Takarazuka

The Takarazuka Revue (*Takarazuka kagekidan*) is an all-female troupe founded by Kobayashi Ichizō (1873-1957) in 1913 as a device to generate business on the railway and hot spring resort owned and operated by Kobayashi and the Hankyū Railway. The troupe takes its name from the city of Takarazuka just northwest of Osaka. The commercial promotion was such a success that the city is now better known for the Takarazuka Revue than for its hot springs. Today, the company has two large theatres, one in Takarazuka and one in Tokyo, and five troupes, Flower, Moon, Snow, Star, and Cosmos, that take turns performing in Takarazuka, Tokyo, and on national tours.

Kobayashi capitalized on the recently lifted ban on female performers, the declining interest in traditional kabuki, and the rising interest in Western music and revues. There was a spirited debate around the propriety of females in the theatre. Actors had the derogatory label “beggars of the riverbed,” and Japanese performing arts had a history of eroticism and prostitution. To avoid any such taint on his new troupe, Kobayashi established a private girls high school as a finishing school for girls that was the pipeline for revue talent. The troupe maintains its conservative reputation for producing young women with traditional values who are also well-trained performers.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

To emphasize propriety, Kobayashi insisted that all members of the troupe be called “students” rather than “geisha” or “actors.” The girls strive to achieve the motto “be pure, be correct, be beautiful.” The first performance opened on April 1, 1914, and played until May 30, with several revivals that year.

A one-year acting training course was added to the high school curriculum in 1919. The popularity of the troupe had increased so much that they had to move to a larger theatre that year. The division in to Flower and Moon troupes occurred in 1921. In 1924 the revue expanded again, and the Flower and Moon troupes combined for the inaugural performance of a 4000 seat Grand Theatre. That same year, the Snow Troupe was added.

*Mon Paris* opened on September 30, 1927 as Japan’s first revue that integrated song, dance, and drama. The show established the Takarazuka formula of a romantic musical drama followed by a spectacular song and dance revue.

The Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre opened in January 1934. With the opening of a second theatre the company produced twenty shows that year. Then in 1938 the company toured to Germany and Italy for its first foreign performances. The Star Troupe was formed in 1933, but was dissolved in 1939 due to wartime cutbacks. The company continued moral-building performances during WWII, but had to suspend operations near the end of the war. Performances resumed on April 26, 1946. The Star Troupe was re-formed in 1948. The Cosmos Troupe was formed in 1998. By that time, Takarazuka was the only successful all-female company remaining in Japan.

The Takarazuka phenomenon is closely associated with other popular culture forms in postwar Japan. Its most popular drama, *The Rose of Versailles*, is an adaptation of a *manga* by Tezuka Osamu (1928-89). AThe majority of its musical dramas are adaptations of Western works such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Anna Karenina*. It is the only company to gain the rights to make a musical of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. However, the company also adapts Japanese romances such as the eleventh century *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, and the more modern *Osaka Samurai* by Shiba Ryōtarō (1923-96).

The company strives to sell dreams by creating idealized male and female characters. After the first year of training, the students are assigned to be either *otokoyaku*, “male,” or *musumeyaku*, “female” actors. *Musumeyaku* actors play female roles exclusively, but *otokoyaku* may sometimes perform across the gender divide.

The dreams created are patriarchal stereotypes that have found resonance in the company’s fan-base. The great majority of fans are middle-aged women. Although there is an unavoidable homoerotic element in the performances, the company assiduously avoids selling sex. It strives, rather, for a fantasy of romance not accessible to many Japanese women. The most devoted fans follow one particular troupe, and join fan clubs for a particular performer in that troupe. Beyond any romantic fantasies nurtured by Takarazuka performances, fan club activities are a social outlet.

JOHN SWAIN