



Takarazuka: Sexual Politics & Popular Culture in Modern Japan

Jennifer E. Robertson

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The all-female Takarazuka Revue is world-famous today for its rococo musical productions, including gender-bending love stories, torridly romantic liaisons in foreign settings, and fanatically devoted fans. But that is only a small part of its complicated and complicit performance history. In this sophisticated and historically grounded analysis, anthropologist Jennifer Robertson draws from over a decade of fieldwork and archival research to explore how the Revue illuminates discourses of sexual politics, nationalism, imperialism, and popular culture in twentieth-century Japan.

The Revue was founded in 1913 as a novel counterpart to the all-male Kabuki theater. Tracing the contradictory meanings of Takarazuka productions over time, with special attention to the World War II period, Robertson illuminates the intricate web of relationships among managers, directors, actors, fans, and social critics, whose clashes and compromises textured the theater and the wider society in colorful and complex ways.

Using Takarazuka as a key to understanding the "logic" of everyday life in Japan and placing the Revue squarely in its own social, historical, and cultural context, she challenges both the stereotypes of "the Japanese" and the Eurocentric notions of gender performance and sexuality.

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Lindsey says

I genuinely enjoyed this, despite it being rather dry in places. It definitely reads like a thesis! However, the research had been well done, and thus provides a wonderful overall view of Takarazuka and its place in modern Japan.

Gabe says

As a Takarazuka fan and consumer of Japanese pop culture, I highly recommend this text for insight not only to the Revue, but to the role of gender and female sexuality in Japanese culture both past and present.

The research spans the (then) 80 year life of the Takarazuka Revue, and blends in the sociological research seamlessly. I'd say this is a must read for anyone who has an interest in modern Japanese popular culture, especially in regards to the "shoujo" genre. The research on the social aspect of the book is handled beautifully. The author is respectful (as one would expect from a purely research piece), and also understands and communicates the difference between sexual orientation, sex, and gender.

Though there were many passages that interested me, saddened me, and infuriated me, one that stuck out as wrapping the message of the book rather perfectly is:

"Takarazuka *is* Japan, more truly than the administration realizes." (page 214)

This is a book I will certainly refer to often, pass along to friends, and use to seek out the source material for further reading. I only wish it was longer.

Dani says

I read this book, and relied on it heavily for my thesis on Japanese rock music. I made comparisons between the all female theater and otokoyaku with the visual kei males who sometimes played female roles. I also referenced kabuki and onnagata, writing about how all these performers portray the opposite gender, and how the performers use it to cater to their audiences.

kyle says

I loved this book. Meticulously researched, clearly written. The topic is utterly fascinating. Robertson, an anthropologist, writes about the all female Takarazuka review theater in Japan, outlining its history, unpacking the complex gender issues at play in the performances and the institution established, looking at its collusion with the age of Japanese imperialism, and finally a fascinating look at the fan clubs that have been established around it. Anyone interested in world theater, Japanese culture, or comparative gender studies would love this.

Hadrian says

Academic monograph about the famous Japanese all-womens' theater troupe, the Takarazuka Revue. Starts with the group's origins, its performances during the war era, and a description of its fans. Also interesting to see the assignment and performance of gender roles - literally!

Mely says

The Takarazuka is an all-female theatrical revue famed for its splendor and its otakuyaku -- women playing male roles, offstage as well as on.

More theory than history. Focused on the immediate pre- and post-war years; not much sense of the current Takarazuka. Despite Robertson's claims that femininity is as learned as a masquerade as masculinity (which I believe), she mostly focuses on the otakuyaku instead of the musumeyaku.

The pictures are great. The androgynous otakuyaku are seriously hot.

Bianca says

A book trying to talk about Takarazuka as best as it can but not quite getting there. While it gives an interesting history I wish that there was more discussion of how it functions in modern day and its cultural significance. I understand that it is a challenging subject to get any information about but I was hoping for a little more than I received.

Tosh says

While I was in Osaka a friend of mine had an extra ticket to the Takarazuka Theater. Which by the way, is very hard to come by - due to the fact that it's fan base are all women - from early 20's to middle-aged. And they never ever give up a ticket for a performance with this performance group or school of theater.

Basically what the Takarazuka specializes in doing is sort of a low-rent style of bigger theater Broadway pieces or classic narrations - such as 'Gone With The Wind.' The catch is all the roles are acted out by females, and the stories are highly romantic. Not erotic mind you, but uber-romantic. Kind of like sugar romantic. No basis for realism whatsoever.

Lesbian theater? No, I don't think so. It is just that males are so disappointing these days - none are the hero or shinning prince types. So obviously only females can play that role. So it's females in drag - but highly made up by make-up, etc.

There is very little information about the Takarazuka Theater in English, so one is grateful for this book. It's kind of dry, but nevertheless it's history is a fascinating look at 20th Century Japan.

The theater is run like a school. So there is a lot of cleaning the theater itself with toothbrushes, etc. by its students/actresses.

And what is even more fascinating is the obsessive all-female audience!

Sus says

Absolutely fascinating.

Jocilyn says

Robertson's Takarazuka is easily my favorite non-fiction work to date. I loaned this book to a friend a few years ago and have yet to get it back. I will post a fuller review when I have obtained a new copy.

Ninja says

This is obviously Jennifer Robertson's thesis. And it reads like one. Very dry but I swear I will finish it. It took me 4 years to read Proust's Remembrances, so I think I can do it.;-)

Oscar says

A really great book about the Takarazuka Revue, which is a theatrical company producing all-female musical spectaculars in Japan. This well-researched tome focuses on the psychology of the people who go to see the Revue, and the gender politics which have shaped the Revue's place in the entertainment industry.

Takarazuka provides a scholarly as well as entertaining view of the Revue. I came away knowing much more about the institution as well as Japan. I'd recommend it to anyone with an interest in theatre, gender politics, or Japanese history.

yengyeng says

The author definitely cares very much about the subject matter and took great pains to research it thoroughly. The only grouse I have is that the hyped-up expose of the tawdry, shady world of Takarazuka never happened in the book, Or did I miss it?

Takarazuka, from the performance I saw at the Takarazuka Theatre in Hyogo Prefecture a couple of years ago, is a well-oiled entertainment machine with a successful business model that is determined to thrive and profit. The stable of stars ensure the show is perfect and not a feather is out of place, and work hard to sell a 3-hour dream of glitz and glamour. Fans expect to have a good time and pay a lot of money for tickets and merchandise. It's no different from Disney or Hollywood. No one is being exploited, as far as I could see.

