



Takarazuka performers in 1936.

Takarazuka (All-Female Revues in Japan)

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During the twentieth century in Japan, Takarazuka, all-female musical and theater companies in which women play all roles, have thrived; and actresses playing males have generated large female fan clubs.

The revues are elaborately costumed, flamboyant, and extravagant in execution. These commercially successful and mainstream theatrical enterprises generally present plays with safe, middle-of-the-road topics. During World War II, for example, the productions emphasized patriotic themes and the liberation of other Asians from European exploitation.

Despite the mainstream subjects of Takarazuka, the revues have nonetheless spawned fringe activities that are gender-transgressive and that tellingly illustrate the construction and deconstruction of gender roles.

It is important not to put a Euro-American imprint on Takarazuka. This is a Japanese theater in a Japanese context. It does not map well onto Euro-American concepts of desire, gender, and sexuality.

Theater in Japan became mono-sexual in 1629, when the Tokugawa regime banned women (and later boys) from Kabuki. Men playing women (*onnagata*) in Kabuki are said to "embody" the ideal of femininity, while women playing men (*otokoyaku*) in Takarazuka only "represent" masculinity.

The oldest and most successful of the all women groups is the Takarazuka Revue, founded in a hot-springs resort near Osaka in 1913 by Kobayashi Ichizo (1873-1957), a male industrialist, impresario, and politician. He called it "New Citizens' Theater" in contrast to the old and elitist Kabuki. He conceived Takarazuka as a mass theater for families.

The 3,000-seat theater near Osaka sells out regularly during the performing season year after year. The Tokyo troupe is planning a new and larger theater complex near the Tokyo Disneyland. Its most prominent rival, Tokyo's Shochiku Revue, opened in 1928 and ceased regular productions in 1990.

The performers for the three Takarazuka troupes have all been educated and trained in the two-year Takarazuka Music Academy. Entrance to the Academy is highly competitive, and well-off families train their daughters for years to enhance their chances for admission.

The students (and later the performers) are subject to tight discipline and regimes designed to maintain their respectability. Nonetheless, gossip about the performers is intense (and marketed in both official and unofficial venues), and scandals--including lesbian scandals--have occurred. Students are assigned their gender identity after they are accepted, on the basis of appearance (and, to a certain extent, on personal preference). The roles are based on contrasting gender stereotypes.

Thus, the women (*musumeyaku*) and the men (*otokoyaku*) are both examples of constructed gender. The *otokoyaku's* hair is cut short. The Stanislavsky method of acting, which Takarazuka directors have used from the beginning, involves the actors not only creating the internal lives of the characters but also physically

embodying them. The *musumeyaku* are used theatrically to define and enhance the masculinity of the *otokoyaku*.

Most Takarazuka fans are as respectable and mainstream as the performers--housewives, industrialists, politicians, and teenagers. But the intense fan response (from both women and men) indicates that more is going on than the official ideologies of theatrical gender acknowledge.

Women fans' passions for *otokoyaku* are multi-faceted. Heterosexual women may feel an attraction for a "romantic" man that they do not experience in their own lives: a man who is "sensitive" because he is a woman. For some women, the *otokoyaku* expresses a freedom that is not available to them as housewives or secretaries.

There are undeniable lesbian and homoerotic components to some of the fan relationships. Everything is framed within the complex transgression of a woman being a man while still being a woman. Some fans are crushed when an *otokoyaku* later in life leaves Takarazuka and becomes an actress. *Otokoyaku* often maintain their "masculinity" off-stage as well as on. The official reason for this is that they do it out of respect for their fans, but it seems apparent that, as with the fans' reactions, something more complex goes on here as well.

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