan magazines all sell the actresses, or at least their constructed images. A consciousness of "we aim to please" (the customer, the spectator) colors the attitude of Takarazuka actresses themselves who, like their audience and even the general population familiar with the theatre, claim that they "sell dreams" (*yume o uru*) (Tsurugi 1987). The actresses are paid modestly for the fantasies they serve up, and many rely on their parents for financial support for a good part of their Takarazuka careers. On the other hand, top stars, who bring in the greatest number of fans, get good salaries (Berlin 1987:191–92).

Takarazuka's history brings into relief the commercial nature of the theatre. The Takarazuka Revue Company was founded not by an impoverished, passionate theatre artist, but by an industrialist and entrepreneur who loved theatre, Kobayashi Ichizō. Around 1910, Kobayashi was working for Hankaku Tetsudō (which became part of Hankyū), a firm that had constructed a commuter railroad line from Osaka to the small hot springs town of Takarazuka. To build ridership on the line at off-peak hours, the company developed the town into a resort. As one of their first ventures they installed a swimming pool—the first in Japan—called "Paradise." Restrictions against mixed bathing and problems with heating the pool left it empty. "Paradise" was turned into a theatre (Hashimoto 1984:43).

Western music was popular around this time, thanks, in part, to its government-sponsored introduction into the public school curriculum (Shiraishi 1984:15). In response to popular taste, Kobayashi Ichizō decided to feature an all-girls' chorus singing Western music as a sideshow attraction for his Paradise Theatre at Takarazuka.<sup>7</sup>



2. Takarazuka looked to the French revue for inspiration in *Parizetto* (Parisette, 1930), a hit of the "Golden Age" of the Takarazuka Revue. (Photo courtesy of Takarazuka Kagekidan)

Kobayashi was a romantic and a dreamer, as well as an entrepreneur and pragmatist.<sup>8</sup> He harbored yearnings for the literary life, for the Edo theatre of Chikamatsu (Shima 1984:24), and for Western opera (Takagi 1983:60). Aside from his practical concerns, he espoused a philosophy calling for a change in Japanese theatre. He advocated wholesome entertainment for the entire family, a theatre that would be financially and culturally within reach of ordinary people, as he believed kabuki had ceased to be.

Toward this goal, in December 1913, he renamed his company the “Takarazuka Girls’ Opera Training Group” (Takarazuka Shojo Opera Yōseikai) and turned his simple girls’ chorus into an operetta company that performed musical versions of fairy tales. In the spring of 1914, 17 girls, all under the age of 15, gave their first performance.

The novelty of the Takarazuka Girls’ Opera (Takarazuka Shojo Kagekidan), as it later came to be called, brought engagements in Osaka and Tokyo. More and more people thronged to the Paradise Theatre to see productions based on fairy tales; adaptations from the traditional repertoires of noh, kyōgen, and kabuki; and pieces featuring Western music and dance.

Kobayashi’s philosophies were not only directed toward the masses whose entertainment needs he aimed to serve but also toward the girls he hired to meet these needs. Women had been banned from the Japanese stage in the early 17th century; in the early 1900s, the greatest number of women performers (singers and dancers), with the exception of folk performers, were probably geisha. Kobayashi set out to make performing with Takarazuka respectable, as, in many circles, being a geisha was not. He did not believe that performing with Takarazuka was detrimental to a girl’s prospects; in fact, he saw his theatre as a tool for her education. In 1919, he founded a school to train his company in wifely as well as performing arts.

Young girls, not women, comprised the core of the Takarazuka company. It was easier to train and mold younger performers for this new kind of theatre. But Kobayashi may also have initially chosen girls over women because of their innocence. They were too young to exhibit the sexuality that created havoc in the early days of kabuki, causing the government to throw women out of the theatre.<sup>9</sup> Another reason for his casting young girls no doubt reflected the prevailing attitude of the Meiji period (1868–1912) towards women—an attitude that persists to a degree today—that an adult woman’s place is in the home caring for a family, not covorting on the stage. Once a girl reached marriageable age, Kobayashi expected her to quit performing and settle down. To this day Takarazuka strictly enforces the rule that once a performer decides to marry she must leave the company.

Girls enter the company after graduation from the Takarazuka Music School, between the ages of 17 and 20. Although about half the performers retire by their sixth year, many of them—particularly otokoyaku, who may take longer to develop due to the unusual demands of their roles—stay in Takarazuka for 15 years or more, into their thirties and past the conventional limits of marriageable age (Hashimoto 1984:118–31). There have even been a few who have stayed on into their fifties and sixties, teaching and making special appearances onstage; some have even sat on the board of directors. Not all actresses leave in order to get married. Kobayashi’s wishes to make his charges into good wives and mothers have often been foiled by the will of his actresses to pursue careers in the entertainment world.<sup>10</sup>



3. First-year Takarazuka Music School students wearing cotton kimonos and name tags learn the basics of kabuki-style Japanese dance. Takarazuka choreography makes extensive use of the fan. (Photo courtesy of Lori Brau)

Students at the Takarazuka Music School no longer receive lessons in sewing, manners, or English to enhance their desirability as potential wives as they had earlier in the school's history (Shiraishi 1984:46). The sole route through which a girl becomes a part of the company, the two-year program, today provides rigorous daily instruction (about six hours a day, six days a week) in ballet, modern dance, jazz, voice, acting, and Japanese dance. In their spare time, most students supplement their two years of group classes with private lessons. The sewing and English may be gone, but emphasis on discipline remains. To build character, first-year students are required to clean the entire school every day and to take orders from second-year students.

Girls may audition for the school once they have graduated middle school (around age 14) and up until they are 18. Competition to enter is very keen—in 1986, 1 in 20 girls was accepted (Berlin 1987:256). In choosing students for the school and, consequently, the company, the Takarazuka staff examines the girls for potential to please the spectator with charming stage presence and the ability to sell the star photos. Thus,



in addition to demonstrating how well they have mastered the basics of ballet and voice (two of the entrance requirements), the girls must be attractive and well-proportioned. Longer legs are favored, perhaps to match the Euro-American dance aesthetic (Tsuda 1987). Because of their greater popularity, many entrants to the school set their hearts on becoming otokoyaku. However, only the taller students can hope to be cast as men.

Although acting classes are conducted along the lines of the Stanislavski method, the students are also trained in a manner comparable to that which is used in kabuki actor training, that is, through the memorization of *kata*—codified behaviors centered on gesture, dress, and voice, that help create a role.

When graduates of the Takarazuka Music School enter the company, as all of them do, they are still referred to as “students,” *seito*. The *seito* imitate the *kata* of their *sempai*, their seniors in the company. In this way, the otokoyaku learn to perform male roles. Though some *kata* for playing men come directly from kabuki, portraying non-Japanese requires the use of different behavioral codes. In addition to the codified movements, placement of the body, and use of the voice encoded in the *kata* that they learn from *sempai*, otokoyaku imitate and create *kata* from the behavior they observe in Japanese or Western film and stage actors, or even in the men around them (Tsurugi 1987). Despite their efforts at achieving authenticity through a study of masculine behavior, when the otokoyaku transplant a masculine gesture into a Takarazuka context the gesture becomes a *kata*, a theatrical sign, rather than a fragment of naturalistic acting. An otokoyaku distills the masculine portrait in order to present only the part she feels will appeal to her audience; she does not aim toward verisimilitude.

Costuming also demonstrates how complex the *kata* for Takarazuka-style masculinity can be. Rather than trying to look just like men, the otokoyaku represent a kind of “third gender” (Berlin 1987:21). To emphasize their long legs, otokoyaku wear chunky high heels and tight-fitting, high-waisted trousers. The high heels remind the spectator that the otokoyaku is not a man, but an idealization of one, with attractive legs that appear longer than those of typical Japanese men. Although otokoyaku thicken and darken their eyebrows and add sideburns and even fake moustaches when appropriate to a role, they confound these signs of masculinity with long eyelashes and heavy eyeshadow. To a Westerner this sort of makeup generally spells femininity. When an American director was called to Japan to work on the 1968 production of *West Side Story*, he demanded that the false eyelashes go. But the fans were unhappy without this detail that is so essential to the otokoyaku look.<sup>11</sup> As soon as the director left, the eyelashes came back (Mochimaru 1987).

Although costumes may be dictated by the designer and director, Tsurugi Miyuki, top otokoyaku star of the Moon Troupe, indicated that the otokoyaku is fairly free to interpret a character as she wishes. Her aim is to create a “*risōteki na dansei*” (an “ideal man”) who will appeal to the spectator. I questioned Tsurugi about how she conceived male impersonation. She emphasized that it was just a “role” that she wore like the makeup and costume that help create her otokoyaku image. After the performance she takes off her costume and makeup, gets into the bath and reverts to her nonperforming (feminine) self. But Tsurugi acknowledges that there are some Takarazuka actresses who like to play the male role in everyday life (1987).



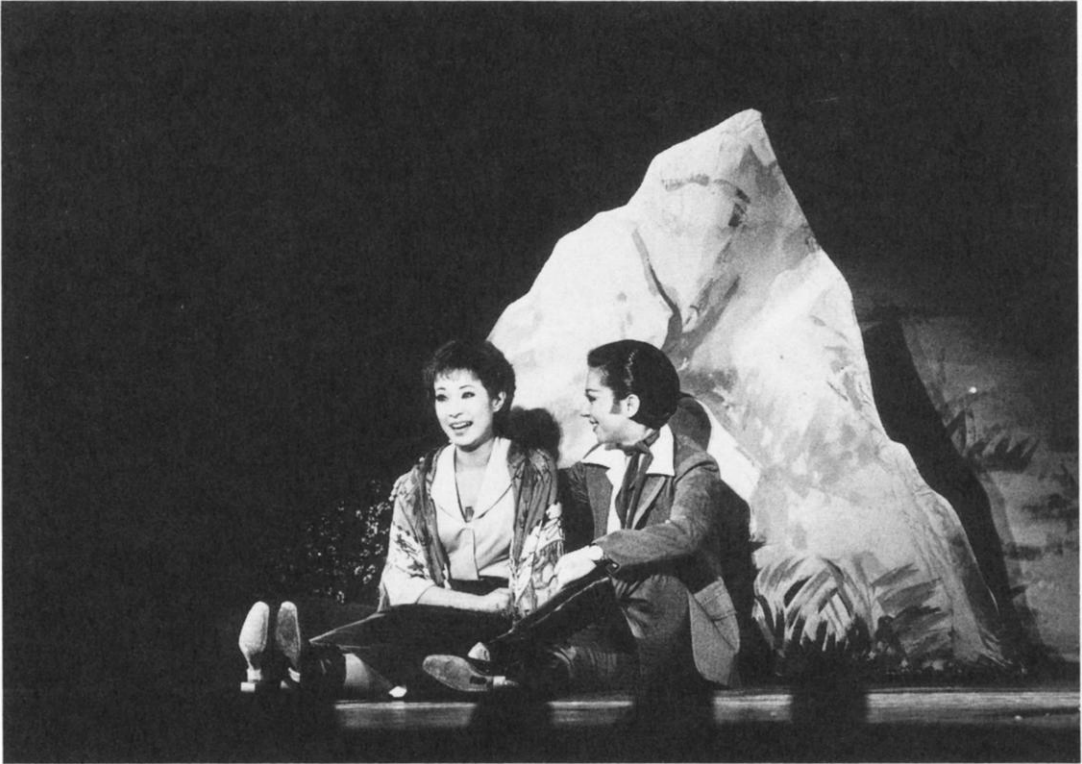
4. Takarazuka broke new ground in the '60s with performances of American musicals such as this 1968 production of *West Side Story*. (Photo courtesy of Takarazuka Kagekidan)

In fact, it is the carrying over of this “boyishness” into everyday life and the freedom that this implies that captures the attention of some fans. One fan, for example, was captivated by the otokoyaku star who, even off-stage, sits with her legs crossed, an unladylike posture in Japan (Ishitani 1984:74). Fans delight in seeing women stripped of their “femininity,” surpassing the limitations of being “woman,” as defined by Japanese patriarchy. Other otokoyaku, however, rebel against their constructed, masculinized image and make a point of indulging in “feminine” activities in their private lives, like cooking or knitting (Tsurugi 1987).

Although Takarazuka is a relatively new theatrical tradition that incorporates many foreign techniques, plots, and styles, traditional Japanese performance principles govern the construction of the shows and the audience-performer relationship. “Traditional [Japanese] theatre performances are essentially incoherent and fragmented events, and this is the nature of the entertainment they provide to their audience” (Raz 1983:268). If the Takarazuka spectator does not go to the theatre to see a carefully plotted play, what does she go for?

Like the kabuki fan, she goes to see the actors.<sup>12</sup> Jacob Raz writes about *noh* that it “is only repeated confrontation with the actor on stage that increases enjoyment and understanding” (1983:268). Takarazuka fans, too, return several times to see the same performances,<sup>13</sup> as well as the same actresses, although they may do so for different reasons than spectators at *noh*.

Despite its popularity, and the fact that it was conceived as a theatre for the masses, Takarazuka might be characterized as an insiders’ theatre and, in this respect, resembles *noh* and kabuki. It is certainly possible to derive pleasure from a Takarazuka performance with no knowledge of the form or of the particular performers, but the experience is greatly enhanced if one follows a performer and knows the tradition.



5. *Musumeyaku Haruka Kurara* and *otokoyaku Ōtori Ran* play a love scene in *Taga tame ni kanewaru naru* (For Whom the Bell Tolls, 1978). (Photo courtesy of Takarazuka Kageki-dan)

The “shows,” the pastiche productions of song, dance, and short narrative sketches that often make up the first half of a Takarazuka performance, seem to allow more of the desired interaction with one’s favorite star, because her “roles” are more fluid (since they may well change a number of times during the course of the revue) and consequently it is easier for her to slip through the “fourth wall.”<sup>14</sup>

Contact with the spectator is worked into the performance. When the actor comes out on the *ginkyō*, the “silver bridge” walkway in front of the orchestra pit, she enters a liminal space where she meets her adoring fans. Sometimes she even climbs down into the audience to flirt with them. How does the *otokoyaku* explain this flirtation? Tsurugi claims that it is all a part of the role. Once she becomes the male character, she is able to envision the girls in the audience as “adorable.” Tsurugi and one of the supporting male leads in the Moon Troupe, Go Mayuga, describe this as something natural, a largesse of feeling that can turn any human being, whether of the opposite sex or not, into an object of affection (Tsurugi 1987).

In spite of what Westerners might read into the flirting, the staff and even the performers themselves disavow any eroticism: Takarazuka is family entertainment, a far cry from the demimonde where geisha sing and dance. If there is any sexual communication—either from the stage or in fan-actress relationships—it is absolutely taboo to discuss it. The poems to *otokoyaku* stars in fan magazines like *Kageki* evidence more romance or puppy love than sex. One poem to Tsurugi Miyuki reads: “Are you a man or a woman? It doesn’t matter. I didn’t love you as a person but as I would



love time or the wind . . . Ah, if only you were a doll I could touch you” (Ruruka 1986:129).

Although the otokoyaku’s contact with the audience may seem like a forced attempt to play the man, it is also, in a sense, the woman in the otokoyaku who attracts the teenage girls in the front row. Many of these teenagers move in what is at least a homosocial milieu. In contrast to their American counterparts, Japanese high schools tend to have gender-segregated classes. While not a universal phenomenon, same-sex friendships may attain levels of intimacy that would be suspect in the U.S. In Japan, this potentially homosexual phase is considered to be just that—a phase—and is not in the least frowned upon. Takarazuka builds its audience in part on teenage girls going through this phase, when the androgyny and glamour of the otokoyaku hold a special appeal.

Not only the otokoyaku, but also the *musumeyaku*, the actresses in female roles, may invoke the idea of androgyny. In *Taga tameni kanewa naru* (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1978), Maria (Haruka Kurara) gives a start under Robert’s (Ōtori Ran) piercing gaze. “I know it’s short,” she apologizes for her hair that had been shorn off by the Fascists. “Don’t stare at me that way.” Maria may be ashamed of the loss of this symbol of gender distinction but, in effect, her short hair brings her closer to the androgynous ideal and brings any homoeroticism in this representation of the lovers closer to the surface.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between Andre and Oscar in the *Rose of Versailles* also plays on the theme of homoeroticism. Though Oscar sheds her masculine cover, to a degree, in the bedroom scene, when she asks Andre to make her

6. Oscar confers with Marie Antoinette in a scene from one of Takarazuka’s greatest hits, *Berusaiyu no bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*, 1975). (Photo courtesy of Takarazuka Kagekidan)

his wife, she continues to speak in her artificially deepened voice, thereby sustaining the illusion that she is male. These scenes point out how the homoeroticism of Takarazuka completely inverts the usual homosocial relations of Japanese men, who regularly go out drinking without female companionship.<sup>16</sup> This female version of homoeroticism may be the essence of some spectators' pleasure in the theatre.

In his remarks on the Japanese theatre audience Yamazaki Masakazu cites the Japanese sensitivity to the "I and thou" principle as a reason for their traditional love for theatre. "For the Japanese [. . .] being is being perceived by the other; 'I' is 'I in the eyes of the other'" (in Raz 1983:269). To expand on this paradigm, perhaps being is not only being *perceived* by the eye/I of the other; it is also being *affirmed* by the other, as the spectator is perceived and affirmed when the otokoyaku parades on the ginkyō and gazes down adoringly at her fans. Because she is really a woman and not a man (who may be perceived as the oppressor, or at least as the suppressor), because she is—underneath her role—the same as the female spectator, she affirms her.

Japanese women do not only favor the cross-gender performance in Takarazuka; the *onnagata* of kabuki are also a big draw for women spectators (Kamiyama 1988). Here too, it seems to be the appeal of what they imagine lies beneath—a feminized ("sensitive") man—that is exciting. The *onnagata*, a man who presents himself as and puts himself in the place of a woman (albeit an idealized sign for a woman) can be regarded as safer, more affirming than the male lead or ordinary males in daily life.

Raz comments on the "strong ritualistic nature" of Japanese traditional theatre, "established through generations of cumulative, collective artistic endeavor, and by way of aphorisms and patterned segments" (1983:268). Although Takarazuka lacks such a long history of "cumulative, artistic endeavor," it resembles Japanese traditional theatres in the ritualized way in which it is presented for its audience.

Many of Takarazuka's conventions serve to "display" the star and bring her together with her adoring fans. The ginkyō and abbreviated *hanamichi* (in kabuki, the walkway perpendicular to the stage that reaches to the back of the theatre) on either side of the stage work toward this goal. Poses struck by the actresses at certain points in the performance—tableaux reminiscent of kabuki—help engrave the image of the star on the spectator's memory and act as signifiers of romance as, for example, in scenes ending with an otokoyaku embracing a *musumeyaku*.<sup>17</sup> The features of stage design derived from kabuki, such as the *mawari butai* (revolving stage) and *seri* (stage traps), are employed to reveal the star. Indeed, the drama of Takarazuka performances does not reside in the plot, but in this anticipation of the star's revelation. From which part of the stage will he/she appear?

The fantasy world created in Takarazuka is not the dream theatre of Wagner, hypnotizing the spectator into a somnolent, receptive state. The dream of a Takarazuka production engages the spectator more directly. The stage environment includes the spectator. During romantic ballads sung by the otokoyaku lead, a revolving oblong "mirror ball" showers light over the audience. The mirror ball is commonly used at dance halls—arenas of participatory performance. In the theatrical context of Takarazuka, the dappled lights sweep up the spectators, allowing them to participate in the dream presented onstage.

Every Takarazuka performance closes with a "finale" in which all the actresses walk down a huge stairway, lit with flashing electric lights, that

extends across the back of the stage. This grand stairway may be the “most Takarazuka-esque” of the various modern facilities used to create the fantasy (Shima 1984:184). Singing songs from the production, showered with applause, the actresses dance on and promenade down the stairway. The finale appears to be the last chance to get an eyeful of their favorite stars. But for some, this last look during the finale is not enough. A ubiquitous sight at the theatres in both Takarazuka and Tokyo is the gaggle of girls (and women) waiting at the backstage entrance for a glimpse of, or even a chat with, one of the stars.<sup>18</sup>

What is it that the fans receive from Takarazuka stars, and what do they give in return? Mochimaru Haruko, who was a fan in her younger days when she worked as an usher at the Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre, describes the benefit from a relationship with a star or popular actress as “psychological.” She remembers that Ōtori Ran (who played Robert Jordan in the production of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, mentioned above) winked at her once during a performance. It was satisfying to have a liaison with a star, even a superficial one, acknowledged by such a wink. It prompted a feeling of superiority or specialness (1987).

In return for this recognition, this affirmation, fans bring flowers and elegant shopping bags filled with little gifts and food to the backstage door. Relationships between stars and fans often last long after the star has left Takarazuka. Mochimaru’s aunt, who now lives in California, performed with Takarazuka nearly 40 years ago. Her fans still take her out to dinner when she returns to Japan. According to the gossip, one famous Takarazuka actress had fans preparing every meal for her and her new husband for two years after she left the company (Matsushima 1987). Some young women act as personal secretaries or part-time “servants” to their favorite actresses, for no pay.<sup>19</sup> They consider the sacrifices to be well worth the special feeling they get from contact with beloved stars.

But it is not necessary to have a personal relationship with a star in order to feel enriched by Takarazuka. One fan described the peace of mind she experienced at a Takarazuka performance—it was a place where she felt at home. Another fan claimed that Takarazuka actresses served as models to young girls who do not have the heroes that young boys do in public figures like baseball players. The otokoyaku functions as a kind of effigy<sup>20</sup> as well, playing out the active, masculine desires of the fans (Ishitani 1984:73).

A Japanese director explained the appeal of Takarazuka in the following way: unattractive teenage girls allow their dreams to be played out for them as a love story performed by attractive women. A Takarazuka fan disagrees: powerless teenage girls allow their dreams to be played out for them by women who are clearing a path (Ishitani 1984:77), perhaps toward a kind of liberation. If enough Takarazuka fans think this way, consciously or even unconsciously, Takarazuka may qualify as a subculture, in the sense that Dick Hebdige discusses it—a place to dispute signs.

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is [. . .] at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life (1979:17).

Further research might show how some Takarazuka fans carry their subcultural obsessions with the theatre over into their everyday lives. The high proportion of boyishly dressed girls and even older women who flock

to the theatre indicates that Takarazuka fans do follow a particular style—if not the otokoyaku style, then the frilly, flowery musumeyaku style.

Other Japanese theatres have what might be called “subcultures”: amateur noh practitioners—connoisseurs who fill the seats of the *nōgakudō*—or kabuki devotees.<sup>21</sup>

Might there be more at stake for the members of Takarazuka’s subculture than for these other theatrical subcultures? Takarazuka’s motto, “*ki-yoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku*” (modesty, fairness, and grace) while conceived as an antidote to the fiercely competitive, corrupt, even “dirty” entertainment industry, calls to mind the Girl Scouts rather than a professional acting troupe. But the fact that Takarazuka has such a motto suggests that despite its glitz and slick commercialism, the theatre is distinguished by its collegiality, a spirited amateurism in the positive sense of the term—a love for performing—that is communicated to its audience. Perhaps it is this group spirit, the idea of Takarazuka as a club, that renders the relationship between Takarazuka actor and spectator more porous, enables fans to identify so strongly with their idols. On the one hand, we can characterize Takarazuka as the product of a corporate, male bureaucracy, created to nourish women’s desires (as conceived by male fantasy). But if we focus on its players and audience, we may discover—especially in the Takarazuka otokoyaku, the object of fans’ devotion and identification—a display of power and desirability that may, in turn, empower the women who adore them.

7. Stars take center stage in this finale of the 1989–90 revival of *The Rose of Versailles*. (Photo courtesy of Takarazuka Kagekidan)



## Notes

1. Takarazuka Kagekidan means “Takarazuka Opera Company” but the company is known in English as the “Takarazuka Revue Company.”
2. Hereafter, “Takarazuka Revue Company” is shortened to “Takarazuka.”
3. This is a stock phrase in Japanese. In the Meiji period (1867–1911), a girl was educated for this purpose. A “good wife and wise mother” was necessary for the maintenance of the family system (Paulson 1976:15).
4. Although Andre ostensibly loves her as a girl, Oscar is always in men’s costume. It thus remains ambiguous as to which side—male or female—Andre is attracted. The only time that Oscar appears in women’s dress—in a ball gown—she seeks the attention of another character, the Swedish count Felsen (who is the lover of Marie Antoinette).
5. In all fairness, I believe that there are many Japanese women today who would claim that women *can* take the lead in relationships. In any case, the myth is still in place.
6. The name “Tōhō” is, in fact, an acronym for “Tokyo Takarazuka.”
7. Kobayashi followed the lead of the Mitsukoshi Department Store. In an effort to attract customers, they literally jumped on the bandwagon and assembled a band of young men costumed in red uniforms and winged hats to perform in the store. Their venture was a great success (Shima 1984:56).
8. See Kobayashi’s biography as presented by Shima (1984:13–48ff).
9. Young girls may represent a subtle, forbidden sexuality. The Japanese taste for young female pop singers—“*kawaiiko-chan*,” “Miss Cutie’s,” whose TV fame seems to be as transient as cherry blossoms—might also relate to what appears to be a preference for innocent sexuality.
10. A brochure that I received from the company, “The Takarazuka Revue” (n.d.) claims that “it is no exaggeration to say that half of the top actresses in Japan today are alumnae of Takarazuka.”
11. Mochimaru Haruko (1987) explained that the false eyelashes are used to make the actresses’ eyes look bigger. They also shade the eyes from the bright stage lights and make it easier to see.
12. A stage manager from the National Theatre in Japan remarked to me that foreigners seem so concerned with getting the plot that they rent headsets. Even Japanese have fallen into this habit. But they are missing the point. The kabuki cognoscenti go to see how their favorite actors “play” the role.
13. Mr. Kazuto Ohira, head of the New York branch of Tōhō International, remarked that true Takarazuka fans see a performance several times. During the shows, the more avid of them used to sit in the front rows, shout their favorite actresses’ names (almost like a kabuki *claque*) and throw flowers and gifts on the stage (1987).
14. But it is in the more dramatic pieces that the otokoyaku (and their female leads) construct their images. They layer their basic otokoyaku identities with the identities of the characters they play. Mochimaru Haruko, who worked as an announcer and usher for the theatre for four years, claimed that the “plays” were more interesting to the fans for this reason (1987).
15. Coincidentally, the actress who plays Maria in this videotaped production, Haruka Kurara, began her Takarazuka career as an otokoyaku. Despite her height, she discovered her true talent was playing the sweet female roles. She is noted as one of the finest *musumeyaku* the company has known.
16. This idea was suggested to me by Peggy Phelan.
17. Top *musumeyaku* star, Kodama Ai, explained that her role was to look good, “pictorially” (*eteki ni*)—as in tableaux—with the otokoyaku (Tsurugi 1987).
18. I came upon a congregation of about 15 to 20 girls who had been waiting for over a half-hour to see their favorite actress walk from one door, across a space of a few meters, into another. She would not have been visible for more than 10 seconds, and would certainly not have had time to sign autographs.
19. Japanese friends tell me that this custom is not limited to Takarazuka, but occurs in other Japanese arts and indeed other professions.



20. The word used in Japanese was *katashiro*, which refers to the paper doll used at purification ceremonies.
21. Until the Meiji period (and perhaps even after) kabuki culture supported a highly codified system of actor-patron relations. Evidence for this elaboration of manners are the guides to actors and theatregoing—the *hyōbanki*.

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## TDRReading

For a related analysis of Japanese theatrical forms, see Roland Barthes' "The Written Face" in TDR 15, no. 3 (T50), Spring 1971.