

Welcome to Romance Theatre

By Kat Avila

When you enter the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, you walk up a grand red-carpeted staircase whose banister is adorned with multicolored roses. It's part of the fantasy - princess meeting her prince.



But it's a prince created by another woman.

The dream men in Takarazuka theatre are brought to life by women actors. Who knows best what a woman desires most in the deepest recesses of her heart than a same-sex peer?

Welcome to Romance Theatre! The fantasy arena for Japanese women. If men can go to strip bars to get their SEXUAL fantasies fulfilled, why shouldn't there be a place for women to watch their EMOTIONAL fantasies played out?

And why just in Japan? Are those staid salarymen neglecting their wives that much? Shouldn't Japanese women be satisfied with daytime soaps and romance novels like the rest of us?

As for the one-sex casting, a precedent has already been set by the prestigious Kabuki, where men play both the men and women's roles. In a paradoxical correlation, the original Kabuki was started by a woman around 1600, whereas the Takarazuka Revue Company was founded by a man in 1914. This year is the company's 90th anniversary.

In the United States, when one thinks of artists who play the opposite gender, drag queens and drag kings are what usually pop to mind. And they are mostly associated with the gay and lesbian communities. The community-at-large is attracted to or repelled by what is interpreted, through a conservative American Christian lens, as a perversion.

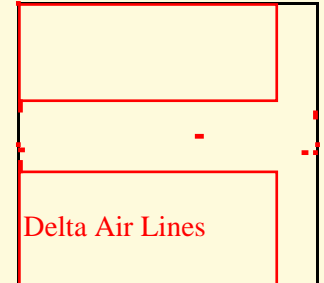
This is not generally true in Japan. The Kabuki is a well-respected cultural institution. While the Takarazuka might not be given quite the same level of respect, no one will argue about how difficult it is to pass the auditions or how arduous the two-year training is that the girls endure to join the musical theatre company. There is a saying that it's harder to get into the Takarazuka than Tokyo University (whose entrance exam is legendary).

Five 70-80 member troupes make up the Takarazuka Revue Company. They are Moon Troupe, Flower Troupe, Star Troupe, Snow Troupe, and Cosmos Troupe. Each troupe does a month-long run at the primary Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka City (near Osaka), followed by another month of the same production at the secondary Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo. The Takarasiennes occasionally perform abroad.

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The shows are almost three hours long with half-hour intermissions. They are usually divided into two parts, a musical drama followed by an unrelated song-and-dance revue. For example, last July in Tokyo the Moon Troupe performed the new musical *Señor Don Juan*, where Don Juan is actually the name of a Milanese fashion label and Leo Visconti is its handsome womanizing designer. This was followed by a 16-act dance epic *Takarazuka's Floral Diary* with "rows of Kabuki-men and Kabuki-women on the stage covered by cherry blossoms. They sing and dance gorgeously as the curtain rises."

In addition to romance, another selling point of the Takarazuka is the beauty of its stages and costumes from different time periods and regions of the world. The overall effect is enhanced by solid choreography and evocative music which is supported by a house orchestra.

It's wonderful to see women supporting women performers. Before and after the shows, the mostly female Takarazuka fans stand outside the theater to catch glimpses of their favorite Takarazuka actors. The fans are a polite bunch, the front rows kneeling down at various times so people in the back can see. The stars walk by like well-bred horses. And you just gotta turn your head and watch because the performance has already begun.

For more info:

<http://kageki.hankyu.co.jp/english/>

http://www.geocities.co.jp/Hollywood-Theater/9223/takarazuka_001.htm

<http://shoujo.tripod.com/takara.html>

<http://goldland.web.infoseek.co.jp/erandt.htm>



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