

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jennifer Robertson. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998. xvi + 278 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21151-3; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21150-6.

Reviewed by Jordan Sand (Georgetown University)

Published on H-Japan (February, 1999)

This rich and original study explores the meanings beneath the gaudy surfaces of Japan's famous all-female theater, the Takarazuka Revue. Most readers who have lived in Japan will be familiar with the distinctive Takarasiennes (as the players are known), whose heavily made-up eyes and peculiarly stagey stage names stand out in subway and newspaper advertisements. But fewer will have seen them perform. Unlike Kabuki (which also features cross-dressers), the all-female revue has not gained entrance to the canon of native culture. Its hybrid character as a theatrical form denies it recognition as traditionally Japanese. Regarded as kitsch by many, Takarazuka is sustained by a sharply defined cohort of loyal fans, most of whom today are adult women. These are precisely the points where Robertson focuses her study: the hybridity of the revue and its relationship with its devoted fans. In the style of recent cultural studies, she approaches both topics with a resolve to reveal the politics underlying them, and to demonstrate the serious import of what many regard merely as escapist entertainment. This is the source of the book's force and originality, as well as its most conspicuous flaw.

Since its founding by railroad magnate Kobayashi Ichizo in 1913, Takarazuka has been tightly controlled by a management with decidedly conservative ideas about women. Yet the revue's biggest stars are the *otokoyaku*, women specializing in male roles, whose appeal derives at least in part from their non-conformity to the expectations for their sex. The theater thus makes an ideal laboratory for Robertson's study of competing representations of gender. This theme is woven throughout the book, which draws on a combination of historical and ethnographic sources, interpreting the dramas themselves, the words of founder Kobayashi and of contemporary fans, as well as a wide range of critics and commentators from Taisho to the present. Chapters One and Two discuss the implications of cross-dressing and androgyny, first in relation to the ambivalence and "semi-otic excess" inherent in popular culture, then specifically

within discourses of sexuality in Japan. Chapter Three analyzes the revue theater in the 1930s and 40s, when a number of imperial propaganda pieces were produced. Chapters Four and Five turn the focus to the revue fans, first as they have been stereotyped in the writings of (mostly male) critics, then as cultural producers in their own right, offering distinct interpretations of Takarazuka through critical writing, personal letters, fanzines, and even "off-Takarazuka" performances.

At every stage, Robertson reveals how gender ambivalence in the theater serves "both to contain difference and to reveal the artifice of containment" (p. 215). She presents the theater as a dynamic site of competition between management, actors, critics, and fans. While the management has portrayed the revue as an ideal "family entertainment" as well as a finishing school in which the Takarasiennes—in male and female roles—learn to become good wives, many fans, Robertson demonstrates, have made it a vehicle for their erotic fantasies. Poised between these two poles, the stars themselves have an uneasy relationship with both. Some male social critics, meanwhile, have treated the female fan as pathologically obsessed and the revue as an incitement to deviancy. Ironically, while these critics worry about the theater's corrupting influence on fans, revue managers worry about fans' corrupting influence on the Takarasiennes.

Between management and players, the male-dominated management has the upper hand, maintaining strict control from the time the young women enter the drama academy, when they are assigned to play either *otoko* or *musume*. The theater is thus a microcosm of patriarchal society. Yet the management has not refrained from exploiting the Takarasiennes' implicit homoerotic appeal, using devices such as official fan-magazine photos of stars in imaginary off-stage dating and even wedding scenes.

Guided by Robertson's deft analysis, the game of sex-

gender permutations offers the intellectual pleasure of a good mathematical puzzle. Ethnic identity adds an extra variable. The postwar favorite “Rose of Versailles,” for example, “at once exaggerates and masks the slippage between sex and gender” by showing someone biologically female and Asian but gendered male (the *otokoyaku*) in the role of a character supposed to be biologically female and European but made to dress as a boy. The drama thus involves a double-reverse. It is significant, Robertson points out, that the cross-dressed European character can only be played by an *otokoyaku*, because only *otokoyaku* are permitted to play the more demanding and charismatic European roles, as well as to cross the boundaries of gender.

Robertson’s emphasis on eroticism runs against the grain of most Japanese writing on Takarazuka, which has tended to present the Takarasiennes as asexual. She takes pains, at the same time, to avoid the pitfall of equating fandom with lesbian attraction. Rather, she writes, the androgynous beauty of the Takarasiennes invites “unaligned erotic play” (p. 145). By stressing that desire is not always encapsulated in stable binary categories, her analysis suggests both the theater’s liberating potential and its significance beyond subcultures of either revue fans or homosexuals.

The book is marred in places by overstatements and interpretations that seem forced for the sake of Robertson’s political reading. The greatest difficulties come in analysis of the war years, when she seeks to demonstrate that Takarazuka served as a “weapon” in state mobiliza-

tion of the Japanese and even in the assimilation of other Asian peoples. The material she presents shows that revue directors were imperial enthusiasts, but not that the government made any effort to use the revue theater for purposes of mobilization. Accepting what she further implies, that Takarazuka dramas performed in Japanese (or worse still, in Mandarin rendered in Japanese syllabary!) were somehow useful in making loyal Japanese subjects out of non-Japanese audiences requires simply too great a suspension of disbelief. Robertson’s analysis of the imperial worldview in the wartime productions is insightful in itself. Surely the fascination of these wartime dramas is not in their real-world political significance so much as in the evocative correspondence between the “dream-world” of the revue theater and the fantasies of empire.

Despite occasional forced interpretations, this is an important and pathbreaking work. Robertson has given us Japanese cultural studies in the best sense: a nuanced reading that relates her subject to its Japanese context without conflating it with “Japanese culture” as a reified totality. As a study of gender in theater, as well as of fan-idol relationships, it also makes a fascinating and innovative contribution to the field of popular culture studies.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Jordan Sand. Review of Robertson, Jennifer, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2754>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.