

## Takarazuka

Robertson, Jennifer. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1998; xvi + 278 pp., 29 b & w illustrations. US \$40.00 (hdbd.), \$15.95 (paper).

The Takarazuka Revue is a popular all-female theater and dance troupe formed near Osaka, Japan, in 1913 by a railroad baron who wanted to draw more customers onto his trains, and to the shops and housing estates he was building near the stations. The Revue has been popular since its inception with two rather distinct categories of people, impassioned throngs of middle-aged housewives and somewhat more serious academic scholars. Both groups find themselves drawn to the charismatic *otokoyaku* or male impersonators who, like their oppositely gendered counterparts in traditional *kabuki* theater, blur boundaries of gender and sexuality in their cross-gendered performances.

Although much has already been written about the Revue in Japanese, Jennifer Robertson's *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* is the only academic work on the Takarazuka Revue available in the English language. Robertson focuses on early twentieth-century Takarazuka as an extension of state imperialism, as well as deviant sexuality and subversion in the Revue. With her primary sources being historical archives, newspapers, journals, and other public textual resources, Robertson provides a macroscopic portrayal of how the Revue constructed and projected gendered and nationalistic images in the earlier half of the previous century. In her own words, "this book is ... neither a history of the Takarazuka Revue, nor a biography of its founder, nor a history of (homo)-sexuality in Japan. It is ... an exploration of the overlapping discourses of gender, sexuality, popular culture, and nationality as they erupted into the world framed by Takarazuka" [23].

Robertson introduces the book by telling us of her own first experience with the Revue and her attraction to the "eroticized energy" [3] that she felt from the audience that night. That theme of eroticism emerges as a central pivotal mechanism through the book, uniting her historical analysis of sexuality and colonialism in pre-War Japan in the first half with her ethnography of contemporary adult comics and transgenderism in the second half.

In the first chapter, Robertson outlines her theory of the linkages between Japanese popular culture, sexuality, and nationalism. Popular culture she says, is where "sociohistorical forces and relations are generated and reproduced" [35], and it is through the analysis of popular culture that one can understand the

underlying ideology of a nation and people. Robertson incorporates Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber's analyses of cross-dressing in the United States, to argue that the gender excessiveness, the gaudy, hypergendered performance of the cross-dressing on the stage, reflects an essential underlying ambiguity and ambivalence about gender and sexuality in Japan. Much scholarly interest in Japan studies has recently been focused on the body of the young girl (*shojo*) as asexual and agendered (and yet also heavily sexualized and gendered), which is the type of ambiguity/ambivalence that Robertson speaks of.

The second chapter, "Staging Androgyny," lays out Robertson's central theory of androgyny in Japan. For Robertson, the androgyny in Takarazuka is an amalgamation of both male and female, a zone of deep eroticism as well as a blurring of gender roles. She notes, "androgyny has been used . . . to camouflage 'unconventional' female sexual practices by creating the illusion of an asexual—in effect, a disembodied—identity" [48]. For Robertson, when she peels back this camouflage and illusion, she uncovers the true "lesbian subtext" [61] of Takarazuka.

In the third chapter, "Performing Empire," Robertson explores the Revue's role in serving as a projection for Japan's imperial dreams from the troupe's inception until the mid-40s. The plays performed during that period contained themes of ethnic superiority, empire building, and gender stereotypes that would make even Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* blush. Although the segue between androgyny and imperialism may not seem obvious at first, Robertson notes: "Central to my overall thesis of strategic ambivalence as a defining feature both of the gender ideology informing the Revue and of modern Japanese national cultural identity is the homology between the process of an *onnagata* or *otokoyaku* becoming woman and a man, respectively, and the process whereby a colonial subject 'became' Japanese" [91]. Pre-War social critics fretted about both the growing androgyny of Japanese culture as well as the dilution of the purity of the Japanese bloodline through intermarriage and assimilation. Robertson argues that not only these two types of moral panic were one and the same, but also that both could be seen refracted through critiques of the Takarazuka Revue during the 1930s and '40s.

The final two chapters of the book, "Fan Pathology" and "Writing Fans," examine the Revue from the perspective of its mainly female fans. Robertson delineates that it was clear that throughout the pre-War period, Takarazuka fans had been seen as socially as well as perhaps sexually aberrant by Japanese critics. Unfortunately, most of what we know of fan life in that period is distilled through fan journals and other official publications of the Revue company. Robertson indicates in the first chapter of the book that she had perceived resistance early on during her research from Takarazuka-affiliated library staff who saw her topic of Takarazuka and sexuality as inappropriate. In order to understand the "things that aren't discussed in books on Takarazuka" [178], Robertson then undertook an ethnography of amateur theater groups and comic books with transgendered themes.

It is in these last two chapters that Robertson has most often been misread. Although the major contribution of her work is a lucid argument regarding gender and national ambivalence in wartime Japan, the incorporation of contemporary ethnographic material in a volume set mainly in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s is disorienting. The critical historical analysis of the Revue is contrasted with an

ethnography of various gendered phenomena in contemporary Japan that are of only ancillary relation to the main topic. Robertson argues that similar processes of gender ambiguity are occurring in popular culture in the modern period as had occurred with Takarazuka during the colonial period, yet she does not draw the connecting lines herself, and we are left wondering just how similar or different they actually are. It is in this vein that Robertson has been criticized by Takarazuka scholars in Japan for placing too much emphasis on sexuality and imperialism as central elements of Takarazuka [Kawasaki 2001]. We should however remember that her perspective as a Western scholar will necessarily diverge from those of the fans and local scholars.

For visual anthropologists, Robertson's *Takarazuka* will disappoint slightly, as she does not focus on the historical or contemporary theater experience itself, an unfortunate side-effect of her "cultural studies" approach. More problematically, she appears to substitute her own phenomenological experience of the Revue for long-term ethnographic fieldwork with the fans themselves. With the first English-language scholarly monograph on Takarazuka, Robertson's has opened many doors of inquiry and leaves our minds full of questions. We still await a volume that approaches Takarazuka as a visual culture in and of its own right, exploring more deeply and ethnographically the interactions between fans and actors, the theater, and mass culture in contemporary Japan.

## REFERENCE

Kawasaki K.

- 2001 A review of *Odoru Teikokushugi* [lit. "Dancing Imperialism," the Japanese title for the translation of Robertson's *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*]. [Ronza, January 2001. Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun, pp. 308–309.]

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