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Takarazuka for the Family: Japanese All-Women's Musical Theater and Traditional Gender Perceptions

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TAKARAZUKA FOR THE FAMILY: JAPANESE ALL-WOMEN'S MUSICAL THEATER
AND TRADITIONAL GENDER PERCEPTIONS

by

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TITLE: Takarazuka for the Family: Japanese All-Women's Musical Theater and Traditional Gender Perceptions

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Takarazuka, the Japanese all-female musical theater troupe has been inspiring Japanese audiences since 1913, when it first began as a place for training young girls to becoming *ryosai kenbo*, or “good wives, wise mothers.” The women are assigned either as a *musumeyaku* (daughter-role) or *otokoyaku* (male-role) when performing on stage. The founder, Ichizo Kobayashi hoped that the training through the Takarazuka Music School as well as the experience of performing male roles would strengthen the character of these young women, ultimately preparing them for marriage. Around 1930, he also created the school motto, “Kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku,” meaning “[With] purity, righteousness and beauty,” to clearly state the type of women Takarazuka was promoting. This paper will closely examine how Takarazuka influences the audience's perception on gender roles and sexuality, and whether it challenges or supports the traditional family idealism.

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INTRODUCTION

Lavish costumes, bright stage lights, energetic dance numbers and breathtaking songs. It all seems just like a Broadway show, with the only difference being that the entire cast is made up of women. Founded in 1913, the Takarazuka Revue Company, also known as *Takarazuka Kagekidan*, the Japanese all-female musical theater troupe produces various shows, ranging from traditional Japanese folktales to translated versions of Broadway musicals, with the women portraying both female and male characters. The male roles, referred to as *otokoyaku*, thicken their eyebrows, wear a suit and sing in a deeper voice to fully display their masculinity; whereas the female roles, known as *musumeyaku*, flaunt their femininity with their graceful movements and flirtatious mannerisms.¹ Although the shows they produce are family-friendly, some people may find it puzzling why the audience is comfortable with half of these women essentially cross-dressing. This paper will closely examine how Takarazuka influences the audience's perception on gender roles and sexuality, and whether it challenges or supports the traditional family idealism.

Before Takarazuka was created, *kabuki*, the most prestigious form of Japanese theater, began in 1603 with *onnna kabuki* or "women's kabuki," a female group performing dances and short skits. However due to censorship and fear of them becoming targets of prostitution, all women were banned from the stage, turning *kabuki*

¹ Jennifer Robertson, "Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint: The Takarazuka Revue and the "State Theatre" Movement in Japan," *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 4 (1991), <http://www.jstor.org> (accessed October 9, 2011).

into a form of theater performed only by men.² It was only with the introduction of Takarazuka that women were allowed to set foot on stage as performers once again. Although society at first frowned upon the idea of unmarried women entering the theater arts, the intentions behind Takarazuka soon gained approval. Aside from being an entertainment source for the masses, Ichizo Kobayashi (1873-1957) founded this group to educate and train young girls to become *ryosai kenbo*, or “good wives, wise mothers,”³ that are advocated in the Meiji Civil Code.⁴

Like other East Asian cultures, Japanese culture greatly values traditional customs and morals, many of them pertaining to family issues. The culture also preserves traditional gender role images where the husbands are expected to work and earn wages while the wives bear children and help raise a successful family. In order to follow this idealism, many Japanese people stress the importance of men acting masculine and women behaving feminine. As the young girls in Takarazuka train to become glamorous stage performers, it becomes apparent how much emphasis is placed on the traditional values, and how that in turn plays a role in making a magnificent performance.

“A TRAINING SCHOOL FOR BRIDES”

² Shochiku Co. Ltd., “Kabuki Official Website,” Shochiku Co. Ltd., <http://www.kabuki-bito.jp/eng/top/html>. (accessed October 11, 2011).

³ Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 62.

⁴ System developed during the Meiji Restoration, describing the patriarchal Japanese family values and laws regarding marriage.

Before the girls step foot on stage as *otokoyaku* and *onnayaku*, they must go through rigorous training at the Takarazuka Music School. After Kobayashi created Takarazuka, he founded the Takarazuka Music School in 1919 with a two-year program where girls were trained to become true “Takarasiennes.”⁵ Even today, the Takarazuka Music School is known for their strict discipline and orderliness carried throughout the academy and is sometimes referred as “a training school for brides.” Stickland explains that “Takarazuka teaches its members to observe, manipulate and modify orthodox gender roles for their own purposes, and ex-Takarasiennes take this knowledge with them as they rejoin the everyday world, where different versions of masculinity and femininity are played out.”⁶ To solidify their femininity the students follow the strict regulations within the music school regarding their behavior and interactions with one another. In order to prepare for the stage, they also have daily lessons in acting, voice and dance (ballet, modern and tap), along with lessons on traditional Japanese dancing.⁷

The foundation of the Takarazuka Music School and Takarazuka Revue rests on their motto, “*Kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku,*” meaning “[With] purity, righteousness and beauty.”⁸ This phrase is especially important for the students at the music school because each word plays an important role in strengthening their character. The first

⁵ Takarazuka Music School, “About Takarazuka Music School,” Takarazuka Music School, <http://www.tms.ac.jp/index.html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

⁶ Leonie R. Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*. (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, Inc., 2008), 176.

⁷ Takarazuka Music School, “About Takarazuka Music School,” Takarazuka Music School, <http://www.tms.ac.jp/index.html>

⁸ Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, 92.

word, *kiyoku*, refers to the young, innocent and unwed girls that the theater company represents. Takarazuka continuously promotes pure, fresh-faced and sprightly women; in order to preserve this image, these girls must not be tainted in any way. They have little interaction with the world outside of the academy (particularly with men), wear uniforms and are expected to behave well at all times.⁹ The fact that the females are called *musumeyaku*, or “daughter-roles” instead of *onnayaku*, meaning “women-roles,” signifies how the terminology alone represents their youthfulness.¹⁰

The other two words, *tadashiku* and *utsukushiku*, reflect the strict discipline the school practices. It is especially important for the music students as the skills they accumulate will help them develop into the “wholesome women” the academy advocates. The students must use proper language when addressing instructors and other students, following the hierarchy of the school. This derives from the Japanese social custom, where one is expected to show respect to elders and superiors. In the Takarazuka Music School, the first-year students respect their teachers and upperclassmen; the second-year students show respect to their teachers while acting superior to the underclassmen; and peers treat each other equally.¹¹

The first-year students further shape their character by practicing extensive cleaning. They have designated areas within the school grounds that they are assigned to clean throughout the entire year on a regular basis. At the beginning of the year, the

⁹ Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams, *Dream Girls*, DVD, (New York, NY: Women Make Movies, 1993).

¹⁰ Jennifer Robertson, *Butch and Femme On and Off the Takarazuka Stage: Gender, Sexuality and Social Organization in Japan*. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Board of Trustees, 1989), 3.

¹¹ Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, 97.

second-year students instruct and closely monitor the first-year students until they become secure in their cleaning.¹² Though tedious, the cleaning soon becomes an art form as they clean the area with minimal amount of movement or effort and without the use of tools such as vacuum cleaners.¹³ By imbedding the correct way of addressing one another and perfecting the skill of cleaning, the students become stronger individuals and develop their inner beauty, which will emanate in their performances and their lives after Takarazuka.

Once these women reach the age suitable for marriage, around ages twenty-five to twenty-seven, they are encouraged to retire or “graduate” the troupe and get married. While some women indeed follow the normative path and get married after retiring, many of them choose alternative routes. Some decide to go to a university and pursue a higher degree; some pursue other performing careers; some find jobs within the Takarazuka theater company or music school; and some open private studios to train young girls who aspire to be in Takarazuka themselves.¹⁴ Even though the school was founded in hopes of cultivating women to become “good wives, wise mothers,” the school has provided much more. No matter which path they choose, the Takarazuka performers all leave the stage with a firm understanding of what is necessary to be seen as a proper, well-rounded woman in Japanese society.

¹² Longinotto and Williams, *Dream Girls*, DVD.

¹³ Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194-204.

WESTERNIZED *OTOKOYAKU* AND TRADITIONAL GENDER PERCEPTIONS

The early voices of disapproval with Takarazuka were not only against women being in theater in general, but also against them performing male roles. The audiences and critics believed that “a masculine female is dangerous to the social order...in appropriating ‘male’ gender, she, like the *moga*¹⁵ who eschewed conventional femininity, embodies the rejection of wifhood and, most importantly, motherhood.”¹⁶ Kobayashi however believed that having these women perform male roles was advantageous for them because, by mastering the portrayal of these characters they would understand the male psyche, which would later allow them to understand their husbands better.¹⁷ Regardless, it was enforced that the *otokoyaku* characteristic was to be used for professional purposes only.

Strictly looking at the structure of the theater company, we can see that the attitude towards the *otokoyaku* reflects the Japanese patriarchal society. Some of the performers describe the setting as, “Japanese society is a male’s world, and Takarazuka is an *otokoyaku*’s world.”¹⁸ *Otokoyaku* Maya Miki and a *musumeyaku* explain in an interview that the theater company follows the mentality of a term called *teishu kappaku*,

¹⁵ Shortened term for “modern girl,” and described as a Japanese version of the American flapper.

¹⁶ Jennifer Robertson, “The ‘Magic If’: Conflicting Performances of Gender in the Takarazuka Revue of Japan,” in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick. (London and Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 46-67.

¹⁷ Ichizo Kobayashi, *Takarazuka Manpitsu* (Tokyo: Jitsugyo no Nihonsha, 1955), 91.

¹⁸ Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, 83.

where the husband is treated like a boss and the wife expected to follow him. In a similar way, the *musumeyaku* must try to make the *otokoyaku* look better and work hard not to overshadow them.¹⁹

As an audience, it is important to understand that the *otokoyaku* is not supposed to be an accurate portrayal of men but rather representing the “ideal man” fantasy for women. Even though the *otokoyaku* slick their hair back and wear male-style clothing, they still wear high heel shoes and attach fake eyelashes to further emphasize the fact that they are not meant to be seen as actual men but as women who are *portraying* men.²⁰ Their way of performing male characters in fact bends the standard masculine and feminine qualities that are seen outside of the theater realm. Many Japanese people stress how men should be masculine and assertive, while women should be gentle and passive. The portrayal of *otokoyaku* however, goes against this view, and incorporating Western cultural traits creates personas that are both bold and sensitive.

One of the things most fans appreciate about Takarazuka is that adapting Western romance stories allows the *otokoyaku* to express feelings in a way that one will not see from actual men in real life. While hugging and kissing on the cheek can be seen as a normal greeting in some Western cultures, most Japanese people - especially the older generation - do not show affection in this way. When the Takarazuka performers are portraying Western characters in these productions, they have the freedom to show

¹⁹ Longinotto and Williams, *Dream Girls*, DVD.

²⁰ Lorie Brau, “The Women’s Theater of Takarazuka,” *TDR* vol. 34, no. 4 (1990), <http://www.jstor.org> (accessed October 8, 2011), 86.

emotion and love effortlessly. It seems a big reason most of the audience is made up of middle-aged women is because they do not get this type of affection from their husbands.²¹ One fan expresses, “Japanese men are boring, so of course women love Takarazuka. The husbands work so hard that they have no time for their wives, and Takarazuka is a place for wives to go that doesn’t threaten their husbands. At Takarazuka, women can express the emotion they can’t show their coldhearted husbands.” When the *otokoyaku* say things that make women swoon, it provides the married women what they believe they are missing from their real relationships.²²

Japanese people also tend to use *honne* and *tatemae*, a social phenomenon where one’s *honne*, or “true feelings” are covered up by the *tatemae*, or “façade” to avoid conflict and maintain social harmony. Because of this trait, Japanese people tend not to openly share their true feelings, while people in Western cultures are stereotyped to be open about what they are thinking or feeling. For these reasons, the audiences often find it refreshing and inspiring to see characters easily show their true thoughts and feelings to others. As former *otokoyaku* star Miki Maya explains to a younger *musumeyaku*, “Try and be more Western. We Japanese hold our feelings in; we don’t express them. Be more dramatic. Western women would flutter their eyelashes.”²³ Through the advice given to one another, these women work towards improving their portrayal of Western characters to make it more believable to the audience.

²¹ Ingrid Sischy, “Onward and Upward with the Arts: Selling Dreams,” *The New Yorker* (Sept. 28 1992), 93-94.

²² Longinotto and Williams, *Dream Girls*, DVD.

²³ *Ibid.*

Along with the boldness, the *otokoyaku* show a degree of sensitivity in their performances. For example, contrary to their grand sets and costumes, the gestures that these women use in romantic scenes are quite simplistic and subtle. Although these women never actually kiss each other on stage, they use alternative gestures to suggest their intimacy such as the correct use of words, eyes and whole body through the fingers.²⁴ In addition a majority of the productions have the *otokoyaku* play high-class roles where they are always poised and regal. Because of the elegant and sensitive nature played out by the *otokoyaku*, some audiences, especially young girls, find them more appealing than actual men.²⁵ As witnessed in the *Dream Girls* documentary film, fans will wait hours outside of the stage door in hopes to get a glimpse of their favorite *otokoyaku*. In fact, they explain that they would never have the patience for such behavior for actual men because of their “rough nature.”²⁶

These comments and behaviors confirm that the Japanese audience appreciates the way the *otokoyaku* is characterized based on Western cultural traits. The way they combine the boldness and the gentle sensitivity into their roles reveals how they do not entirely succumb to the traditional male characteristics. Rather, these women create their own version of masculinity while maintaining a hint of femininity within, producing the ultimate “ideal man.”

²⁴ Kenko Kawasaki, *Takarazuka to Iu Yutopia*, (Tokyo, Japan: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), 157.

²⁵ Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, 115.

²⁶ Longinotto and Williams, *Dream Girls*, DVD.

LESBIANISM AND JAPANESE FAMILY VALUES

In addition to the concern of these women losing their femininity through playing male roles, some worry that it could initiate “perverse life styles,” namely homosexuality.²⁷ For centuries, Japanese society has been aware of the idea of homosexuality, as such behavior between men was fairly common in various institutions during the Edo period (1603-1868). Monastery monks or men of the samurai class took on young male apprentices and practiced *wakashudo*, “the way of youths”, or as Gregory Pflugfelder defines, “the way of *loving* youths,’ an erotic path that younger males traveled only in their capacity as sexual objects,”²⁸ where the elder would mentor the young boy in various skills and also took him on as a lover until the boy reached the age of adulthood. Although this ritualistic homoerotic behavior between men was accepted during the Edo period, society condemns lesbianism even more because it once again challenges the idealism of women settling down and raising a family. As Stevi Jackson states, “the Asian aversion to homosexuality is not identical to homophobia in the West. Homosexuality and lesbianism are not merely objects of moral outrage - they challenge the foundation of the Asian patriarchal family.”²⁹ Because many Japanese parents expect their children to raise a family to continue the family lineage, they view lesbianism as a

²⁷ Robertson, “The ‘Magic If,’” 52-53.

²⁸ Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse 1600-1950*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, Inc., 2000), 27.

²⁹ Jackson, Stevi, Liu Jieyu and Woo Juhyun. “Introduction,” in *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures*, ed. Stevi Jackson, Liu Jieyu and Woo Juhyun. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), 1-30.

behavior that disrupts that purpose. Further, the women are seen as responsible for raising a successful family, making it crucial for them to be “proper” and fit for such duties. This mentality is practiced to the point where a study by Saori Kamano and Diana Khor³⁰ shows that even when lesbian couples live together, their parents often deny the fact that they are more than just friends, and continuously urge them to marry a man by setting up arranged marriages.

The phenomenon of *otokoyaku* actresses drawing the attention of female fans was seen natural until claims of lesbianism started being associated with the theater company. In 1929, a scandal involving *otokoyaku* Miyako Nara, *Shinpa*³¹ actress Yaeko Mizutani and their same-sex affair³² erupted among the media, marking the beginning of potential threats towards Kobayashi’s ideologies for Takarazuka. The press described how the *otokoyaku* were using their masculine personas off stage in their private lives, wreaking havoc among the traditional gender idealisms. Following this incident, some *otokoyaku* began cutting their long hair rather than stuffing it into their headpieces, while others utilized masculine-style speech off stage.³³ Along with the radical behavioral changes among these women, there was an increase in reported love affairs between the Takarazuka performers and their fans, strengthening the allusions towards lesbianism.

³⁰ Saori Kamano and Diana Khor, “‘How Did You Two Meet?’ Lesbian Partnerships in Present-day Japan,” in *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures*, ed. Stevi Jackson, Liu Jieyu and Woo Juhyun. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), 161-177.

³¹ The “New school” theater founded in 1888.

³² Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, 149-151.

³³ Jennifer Robertson, “Gender-Bending in Paradise: Doing ‘Female’ and ‘Male’ in Japan,” in *Women and Women’s Issues in Post World War II Japan*, ed. Edward R. Beauchamp. (New York: Garland, 1998), 144-163.

In order to avert the public's eye from these accusations, Kobayashi ultimately created the school's motto, "*Kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukushiku*" to reaffirm its original honorable intent of teaching young girls to build proper character.³⁴ Since then, the Takarazuka Music School has set stricter regulations regarding the students' behavior, and has been able to promote the "good wives, wise mothers" approach once again.

In order to further distance Takarazuka from associations with lesbianism, certain terminology has been in use to describe close friendships between two women.³⁵ One of them is called "Class S" with the "S" standing for the word, sister or *shojo*, meaning young girl. The term describes an intimate friendship or crush developed between two females, often in a junior-senior setting. The usage of this term made it seem natural and acceptable to have two women develop a close relationship as it was seen as "a phase."³⁶ Meanwhile, the public made sense of the passionate fans lusting over the *otokoyaku* as a natural result, since the masculine personas are hard to resist for heterosexual women.³⁷ With the Nara-Mizutani scandal, Nara was condemned for using her masculine persona to her advantage and being aggressively seductive;³⁸ whereas Mizutani was not because the public believed that she "could not help" falling for such a seductive *otokoyaku*.

³⁴ Robertson, "Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint," 172.

³⁵ Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, 68.

³⁶ Brau, "The Women's Theater of Takarazuka," 89.

³⁷ Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue*, 159.

³⁸ Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, 151.

These events reveal how Takarazuka faced serious accusations of lesbianism once the women began to use their *otokoyaku* personas outside of their performance, endangering the image of the company. However, through altering their views regarding same-sex relationships, the Takarazuka management and the Japanese audience were able to avoid any threats challenging the traditional family idealisms. In addition, with Kobayashi's creation of the school motto, Takarazuka was able to reestablish their purpose of sending off "pure, proper and beautiful" women into the world.

CONCLUSION

Compared to *kabuki*, which has a history of over four hundred years, Takarazuka is not quite as prestigious; however in its own way it is gaining respect from Japanese people and inspiring thousands of audiences with each performance. Taking a closer look at the foundational elements that support this theater company allows one to discover that, behind the scenes of such grandiose performance lie the simple, family-oriented traditional Japanese values. From the first day of classes, the students of the Takarazuka Music School are taught important skills that become significant later in their lives once they get married and leave the theater troupe, should they follow the normative path. As the *otokoyaku* prepare their male roles on stage, they try to understand the male psyche to fully display masculine characteristics. Finally, despite the allegations of these women being associated with lesbianism, Takarazuka denies any association with it Japanese people continue to advocate traditional family morals and encourage the women to get married and settled down with a husband. As it approaches the one-hundredth

anniversary of its founding, Takarazuka continues to value and promote the beauty of these women, who skillfully portray both genders and uphold the integrity of the theater troupe.

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