

# Pargamatic U-Turna: Unity within Diversity and the Discomfort of Self-Representation in Takarazuka Revue's Performance Strategy

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## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the representation of late-modern Japan by the extremely popular, all-female musical theatre Takarazuka Revue, as displayed in two recent performances: Le Château de la Reine (2017, sky troupe) and Company (2018, moon troupe). The dramaturgic decision to tackle the problematic of late-modern Japan on Takarazuka Revue's stage is an important one: firstly, it is a clear distancing from the postwar performance strategy to not ever represent Asian peoples or nations in modern or contemporary times due to Takarazuka Revue's infamous involvement before and during the war; secondly, it is a powerful ideological return to its founder Ichizō Kobayashi's ideal of a theatre for the people and in the name of the people, which has gradually vanished since the overwhelming success of the blockbuster The Rose of Versailles (1974) with its numerous sequels and its orchestration of the world as a flowery rococo fantasy with gorgeous costumes, rapid succession of astonishing stage-sceneries and flamboyant advertisement of otokoyaku (female impersonators of male roles in Takarazuka Revue). Regardless whether it tackles the experiences of a group of Japanese tourists in Paris or everyday lifestyles in Tokyo, Takarazuka Revue's re-creation of "Japan", "Japanese citizens" or "Japaneseness" strongly adheres to the idea of "unity within diversity": namely, tolerance and preservation of the status-quo. The analysis unfolds on two levels: the narrative construction of a "Japan of variety and self-acceptance", visible in the performances themselves, and the meta-narrative level referring to Takarazuka Revue as a public institution within the complex apparatus which is the Japanese media industry.*

**Keywords:** late-modernity, Japan, popular culture, entertainment industry, Takarazuka Revue, cultural consumption, musical theatre, femininity.

## 1. Introduction: the Japanese entertainment industry and its corporate modus operandi

**W**ithin the highly corporative Japanese media and entertainment industry, the extremely popular all-female musical theatre Takarazuka Revue positions itself as a symbolical institution, both longitudinally due to its longevity (since its foundation in

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1914, it has lasted more than 100 years, which equals eons in terms of the volatility and competitiveness of Japanese media-entertainment landscape) and latitudinally (it is widely considered the ideological and aesthetic foundation of the domestic industry of cultural consumption, and the entry gate of Western culture respectively Western popular culture to Japan). Taking this working hypothesis as departure point, the current paper critically observes the representation of late-modern Japan by Takarazuka Revue in its appearance as an extremely popular musical theatre. Two recent performances – *Le Château de la Reine* from 2017, performed by the sky troupe, and *Company* from 2018, staged by the moon troupe – are brought forth as explanatory examples, providing practical insights into the inner-dialectics of the theatrical medium “Takarazuka Revue” as an instrument of reflecting, promoting, propagating, implementing, and thus providing alternative role-models and existential paradigms within the neo-liberal undercurrents crisscrossing Japan’s public discourse in the past five years (2014 being a turning-point year for Takarazuka Revue due to its centennial celebration).

It is important to elaborate on the dramaturgic decision pursued by Takarazuka Revue’s administrators to tackle the problematic of late-modern Japan on its stage as a fundamental one, as it is meant to shape the future of socio-political audiences – and, hence, of the Japanese society at large: firstly, it is a clear distancing from the post-war performance strategy to not ever represent Asian peoples or nations in modern or contemporary times due to Takarazuka Revue’s infamous involvement before and during the war; secondly, it is a powerful ideological return to its founder Ichizō Kobayashi’s<sup>2</sup> ideal of a theatre for the people and in the name of the people, which has gradually vanished since the overwhelming success of the blockbuster *The Rose of Versailles* in 1974 (Berlin, 1988:57, Grajdian, 2005: 79-82, 2009: 35-44, Hashimoto, 1999:111-114, 2002:78-82, Iizuka, 2002:505, Iwahori, 1972: 44-51; see Aoki, 1988). In the former case, it is by now common knowledge that in the pre-war period and during the Pacific War (1941-1945), Takarazuka Revue Company<sup>3</sup> supported with unconditional

<sup>2</sup> Ichizō Kobayashi (1873-1957) was the founder of Takarazuka Revue Company and one of the most important entrepreneurs in pre-war Japan.

<sup>3</sup> Back then, it took over various denominations such as *Takarazuka Shōkantai* [Takarazuka Choir] 1912-1913, *Takarazuka Shōjo Kageki Yōseikai* [Takarazuka Company for the Training of Girl’s Revue] 1913-1940, and since 1940 as *Takarazuka Kagekidan* [Takarazuka Revue Company] – the name under which is currently registered (Tsuganesawa, 1991:22-36, Watanabe, 1999:29-33).

abnegation the Japanese politics of nationalism and military expansion, e.g., by positively, proactively representing the battles on-stage or by sending groups of actresses in the occupied territories to spread the Japanese spirit and ethos. As a consequence, after the merciless, definitive defeat in August 1945 and the subsequent shut-down and confiscation of the two theatres by the American military – one in Takarazuka, taken by the Navy and the other in Tokyo, taken by the Army –, a new performance policy was issued for the post-war era: never again were Japan and any other Asian countries to be represented on-stage in modern times and present-day contexts. Instead, ancient and mythological settings were to be chosen. It is still unclear how much of this decision was influenced by the leaders of the American occupation (effective 1945-1952), or even imposed as a condition for the permission to re-open the theatres for performances in front of Japanese audiences (McClain, 2002:238, Ōzasa, 1995:2/105; see Kobayashi, 1955, Powell, 2002). The Takarazuka Grand Theatre was re-opened in April 1946 with a Takarazuka Revue-version of Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* (from 1875, on a libretto by Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac, based on the eponymous novella by Prosper Mérimée) and *The Dance of Spring – The Dream of Love* in the second part. (Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre was re-opened in 1955; between 1945 and 1955, it had been renamed 'Ernie Pyle' Theatre and employed to put on performances to entertain the American occupation forces.)

In the latter case, the world-premiere of *The Rose of Versailles* in 1974 and its numerous sequels with their orchestration of the world as a flowery rococo fantasy with gorgeous costumes, rapid succession of astonishing stage-sceneries and flamboyant advertisement of *otokoyaku* (female impersonators of male roles in Takarazuka Revue) had gradually enforced the re-creation of "Paris" – and particularly of "revolutionary Paris" from 1789 – as the intellectual centre of Western modernity based on Japanese artefacts. As to be shown further below, in the first performance discussed in greater detail in this paper *Le Château de la Reine*, the *parimono* genre transfers the focus from Paris to Japanese tourists in Paris, slightly reminiscent of *Mon Paris* from 1927, the initial performance which generated the *parimono* genre itself and arrogantly tried to re-define Japan's position within the international community. (As the pre-war blockbuster *Mon Paris* had determined, the *parimono* genre included those performances staged by Takarazuka Revue with Paris-related contents since 1927, when the world premiere of *Mon Paris* had taken place, which made history as

Japan's first revue patterned upon Western, that is, French model; they make out approximately one third of yearly performances within the Takarazuka Revue entertainment conglomerate; Kawasaki, 1999:41, 2005:103.) By effacing "Paris" within a performance clearly belonging to the *parimono* genre, which turns thus into mere pretext for narrative background, and bringing into the spotlight the Japanese tourists with their idiosyncratic individualities, the dramatic message in *Le Château de la Reine* metamorphoses into a political statement, clashing with, and in fact overriding, the economic project of the domestic entertainment industry to rise above international standards of political correctness and intersectional awareness. Overcoming this first stage, the second performance to be analysed, *Company*, describes uncritically various lifestyles in Tokyo entangled within a complicated, but superficial narrative construction of homogeneity and harmony at the expense of individual life choices – which results, inevitably, in an unbent preference for tolerance and preservation of the status-quo. In doing so, Takarazuka Revue transcends the project of (Western) modernity with its focus on efficiency and competitiveness and establishes the foundation of a Japanese-flavoured type of worldview – with compassion and cooperation at its very core, while targeting at its predominantly female audiences in their major roles as mothers and primary educators.

Backed by extensive fieldwork and meticulous archive research, the forthcoming analysis unfolds on two levels: the narrative construction of a "Japan of variety and self-acceptance", visible in the performances themselves, and the meta-narrative level referring to Takarazuka Revue as a public institution within the complex apparatus which is the Japanese media industry, e.g., in the employment of the sky troupe for the performances with progressive contents to test the openness and resilience of audiences, as it happened in the previous performances since 2007, as well. To this outcome, I shall proceed in three steps: firstly, the general presentation of previous performances attempting at breaking the "glass wall" of Takarazuka Revue's administrators in post-war period to not ever display Japan or Asia in modern times (depending on the historical vision, "modern times" referred mostly to "since mid-19<sup>th</sup> century"); secondly, the detailed critical analysis of the two performances *Le Château de la Reine* and *Company*; thirdly, an anthropological questioning of the challenges this U-turn move might face, and an empiric evaluation of the effects such a decision, and the dramaturgic consequences it would trigger, might have

on the position and reputation of the Takarazuka Revue as a central institution within Japan's entertainment industry – and its more often than not conglomerate-like galaxy of cultural consumption.

While it is true that theatrical performances allow for freedom of expression and exploration of potential worlds, it also delves into new ways of interpretation of familiar circumstances. The Japanese version of stage representation as provided by Takarazuka Revue, though, raises more questions than it attempts to answer, not least due to its unilateral view of history and historical facts. In light of recent events and increasingly strained political relationships both with its Asian neighbours (more specifically, China and both Koreas) and its Western (particularly French and US-American) counterparts, it seems as if Takarazuka Revue possesses an unusual ability to foresee history's development, and to reflect it *avant-la-lettre* on its shiny stage. The problem remains, of course, the fact that the world at large is a far less shiny stage – and far less favourable to the Japanese view of reality than Takarazuka Revue would gladly want to make its audiences believe.

## 2. Present-day Japan and the weight of historical apprehension

Nowadays, a common topos in Japanese everyday life is the popular resistance to facing history and learning the lessons as a vital procedure to find innovative, future-oriented solutions to major crises. Not only the population decline and over-ageing, but also the diminishing of natural resources (of which the Japanese archipelago possesses virtually none, thus heavily relying on imported raw materials) and the environmental issues affecting economies globally as well as the increasing (re-) militarization efforts, are phenomena which no longer can be ignored in the shadow of Japan's (in)famous isolation in its own discursively reinforced insularity. An important means to raise awareness and hence to somehow impact the human tendency to deflect challenges by the so-called ostrich's strategy is mass-media's contribution to pragmatically address fears and articulate problems, and to powerfully suggest – or better said: offer – answers and realistic trajectories towards their constructive, sustainable resolution. However, between audiences' comfort resulting in popularity quotas and the rather difficult and risky task of challenging those very audiences, more often than not, mass-media prefer indulging in celebrities' gossip and political contradictions (Robertson, 1995:991, 1998:72-74; see Iwabuchi, 2015, Yoshino, 1992). Due to specific elements

which slow down more artistic media, to which Takarazuka Revue (Company) belongs, such as the longer timeframe necessary to prepare performances, the direct impact on audiences through empathic communication, the limitations of live events, it becomes easier for artistic media to critically reflect the developments of their time without getting too caught up in current – and thus, highly ephemeral – nonsensical debates and news. Instead, it filters the deeper problems which regularly transpire to the surface of masses' attention, and deals with them self-reflexively on-stage. While this process lasts significantly longer, it is (mostly) stunningly effective. This is evident in the evolution of the problematic of "Japan's self-representation" via Takarazuka Revue – both ambivalent and self-revealing.

### *2.1 Breaking the "glass wall": the meta-narrative role of the sky troupe*

Founded in 1998, the sky (or cosmos) troupe (*sora-gumi*) is the youngest among the five ensembles<sup>4</sup> of the Takarazuka Revue Company, each staging a performance lasting 32 days at the main Takarazuka Revue theatre, the one located in Takarazuka City: Takarazuka Grand Theatre, with a total of nine new performances every year. Each of the nine performances is subsequently staged at Takarazuka Tokyo Theatre in the capital's fancy district of Hibiya. In comparison to other troupes, the sky troupe is regarded as more experimental and less bound to any sort of tradition Takarazuka Revue – as a socio-economic or cultural phenomenon – might have established. For instance, flower troupe (*hana-gumi*) was formed in 1921 and is largely perceived as the most treasured of the five ensembles, with larger budgets and more lavish stage and costume designs as well as more powerful and impactful performances (such as *Casanova* from 2019, on the life of the renowned Italian adventurer and seducer Giacomo Casanova, 1725-1798, with its opera-like outfits and strong message of freedom and individual responsibility as the foundation for social stability, prosperity and cohesion). Likewise, moon troupe (*tsuki-gumi*) was created in 1921, and was the one to push forward the performance strategy when it staged the world premieres of *Mon Paris* (1927), *The Rose of Versailles* (1974, based on the hugely popular).

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<sup>4</sup> A sixth ensemble *senka-gumi* (translated as the "superior troupe", but literally meaning "the specialist's troupe") includes those older actresses who do not yet wish to retire and who are commonly employed for more complex roles in the performances alongside with each of the five main troupes.