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# The Takarazuka Revue

## Japanese All-Female Musical Theatre Troupe

by Sally Brown & Kimberly O'Sullivan

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A Musumeyaku is flanked by two Otokoyaku, circa 1935.

**T**akarazuka is in an ancient Japanese town, situated five hours from Tokyo. It's also home to one of the world's most unusual all-female schools and entertainment troupes. Takarazuka was formed in 1914 by Ichizo Kobayashi, a railway company director who built a theatre at the end of his railway line to boost passenger sales. He predicted that the public would flock to Western-style musicals instead of classical Japanese drama, and in view of this, he installed the country's first women-only troupe which would provide a contrast to the traditional all-male Kabuki theatre.

***... they must adopt a male name, wear male clothes on and off stage, shield any personal relationships with men from the public and not marry.***

What he didn't predict, was the phenomenal attraction that the Japanese audience would have to the show's cross-dressing women, or "men". Ironically, this innovative troupe is owned and handled by an all-male, grey suited, conservative management.

There are over 400 members of the Takarazuka Revue divided into four troupes, each with a quintessential Japanese name: Flower Troupe, Moon Troupe, Snow Troupe, and Star Troupe. The women who populate these troupes dress and behave as either men or

women, and through rigorous training, learn the manners and deportment of their allotted gender, almost to the point of parody; Thousands apply to the school every year, and in return, the chosen girls, aged between sixteen and eighteen, must live a highly disciplined and monastic life for two years. Of the forty successful girls, ten are accepted on the basis that they must become men.

The School's motto is, "Be Pure, Righteous and Beautiful", yet despite this lofty ideal, school life is harsh, with a strong hierarchy in place amongst the students. A small insight into their daily life is that all first year students must arrive at school at 7:00am, dressed in grey skirts and starched white shirts to pick up dust from the skirting boards with tiny paintbrushes.

For a select number of the hand-picked students, the school can lead to incredible fame and status. Women buy tickets months in advance to watch the touring troupe of sequin-clad singers and dancers perform heart-rending versions of Western love-songs. Takarazuka is extremely popular amongst straight women, with the "male" stars ensuring the show's success. These men receive an extraordinary amount of attention from their fans, with theatres consistently packed with devoutly adoring women, who loudly swoon when their "male" favourites appear on stage. Many fans willingly wait for hours after the shows just to catch a glimpse of these performers.

These stars are popular because of, not despite of, the fact that they are women. Although they dress in tuxedos and wear their short hair slicked back, they all wear heavy make-up, ensuring no-one would mistake them for men. Yet, they are popular because they are the opposite of Japanese men. "In real life, men are kind when they are courting but change when they marry you," explains a Takarazuka fan, "but the men on stage are endlessly kind to their women." Says another, "Women act the male roles, so they can create the ideal man that women want. They don't have the bad sides of men." For Takarazuka, the most important thing in their life is their partner, wife or lover. This is an appealing contrast to the bulk of Japanese men who are married to their work and company!

The Takarazuka "male" stars must live the illusion of being men. For the duration of their career, which usually lasts till their mid-twenties, they must adopt a male name, wear male clothes on and off stage, shield any personal relationships with men from the public and not marry. Those who do form relationships with men must be discreet - boyfriends are discouraged. Being chosen as a "male" lead in the troupe is a less than democratic decision. There is considerable pressure for students who are over five foot five and have a flat forehead or cheekbones, to adopt the male role. Those who become men are taught to dance seductively with their leading ladies, and to adhere to a highly sexualized and Westernized mode of performance.

Yet for all the glamour, devotion, and fame the Takarazuka men enjoy, life is draining and restrictive. The constant attention from fans is exhausting, and Mira Anju, a current "male" star, rarely leaves her flat on her days off because she is followed everywhere by crowds of young women, politely, but insistently asking for autographs. She carves her way through sack loads of mail each week "company rules dictate that every letter must be answered - and every day is greeted by fans who press gifts of food, clothes and mascots into her hands.

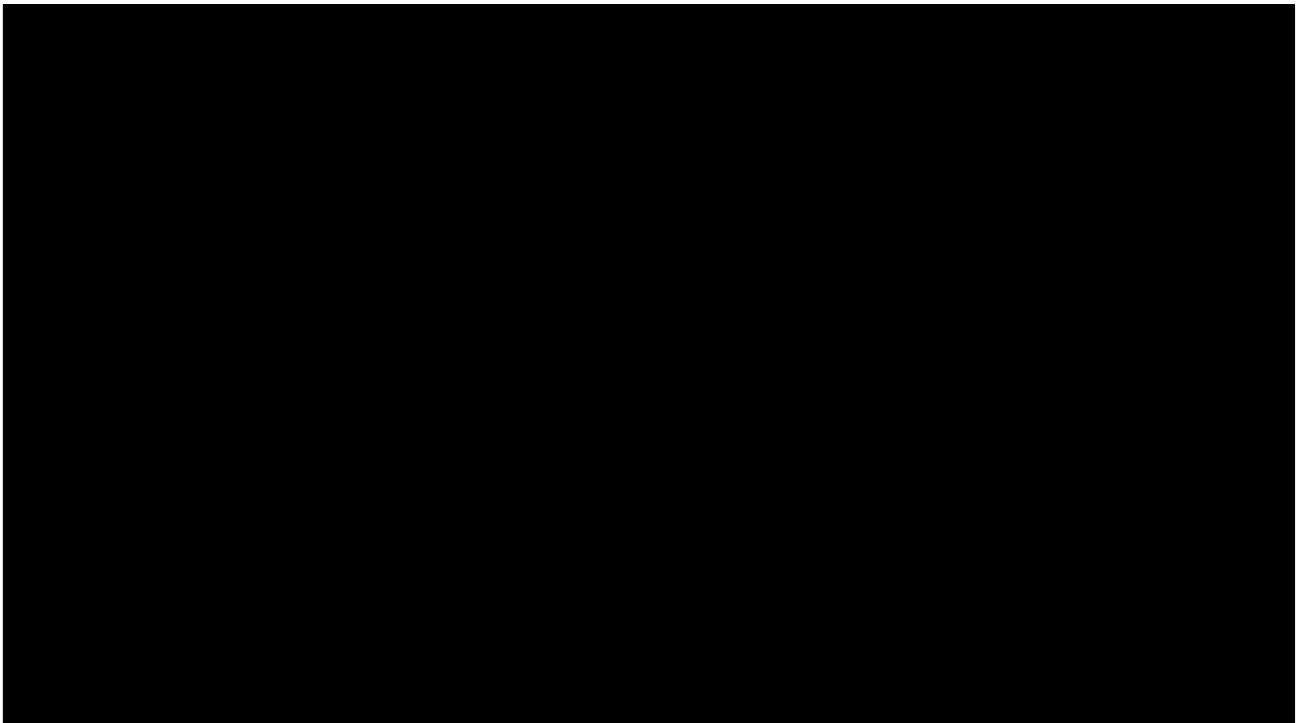
As the members of the Takarazuka Revue reach twenty-five, many of the women are pressured by their parents to leave and get married. Though Japanese society is changing, it is still almost unheard of for a woman to be single after this age. Paradoxically, the Takarazuka men are thought to make "good wives", because of the discipline and endurance that is involved in the Takarazuka training! After their retirement, the Revue players usually marry and take their place in Japanese society, with its inflexible adherence to traditional gender roles. How these women, particularly the "male" stars, survive is not known.

What is evident though, is that the Takarazuka Revue is the fastest growing show in popularity in Japan at the moment, and there is no sign of this slowing down. Though the performances, sets and costumes, with their Las Vegas mimicry, may seem garish to many Western eyes, Takarazuka is sweeping tens of thousands of Japanese women off their feet. The men of this troupe are shown idolatry only equalled by Western rock and pop acts.

in 1994, the Takarazuka School and Revue were the subject of a British documentary called *Dream Girls*.

## Takarazuka Review

**Edited from Wikipedia:**  The Takarazuka Revue is a Japanese all-female musical theatre troupe based in Takarazuka, Japan. Women play all roles in lavish, Broadway-style productions of Western-style musicals, and sometimes stories adapted from shojo manga and Japanese folktales. The troupe takes its name from the Hankyu Takarazuka rail line in suburban Osaka. The company is a division of the Hankyu Railway company; all members of the troupe are employed by the company. For further information about the Takarazuka Review, [please visit the Takarazuka Review website](#) .



This video is courtesy Women Make Movies and You Tube

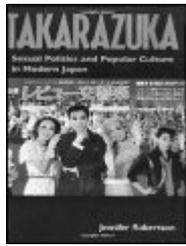


**A History of the Takarazuka Revue Since 1914: Modernity, Girls' Culture, Japan Pop**  
Author: Makiko Yamanashi  
Publisher: Global Oriental/Brill (2012)  
I.S.B.N.-13 978 9004203860

**From Fishpond Books**  Makiko Yamanashi holds a degree in art history and philosophy from U.C.L. She belongs to the Opera/Musical Study Group at the Tsubouchi Theatre Memorial Museum, Waseda University, and also works as a coordinator of cultural events in Japan and Europe. In Takarazuka City, she acts as a member of the Takarazuka Film Festival Committee and the Takarazuka International Friendship Association.

**Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan**  
Author: Jennifer Robertson  
Publisher: University of California Press (1998)  
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0520211513

**From Amazon Books**  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 1914 as a novel counterpart to the all-male Kabuki theatre. 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 theatre and the wider society in colourful 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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