

Takarazuka Revue: acting, atmosphere and gender in Japanese musical theater

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ABSTRACT – Takarazuka Revue: acting, atmosphere and gender in Japanese musical theater – This article exposes the elements that legitimize the takarazuka musical theater, founded at the beginning of the 20th century, as a performative language. It starts with two shows, *Rose of Versailles* and *Once upon a time in America*, highlighting three elements of analysis: acting methodology, scenic atmosphere and gender performance. It infers the subversion of the woman's role as an artist and the negotiation between current gender standards through small reinventions and inherited technical attributes. Takarazuka performativity resorts to artistic and commercial choices that promote the friction and fantasy of genders, in addition to aligning political precepts from the feudal era with modernism.

Keywords: **Takarazuka. Musical. Japan. Otokoyaku. Theater.**

RÉSUMÉ – Takarazuka Revue: méthodologie d'acteur, atmosphère et genre dans le théâtre musical japonais – Cet article expose les éléments qui légitiment le théâtre musical takarazuka, fondé au début du XXe siècle, en tant que langage performatif. Il débute avec deux spectacles, *La Rose de Versailles* et *Il était une fois en Amérique*, mettant en avant trois éléments d'analyse: méthodologie de jeu, ambiance scénique et performance de genre. Il en déduit la subversion du rôle de la femme en tant qu'artiste et la négociation entre les normes de genre actuelles à travers de petites réinventions et des attributs techniques hérités. La performativité de Takazuka recourt à des choix artistiques et commerciaux qui favorisent la friction et la fantaisie des genres, en plus d'aligner les préceptes politiques de l'époque féodale avec le modernisme.

Mots-clés: **Takarazuka. Musical. Japon. Otokoyaku. Théâtre.**

RESUMO – Takarazuka Revue: atuação, atmosfera e gênero no teatro musical japonês – O presente artigo expõe os elementos que legitimam o teatro musical takarazuka, fundado no início do século XX, como linguagem performática. Parte-se de dois espetáculos, *Rosa de Versalhes* e *Era uma vez na América*, destacando três elementos de análise: metodologia de atuação, atmosfera cênica e performance de gênero. Infere-se a subversão do papel da mulher como artista e a negociação entre os padrões de gênero atuais por meio de pequenas reinvenções e atributos técnicos herdados. A performatividade takarazuka recorre a escolhas artísticas e comerciais que promovem a fricção e a fantasia dos gêneros, além de alinhar preceitos políticos da era feudal ao modernismo.

Palavras-chave: **Takarazuka. Musical. Japão. Otokoyaku. Teatro.**

The study shown here is the result of an exchange carried out at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), financed by the JASSO scholarship and intermediated by the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP). It is a remake of the Final Seminar held for the course *Culture and Performativity in Japan*, taught by Prof. Dr. Sayako Ono. The research, of a practical-theoretical nature, selected the theory of the main names that study the field of gender performativity in Japan and, in parallel, sought presence in the physical space of the takarazuka theater to watch the performances.

Our object of study is the Takarazuka Revue: one of the most popular Japanese theaters. This is because it maintains a seal of authenticity on its spectacles, resulting from the control of all stages of its production: selection of talents, training of artists, promotion structure and maintenance of the theatre company. The takarazuka theater performs adaptations in musical and dance formats from cartoons, films, classical and modern literature, and stands out for the fact that the roles, both male and female, are all played exclusively by women, who make up the entire cast.

This research sought to deal with the trajectory of Japanese actresses, from the medieval past to the period after the consolidation of the Takarazuka Revue in the 21st century, with the purpose of showing how this language approaches the discussion about the presence of women on the stages of Japan, and how the issue of femininity and masculinity is playfully handled within the arts.

Japanese Women in the Edo Performing

Women were banned from the Japanese stage in the early 17th century; by the early 1900s, the largest number of women (singers and dancers), with the exception of folk ones, were probably Geisha. Kobayashi decided to make the takarazuka performance respectable, because in many circles, being a Geisha was not. [...] Girls, not women, formed the core of the *Takarazuka Company*. [...] Kobayashi may also have initially chosen girls over women because of their innocence. They were too young to exhibit the sexuality that had, previously, incited havoc in the early years of kabuki, causing the government to expel women from the theater (Brau, 1990, p. 84).

As Brau denotes, the birth of modern musical theater in Japan is intrinsically related to the progression of gender politics within the country's

performing arts. The protagonism that Japanese women maintained with theater and dance was broken during the Japanese feudalism, known as the Edo period (1603-1868). Confucian philosophy, the main educational element to establish the power of the Tokugawa shogunate over the population and make the mentality of civil hierarchy prevail, was questioned and ridiculed several times by actresses and dancers. Some women saw the geisha craft as a way to escape the gender role imposed at the time: having children and raising a family, submitting to take care of the home; the den of the private sphere and child education. Geishas were women who usually had no family or, because they were abandoned or sold at an early age, devoted themselves entirely to the study of dance, music, cooking, and the visual arts. They were financed by wealthy clients through a sponsorship system that requested them for parties and gatherings. The artists were inserted in the public sphere, unlike other women, and owed obedience only to the *ryū*¹ leaders to preserve and divulge the style and technique of the tradition in which they were inserted (Foreman, 2011, p. 76).

The actresses of the kabuki theater, in turn, were censored not only for their aesthetic attributes considered immoral, but also for transgressing the religious precepts of the shogunate through satirical plays with erotic content, increasing their involvement with prostitution. In 1629, the shogunate issued a decree forbidding women to perform in the kabuki, under the accusation of social subversion. According to Darci Kusano (1993), the kabuki theater, during its first years, was an instrument of criticism and satire, as well as a conglomeration of Christian and Buddhist elements in costume and narrative. For example, Okuni, the creator of kabuki theater, used to perform on stage wearing a male kimono and carrying a crucifix. Because of these issues, women artists were seen as averse to everyday life. The abdication of family and motherhood were seen as selfish and disrespectful of religious and political precepts (Kusano, 1993, p. 69-70).

After a series of scandals, all women were banned from performing and artists, in general, were marginalized; they were below the social pyramid, not considered civil, and the subsequent groups that emerged settled on the outskirts of the cities, away from the “morally guarded” center (Origlia apud Mishima, 2002, p. 228). Furthermore, with the increased presence of Dutch and Spanish merchants and especially American and

British sailors, the already repressed women artists (geisha and dancers) surrendered to predominantly private entertainment, illegal performances, and sex work to survive. The image of the woman of artistic craft in Japan spread throughout the world as that of a prostitute from the point of view of foreign fetishists and eighteenth-century Orientalists.

The modernization of classical performing arts, brought about by Japan's late industrial revolution, known as the Meiji period (1868-1912), and the creation of the Takarazuka Revue meant a new return for women to the stages. Although banned from the official kabuki theaters, new actresses were able to perform a new theatrical language molded to the hybrid Western-Japanese taste and to the male-female ambivalence, as we will see below.

Ichizo Kobayashi's Creation

The Takarazuka Revue opened in 1914, founded by Ichizo Kobayashi, an entrepreneur who contributed to the growth of the Hankyu Railway by opening the first department store in Japan inside a railway station. When building the Takarazuka spa resort in 1911, Kobayashi attached Paradise, a two-story French-style building with an indoor swimming pool. However, the project went bankrupt after the summer of that year ended. It was then that Kobayashi reused the building to provide a new kind of entertainment, and thus the takarazuka musical theater was born. Shrewdly, he reconciled Western aesthetic tastes with the political progress forwarded by the modern Japanese state.

The Takarazuka Revue is like the cornerstone of the 'state theater' movement in the 1930s and 1940s, a movement whose agenda included the representation of state-regulated gender roles – particularly that of 'good wife, gentle mother' – and an emphasis on the patriarchal, marital family (Robertson, 1992, p. 425).

Under the motto *purity, honesty, beauty*, the Takarazuka Revue flirts with the national axiom *good wives, gentle mothers*, promoted by the military government between 1912 and 1926 to discriminate between male and female roles within society². Although the cast is almost entirely composed of women, the rest of the technical staff (writers, directors, choreographers, designers, musicians, etc.) is predominantly male even today, which maintains the established gender hierarchy. According to Satoko Kakihara (2014), the

image of women in Japanese modernism, known as the Showa period (1926-1989), was tied to the archetypal *Yamato Nadeshiko*, or Ideal Woman, which nurtures the symbolism around acting for the benefit of the family and following the instructions of patriarchal authoritarian figures. Among *Yamato Nadeshiko*'s virtues are loyalty, domestic resourcefulness, laconic humility, and modest wisdom. During World War II, the idea of the Ideal Woman was popularized as national propaganda by the Japanese government. An Ideal Woman should be able to bear all the pain of her husband's death as a soldier during a battle on behalf of the country. The man, in turn, should always be ready to fight and die at any time, as long as his beloved maintained chastity (Kakihara, 2014, p. 154-155).

Male and female roles played exclusively by women, to a certain portion of society, signified the depravation of morals and good manners, yet Kobayashi's commercial arguments and aesthetic lures were convincing enough to make the sensory alienation of the theatrical experience override the criticism. Japanese audiences came to appreciate the way the actresses of takarazuka theater were characterized based on European traits. The way they combined boldness and delicacy. The sensitivity in their roles revealed how they did not entirely succumb to the traditional masculine characteristics attached to raw virility. On the other hand, social critics characterized Kobayashi's theater as dangerous because of sexual perversion, incitement to homosexuality (*wakashudo*). Deutsch (2006, p. 3) points to the gender fragmentation caused by takarazuka in the macrosocial sphere as the breakdown of the figure of the housewife and the transfer to the modern, detached woman (*moga*), fueling the threat to patriarchy. Over time, Takarazuka Revue took on this contradiction of character: being an avant-garde subculture theater at the same time as a conservative, moralistic theater.

Kobayashi believed that having these women play male roles was to their advantage because by mastering the portrayal of these characters, they would understand the male psyche, which would later allow them to better understand their husbands (Satoh, 2012, p. 6).

Between the 1930s and 1960s, the Takarazuka Revue underwent a radical process of Americanization. Considering the fashion and entertainment trends of the time, such as the emerging Hollywood since 1912 and the Broadway of the late 1950s, the so-called takarazuka shows recruited

young women for big musicals. Large theater buildings were built exclusively for the company – one in Osaka and the other in Tokyo – so that the stage could be adapted according to each new production; a greater freedom to work the space without the technical bureaucracy of someone else's public or private theater. Benito Ortolani (1995, p. 534) comments that, in this period, the traditional Japanese dances were used to train the takarazuka actresses, since in Kobayashi's view the languages of the Japanese classical theater were elitist art forms that were inaccessible to young people and their problems. However, there is no disregard for the traditional forms, but it is understood that there was a negotiation between the aesthetics and poetics of the classical and the modern, the national and the foreign. A phenomenon of hybridization.

Rose of Versailles and Once Upon a Time in America

If I am a nameless flower blooming in a field
Then I just want to be blown by the wind
But, I was born with a rose's destiny
I was born with a bright and stormy life
The rose blooms nobly
The rose dies beautifully (Opening of the anime *Rose of Versailles*, 2014).

The two musicals, *Rose of Versailles* and *Once Upon a Time in America*, have different origins and narrative cores, despite having their male and female characters prescribed in the irrevocable traditional Takarazuka Revue model. *Rose of Versailles* is a comic book intended for a female audience (*manga shoujo*) published in 1972 by author Riyoko Ikeda, dramatized for takarazuka theater in 1974 by Shinji Ueda, and animated in a French-Japanese version in 1979. The plot deals with Oscar Francois de Jarjayes (played by Yuri Haruna in the takarazuka version), a girl raised as a man. Her/his military education allows her/him to become a captain of the royal guard, in charge of the protection of young Marie Antoinette (by Mari Uehara). The first disturbances herald the French Revolution. At her/his side is André Grandier (by Asou Kaoru), her/his childhood friend and secret passion. Because of this repressed passion, both believe in a regime of unrequited love. The conflicts occur when Oscar's father tries to "recorrect" his daughter's life as a woman and arrange a marriage for her. Gender inequality and

class struggle permeate the play. This play has several adaptations and sequels and is considered the ultimate symbol of the Takarazuka Revue.

From *The Princess and the Knight*, the shoujo manga genre grew, inspiring classics such as Ikeda Riyoko's *Rose of Versailles* (1972-4), which also features a prince in drag who is actually a princess. At that time, shoujo manga in general was playing heavily with themes of gender transgression and subversion. The immense popularity of the 1974 theatrical production of *Rose of Versailles* by the Takarazuka Revue drew the attention of all of Japan (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 70).

Once Upon a Time in America, meanwhile, is a 1984 drama film co-written and directed by Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone and starring Robert De Niro and James Woods. In 2020, it was dramatized for takarazuka theater by Shuichiro Koike (*Once Upon a Time in America*, 2020). The story depicts a group of friends of Jewish descent who grow up committing petty crimes on the streets of New York's Lower East Side. Gradually these crimes take on larger proportions and the two best friends of the group, Noodles (played by Nozomi Fuuto) and Max (by Sakina Ayakaze), become respectable mobsters. The intertwining of companionship, ambition, and betrayal leads to a twist in the story, and 35 years later, the only survivor of the group, Noodles, returns to the neighborhood to find out what really happened.

Since the two works are almost half a century apart, one can notice not only the long trajectory of Takarazuka Revue's performances, but also the different editing procedures. The main difference between the two works is the adaptation process itself, especially in the male characterization.

Rose of Versailles of 1974 was thought of from the bias of the androgynous man from the time of the manga edition, and easily adapted to the aesthetics of the Takarazuka Revue with regard to sentimentality and the role of men and women on scene. The friction between the critics disgusted with the fragmentation of genders in modern Japan and the audience excited by the new variations of performativity from women.

Once Upon a Time in America of 2020 distances itself from the film, which features rough and violent and crude-looking men, and presents mobsters with a younger and less frightening aura, more seductive and less

manly. A montage pertinent to a century that is discussing what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

The addition of the songs and dance choreography in the two shows also acts differently in both. If in *Rose of Versailles* it is possible to reconcile that noble and elegant world created in the manga with the melody, in *Once Upon a Time in America* the film no longer exists and the structure set up on stage is like the creation of a new work of art.

Acting methodology

Each year, 18-year-old girls are chosen to enter the Takarazuka Music School and undergo a training process that begins in the Junior Class (*Yoka*) and continues up to the Senior Class (*Honka*). After two years, they are divided into two performance categories: *otokoyaku* (male roles) and *musumeyaku* (female roles). The determinants for such a choice are the student's anatomy, vocal timbre, charisma, and scenic aura, that is, the way the actress behaves on stage once the scenic atmosphere is already established (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 64). From this ranking, the actress officially becomes a *tarakasienne* and is subject to a new hierarchy among the *otokoyaku* or *musumeyaku* members in the company's pyramid of privileges and to receive roles to perform in the shows. When she is old enough to get married or past the age of 40, the actress participates in a graduation ceremony, in other words, she says goodbye to the company. The posture of the *takarasiennes* in the public sphere is always quite formal and polite, and differs greatly from the dreamy, relaxed atmosphere on the stage. The impression one gets from watching an interview or an announcement from the Takarazuka Revue is of an atmosphere of extreme discipline and etiquette.

The annual investment averages almost 3,000,000 yen [...], and the students themselves must buy the school's gray military-style uniform. [...] Most of the female students live with one or two roommates in the Violet dormitories, where the administration seeks to socialize the girls into a life of discipline and hierarchy (Robertson, 1998, p. 11).

The company is divided into five troupes: Flower Troupe (considered the treasure of the school and where the main stars are usually found), Moon Troupe (great western songs and dramas), Snow Troupe (traditional Japanese dramas and some film adaptations), Star Troupe (prominent

musumeyaku), and Cosmos Troupe (experimental and the newest ones). *Rose of Versailles* went through several troupes, but its origin was in the Moon Troupe. *Once upon a time in America* was born in the Snow Troupe (Brau, 1990, p. 79).

Two points underpin the training grid of Takarazuka theater actresses: Constantin Stanislavski and Tadashi Suzuki.

Forty hours a week during the first year are devoted to lessons in voice, musical instruments, music history, Japanese, Western and modern dance, acting and drama theory, cultural history, and etiquette. The second year curriculum is essentially the same (Robertson, 1998, p. 10).

During the singing classes, the actresses are evaluated in groups and individually. The individual exercises use random body positions and movements and resistance during the vocal warm-up to stimulate the “entrance of the word into the body”, that is to say, to have an assimilation of the actress to what is being sung so that no external stimulus distracts her. Before the melody of the song, it is necessary that the actress knows the meaning of what is sung and experiences it in the body through congruent and incongruent gestures to then master the melody and feed her “scenic faith”. Music has the same importance as a theatrical monologue, for both are theatrical exclamations. Ballet training becomes necessary for body versatility, while the marking serves as a stimulus for the group discipline and synchronized corps de ballet. Both the work with dance and the work with singing aim for aesthetic enchantment, the beauty of the movement itself, but also stimulate the narrative of the show and delimit the circumstances.

According to the Russian Stanislavski, the audience is affected not only by the thoughts, impressions, and images that are attached to the words, but also by the tones of the words, the inflections of the movements, the silences, which fill in all that the words leave to express. The character's action is transient, because it is seen “through” it. This is called subtext.

[The subtext] is the manifest, intimately felt expression of a human being on a role, which flows uninterruptedly beneath the words of the text, giving them life and a basis for their existence. Subtext is a web of countless varied inner patterns within a piece and a role, with [...] certain circumstances, with all kinds of imaginations, inner movements, objects of attention, major and minor truths, belief in them, adaptations, adjustments, and other simi-

lar elements. It is the subtext that makes us say the words we say in a play (Stanislavski, 2001, p. 163).

For the subtext to be clear, the movement and the words must be in sync, and the physical action must provoke the feelings required for the scene, since they do not arise naturally from themselves. An action, a situation, is the trigger for sadness or joy. The circumstances are the beginning and the emotions are the end. The work must not begin from the end. There are no loose feelings. "Whatever happens on the stage must be for the general purpose of being visible to the audience" (Stanislavski, 1994, p. 65). The actresses who train by the Stanislavski method in the company undergo sessions in which they must create images from the memorized script and feed these images to the point where they become concrete gestures and flow into feelings. For example, an actress reads a text about farewells that makes her imagine a meadow, so her wish is to run through the green meadow after the object of farewell. This action of running generates a perception of urgency and concern; depending on the intensity, despair. In *Rose of Versailles*, the character Rosalie dances in Oscar's military robes and this should evoke a sense of nostalgia. In *Once Upon a Time in America*, Noodles pierces his feelings of anger at being rejected by the woman he loves by plucking flowers from a vase and throwing them away. The combination of 'word' and 'body' is also a theme present in the work of another theater director, the Japanese Tadashi Suzuki.

I have been working within a Japanese framework to revitalize the Japanese word and help the actors bring the word to the body. To include the word within the body. I think there is a correspondence between the two (Castilho apud Suzuki, 2012, p. 91).

For Suzuki, the actor is the central axis of his scenic poetics. Starting from the idea of acting as self-expression of the actor's conscience, in the constant attempt to discover the true nature of what it is to be human, he dedicates himself to investigate paths that stimulate the actor to rescue his innate expressiveness, his physical and perceptive sensibility.

Suzuki believes that the process of self-awareness and self-knowledge allied to the technical mastery of the principles of his craft form the basis from which the actor has the chance to fully explore his expressive potential, creating from himself, free of clichés and stereotypes (Castilho, 2012, p. 10).

For Suzuki, the actor will find himself and affirm his identity when he presents himself to an audience. The other elements of the performance participate in the construction of this act. For Suzuki, the actor, once in movement, must aim to remain absolutely attentive to the entire structure of his body, like a sort of sculpture in movement. Penetrate the psychological spheres through a purely physical path. The climax of the narrative is punctuated by frozen poses assumed by the actors. Suzuki believes that the key to the actor developing body awareness is the exploration of movement. He does not use the sentimental component in his method in an effort to help keep the actor's focus and to keep the observation of the body as objective as possible. This, by no means, precludes the exploration of movement components to stimulate the apprehension of sensations and feelings, given the intrinsic psychophysical nature of bodily and vocal actions. Speech must be totally related to the use of the body. Movement and words need to merge in a fluid way, so that there is no spoken word that is not intimately linked to bodily sensations and rhythms. "The word must be understood as a kind of physical action; the act of speaking, a variation of gesture. Repetition and detail are important subjects of your training" (Castilho, 2012, p. 93). However, the actor must be concerned with always maintaining an imaginative and emotional involvement with the exercise so that it does not become mere gymnastics. Its methodology can be divided into: basic category (ballet and body positions in modern dance), intermediate category (the noh theater walk), and advanced category (kabuki postures).

Although the acting classes are conducted along the lines of the Stanislavski method, students are also trained in a manner comparable to that used in kabuki actor training, that is, through memorization of *kata* – codified behaviors centered on gestures, clothing, and voice, which help create a role (Brau, 1990, p. 86).

Stanislavski suggests a model of physical action and Suzuki provides a link between Western and Eastern performance methodologies. The Takarazuka Revue also adapts traditional plays staged in kabuki and bunraku without excluding dances with fans and the strengthening of the *kata*³, a vital element for dynamic postures and the right flirtations during scenes, which serves to reinforce the *otokoyaku* or *musumeyaku* character of each actress.

Much of the actresses' training that focuses on learning *kata* refers collectively to gender technologies, including form, posture, sign, code, gesture, and choreography. The *kata* learned by *takarasiennes* specifically involve stylized gestures, movements, intonations, and speech patterns that signify gender (Robertson, 1998, p. 12).

The *kata* of masculinity comprises attributes that can be grouped into four basic categories: physical appearance, voice, gestures, and temperament. The *otokoyaku* as a form is not a “raw man”, or cisgender, he is a constructed man. The construction of the character is posterior to the construction of the gender. From the moment directors and teachers identify the masculine potentiality in a given actress, “they must eradicate any notion of ‘man’ or ‘woman’ – as actresses, they exist only as [empty] figures” (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 68). An empty actress is ready to receive a new personality. “Many stars also use the metaphor of ‘killing themselves’ to get into character” (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 70). They are catered to by the “secondary gender” on the basis of physical (but not genital) and socio-psychological criteria: height, physique, profile, shape, voice, personality and, to some extent, personal preference. They are premised on their own contrasting gender stereotypes. Hyperbolic makeup is used to delineate supposed physical differences between women and men and reinforce socially prescribed behavioral peculiarities between women and men, such as a scar indicating brutality or a flushed countenance, delicacy in touch. The *otokoyaku* are actively encouraged to study the behavior and actions of men offstage to more effectively construct their men, be they samurai or cowboys.

Takarazuka teaches its members to observe, manipulate and modify orthodox gender roles for their own purposes [...] in relation to their behavior and interactions to each other. [...] Acting, voice and dance classes (ballet, modern dance and tap), as well as traditional Japanese dance classes (Satoh, 2012, p. 3).

Directors use these experiments to ensure that an *otokoyaku*'s *secondary male gender* is kept in check by her primary *natural femininity*. *Otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* exist for each other. One cannot exist without the other. Takarazuka Revue creates stories of men living for women and women living for men. The relationship between *musumeyaku* and *otokoyaku* begins behind the scenes, where hierarchy already dominates. The *otokoyaku* are the most powerful, after the director. They advise the *musumeyaku*

about their interpretation and the *musumeyaku* follow their instructions. The *musumeyaku* on stage serves to exalt the image of the *otokoyaku*. “The gestures these women use in romantic scenes are quite simplistic and subtle. [...] They use gestures to suggest their personality such as the correct use of words, eyes and the whole body by their fingers” (Satoh, 2012, p. 9).

In *Rose of Versailles*, Oscar enters the ball with several ladies of the court who are looking at her (him) with admiration. Some faint, others stammer, and one of them simulates a fainting fit. With just a discreet wink, Oscar destabilizes all the ladies of the court. This scene, one of the first of the act, indicates the hidden power of masculinity in the character. Later in the narrative, although Oscar deviates from his masculine *peel* to some extent, when he stumbles into femininity by asking Andre to make her his wife, Oscar continues to speak in his artificially deep voice, thus sustaining the pastiche illusion that he is a man. In *Once Upon a Time in America*, the character Deborah tries to hide her love for Noodles every time she appears, and as much as she eventually decides to leave him, it is remarkable how the mobster's presence makes her more sensitive and vulnerable on stage, by the hands that hang nervously under her dress, by her gaze close to the ground. Deborah's hesitant actions are part of her constant struggle between her true feelings (*honno*) and her façade feelings (*tatema*). By the way, this sentimental battle is present in several plays of the Takarazuka Revue, since the war between love and reason is not something unique to foreigners, being also present in the Japanese imagination by the love suicide stories of the puppet theater (*bunraku*) and the domestic drama of the kabuki theater. The battle between what one wants to do (*ninjo*) and what needs to be done (*giri*).

Scenic Atmosphere

The Scenic Atmosphere is understood as the set of elements that contribute to the imaginary of the spectacle and legitimize the fictional pact between the audience and the stage. These are the elements: set design, costumes, makeup, performance, artificial or organic equipment and all the backstage that dictate what the play is about, what its mood content is (sadness, joy, terror, love, etc.) and what its default tendency is or will be during the show (Pavis, 2008, p. 184). The scenic atmosphere is like a sen-

sory structural axis that ensures the verisimilitude of the show in the eyes of the audience.

In the case of Takarazuka Revue, most of the performances take place in the company's own theaters, which allows the technicians to adapt the stage according to each play, extending the scenery and adding more reflectors and lights. The presentation is dynamic and with few pauses. Each scene lasts a few minutes at most, and usually the entire backdrop of the stage and the place where the actions take place are replaced. In *Once Upon a Time in America*, we have in the first act a bar that soon becomes a bustling city that soon becomes a ballet school that soon becomes a prison. It all happens in the first 30 minutes. In *Rose of Versailles*, an illuminated French ballroom takes the form of a night garden with a choir. The efficiency and speed with which each change occurs makes one think that not only the actresses are performing, but all the objects in the scene as well; each one with its planned movements, so as not to disturb the entrances and exits of other actresses and other scene objects.

Takarazuka is essentially characterized by excess: Revue's exotic settings, extravagant costumes, and complicated scenarios evoke a parallel world of thrilling melodrama, wild fantasy, ambiguous ethnicity, daring adventure, thwarted passion, and tortured romance (Robertson, 1998, p. 26).

The sets and costumes are lavish, the performances are melodramatic, and the endings are extravagant. The actresses reinforce character identity with the use of excessive makeup and well-defined gestures for male and female roles. The lighting system has a row of spotlights that cover the entire horizontal line of the ceiling and retractable walls that hold more spotlights vertically. The infinity of colors overlap to dictate a scene during the day, in the afternoon, at night, on a rainy or cloudy day, at sunrise or sunset, among other possibilities. There are larger projectors arranged at the two opposite ends of the theater, at the back of the audience, while the floor reflectors are near the so-called silver bridge (*ginkyō*) that mediates the orchestra and the audience. The silver bridge is a liminal space where the actress meets her passionate fans, a resignification of the bridge of the flowers of kabuki (*Hanamichi*), where the artist enters and exits through the crowd, and sometimes provides interactive moments between the artist and the audience.

As for the music, even after the songs of a scene are finished, the soundtrack continuously connects with a new background sound proposal, which remains and dialogues with the movement of the characters and the tenor of the scene, until it generates a new song: tension, reunion, love, hate, and battle. In *Once Upon a Time in America*, the sacred music inside a church merges with the theme song of the protagonist Noodles, who laments the bad things that happened in his life. Marie Antoinette, in *Rose of Versailles*, experiences a tense moment whose soundtrack serves as the ignition for the music of the character Fercen's appearance. This factor is equivalent to Broadway shows like *Cats* (1980), *West Story* (1957) and *Chicago* (1975). The plays *Rose of Versailles* and *Once Upon a Time in America* are two examples of countless other productions that take place in alternative worlds linked to the dream of foreignness. The first takes place close to the French Revolution, and the second takes place in the United States during Prohibition. Scenarios disconnected from Japanese reality, but permeated by an attractive exoticism.

Takarazuka is named after the hot springs tourist town where the trains are based. [...] What started as a local tourist attraction, a 'side show' of hot springs, has become a big business promoting its own 'side shows' and merchandising (Brau, 1990, p. 79).

However, it is worth remembering that takarazuka theater is not a copy of the Western world, but a dreamlike resignification. Unlike cheap mimesis, like the dismantled Rokumeikan, the Takarazuka Revue fabulated a new meaning to Western reality through its scenic atmosphere, like painting a picture with its own colors and shapes instead of coloring over a black and white photograph.

Such a fabling that the Takarazuka Revue creates through the scenic atmosphere seeks subsidy in two constructs. The first element is Max Reinhardt's Total Theater theory, derived from Wagner's Total Theater theory (Berthold, 2011, p. 491). It is intended to provide the spectator with a real dream, a show that touches all the senses of those who watch and enchants in a way that real life would make it impossible to perpetrate equally (Styan, 1982, p. 12). The character and the real person merge and so the second construct is established: the Star System. It is a system of exclusive long-term contracts signed by actors with a specific studio, which starts to con-

trol the artists' careers, taking care of their image and deciding which films to make (Aumont; Michel, 2003, p. 278). The audience goes to the theater to see a particular actor, who is beyond interest in the play.

Fan clubs arrange tickets for their members, who tend to attend each show about ten or twenty times. This is part of the reason why regular tickets are so hard to get for people who don't belong to a fan club, and serves to increase the uniqueness of the Takarazuka world (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 62).

Not only in Hollywood, but even today, on the facade of the Kabuki-za theater, the names of the most important actors are the biggest and most visible, the painted pictures or engravings on the posters depict the most skilled. At the Takarazuka Revue, it's no different: "Why do these women come to watch the Takarazuka Theater? Most fans would answer that it's to see their favorite actresses and be carried away by the 'takarazuka dream'" (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 63). Many of the veteran fans give expensive gifts, and when they are in Tokyo, some actresses stay in one of their vacant apartments or in a hotel room paid for by them. "According to gossip, a famous takarazuka actress had fans cooking all the meals for her and her new husband for two years after she left the company" (Brau, 1990, p. 91). Regulars sit all night before the premiere to buy a single ticket and wait behind the theater to shake hands with their favorite actress for a few seconds after the show. The intimacy between fan and star is due to the phenomenon that researcher Kaja Silverman (2002, p. 65) calls suture:

The process by which viewers identify (and question themselves) the position of subjects on screen. [...] The traditional structure of the film denies the total subjectivity of the spectators. [...] Male viewers, however, can totally suture with the male protagonists who act as much as mirrors of their idealized self-image as well as parents and role models.

That is, the public experiences an emotional catharsis and mirrors itself in roles outside its civil reality. The way Silverman exposes the lack of female representation in the media would explain the overwhelmingly female fascination with the Takarazuka Revue, as these women are free to move between genders (roles) in their imagination. This is a counterpoint to the argument that takarazuka theater relies exclusively on traditionalism. The female public sees in Oscar the possibility of women taking the lead in a relationship, a "possibility considered by some Japanese women to be re-

mote in real life” (Brau, 1990, p. 81). Although the Takarazuka Revue reinforces the status quo and elevates women's desires through its dreamlike narratives, there remains the possibility that certain viewers find the simple act of watching other women playing men empowering.

The Total Theater added to the Star System of the Takarazuka Revue models the scenic atmosphere of this type of theater as a lucrative commercial theater, which knew how to take advantage of the capitalist praxis of the great centers of the world. The Takarazuka Revue was founded not by an impoverished and passionate theater artist, but by an industrialist and businessman who loved the theater (Brau, 1990, p. 83).

Gender Performance

According to some parents of actresses, “[...] *otokoyaku* learn to be good mothers and wives, because the meticulous study they do teaches them about what men like, food, the way women should act, the way to put on the coat, the type of cigarette” (Dream Girls, 1994). Within the company, the hierarchy between *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* follows a pattern similar to that of patriarchy. *Musumeyaku* listens and *otokoyaku* speaks. A performance of crossed gender within the confines of convention.

Ideally, men should be taller than women; they should have a longer, rectangular face, a broader forehead, thicker eyebrows and lips, a higher bridge nose, darker skin, straighter shoulders, narrower hips, and a lower voice than women; and they should exude charisma, which is discredited in women (Robertson, 1998, p. 12).

However, Kobayashi's theater sought a masculine fabulation that tangents the usual male archetype, since the *otokoyaku* must be “[...] softer, more affectionate, more discourteous, more charming, more beautiful and more fascinating than the ‘real men’” (Dream Girls, 1994). We cannot ignore the fact that such an aesthetic proposal attunes to gender subcultures in Japan and encourages alternative and fluid identities. People's perception is not unanimous and depends on their time and transformations. An example of the attempt to erase these transformations is the report of researcher Jennifer Robertson (1998), who states that she tried to find older articles and photos about the private history of the Takarazuka Revue, but was prevented from accessing them, while on other occasions she was told

that these files did not exist and that her research was inconvenient. In other words, there are probably hushed up cases of historical homo-affective relationships within troupes and behaviors that oppose the domestication of good wives.

Even though takarazuka does not address the inequalities in Japan's sexist society, but rather reinforces the status quo and sublates women's desires through its dreamlike narratives, the possibility still exists that certain viewers may find it empowering to simply watch women playing men. Theater offers images of liberation from oppressive gender roles (Brau, 1990, p. 80).

The common argument is that otokoyaku is the fantasy of a man who does not exist: an impossible man. A man who sacrifices his duties for the woman he loves over the "real" Japanese man, who sacrifices his own family for his reputation at work. Older women appreciate otokoyaku for the suggestion of an adolescent fantasy, a youthful romance that is no longer possible in the world they live in, but is possible in the theater. Takarazuka Revue, although an escape valve, is not permanent and therefore has the character of a dream because one soon wakes up. We must emphasize that the "escape" from adult concreteness and reversion to childhood in takarazuka culture is temporally and spatially limited in order for the spectators to be disengaged from normative expectations. "They do not live in that space permanently" (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 70). The public is aware of this and therefore keeps the dream alive by following celebrities, going to various shows, making fan clubs and meetups, feeding the *shoujo fantasy*.

Female masculinity in the Takarazuka stage is fundamentally feminine from prepuberty – a reversion to the 'brat' years of freedom before adult responsibility symbolized by the blood of menstruation. [...] In Japan, escape for women is possible through reversion to a pre-pubertal state. We believe that for most Takarazuka fans, sexuality in the interactions between the fans and the stars is inconceivable. The stars - who are symbolically presented as 'students' and 'girls' – are not objects of sexual desire. Instead, they serve as an empty vessel for the fans' dreams (Nakamura; Matsuo, 2002, p. 70).

The gender performance of *otokoyaku* has affinity with the androgyny of gender erasure worked in the performing arts of the Edo (or Tokugawa) period (1603-1868), personified by the *onnagata*, a Kabuki actor specialized in female roles⁴. Within this assumed perspective, what is the man resulting

from *otokoyaku*? The *bishounen*, who is nothing less than the materialization of the beauty of the impossible man.

One who possesses phallic power subjugates women while carrying the ambiguous beauty of angels, attracting by invitation women and their universe. The term means “beautiful young man” and demarcates a typically slender type with fair skin, stylish hair, and distinctly feminine facial features (such as cheekbones), but at the same time maintains a masculine body, like a Renaissance western angel (Adriano; Darin, 2018, p. 40). Something similar to the protagonist of *Tales of Genji*⁵, a man with beautiful features and who does not carry masculine brutality in his facial expression. They are predominantly portrayed as characters from *shoujo* and *no yaoi* (gay men) manga, demarcated by long limbs, silky hair, and slender eyes with long lashes that sometimes may extend beyond the face. Characters with “bulging muscles” are rarely considered *bishounen*, as they are “too masculine”. James Welker (2006, p. 842) defines the beautiful young man as “an androgynous queer aesthete with a feminine soul, who lives and loves outside the heteropatriarchal world”. Although the term was used in Japan to describe school-age boys, today it is slang for all handsome boys and young men. Swedish actor Björn Andrésen is considered to be the milestone founder of the idea of *bishounen* in Japan due to his performance in the 1971 film *Death in Venice*. At the time, his youthful countenance became popular in Japan, and his angelic presence inspired several manga characters for girls, such as the Oscar in *Rose of Versailles*. Andrésen lived in Japan for some years, where he participated in commercials, recorded music albums, taking advantage of the wave of success (*The Most Beautiful Boy in the World*, 2021).

There are three elements in these performances [of takarazuka theater] that seem to diverge from the traditional configuration of masculinity: (1) emotional sensitivity and domesticity, which were previously considered the domain of women; (2) youth; (3) the performance of male-male relationships that draw a fine line between the homosocial and what could be considered homosexual (Glasspool, 2013, p. 117).

But despite the apparent lewdness that surrounds the idea of the “beautiful young man”, the Takarazuka Revue fan club does not aspire to off-stage sexual intentions with the actresses and is aware of the graduations

and future marriages that they will need to get on and off the stage, unlike the fan club of K-pop boy bands, who engineer flirtatious situations between band members during interviews to please their fans.

In *Rose of Versailles*, Oscar undermines the ideological fixity of the differences between man and woman. The camouflaged tension between the inherent female body and the acquired male gender. Oscar is the personification of the Takarazuka Revue's dilemma between the status quo and subcultures. A woman who wears masculine robes and tries to take her place in a man's world, but is oppressed by her father's decisions. As a *bishounen*, Oscar is not prone to gratuitous violence. She does not act with brutality, ready to listen and think before acting when love speaks louder. In one scene, even after almost being murdered by a thug who invades her garden in the middle of the night, Oscar does not use her blade and decides to spare her attacker's life. At the end of the plot, André dies. The person, to whom Oscar's heart belonged, no longer exists. She grieves the loss in the same way as a 'good wife, kind mother' and mourns for her husband killed in the war. She does not completely escape duality. Androgyny, in this sense, is duality. The duality of appearance, the duality of destinies.

In *Once Upon a Time in America*, the characters are radically different from the original film. If in Sergio Leone's work what prevails is brutality and a total lack of modesty, adorned by the sexual content that the intimidating men provoke in American women, in the takarazuka version the characters are filtered from this and, although there is a scintilla of slang and clichés stolen from the Japanese mafia (*yakuza*), they are more beautiful, young, flexible, and warm with women. The insertion of the *bishounen* aesthetic adds elegance to the mafious romance, which overlaps with the terrors caused by the mafia. In the play, the scene in which Noodles tries to rape Deborah is not consummated, unlike in the movie. In the original, Noodles rapes her inside a car and drives off with a restrained sadness leaving her alone and without clothes. In the play, he is with Deborah in a room full of red roses, and just as he is about to kiss her, she pushes him away and leaves. Noodles then sings of his desolation in a way no cis man in Hollywood fiction, much less in a mafious universe, would, with extreme sensitivity.

Conclusion

In summary, the history of the creation of Takarazuka Revue (2020, online) precedes issues related to the role of women in art, after the prohibitive laws that banned women from the stage during Japanese feudalism and the social policy that reinserted them in the public sphere during the country's late industrial revolution and subsequent modernism. The westernized aesthetic adopted by Ichizo Kobayashi is due to the process of insertion of foreign influences in the theaters, whether in the technological apparatus or in the aesthetics of the spectacle itself. The formation of the actresses occurs after casting for the takarazuka language school and the future segmentation into five thematically distinct troupes. Consequently, there is a division between actresses whose performance is masculine, the so-called *otokoyaku*, and those of feminine performance, the *musumeyaku*. There are individual classes to encourage authentic talent, and group classes for synchrony and corps de ballet assembly. The scenic atmosphere is reminiscent of the dreamlike experience, where the audience is alienated by the resulting use of all the spectacle's sensory resources, being, therefore, a Total Theater, similar to Broadway. Consequently, the audience disregards the division between character and actor and starts feeding the Star System. The takarazuka theater scripts are built upon European novels, American films, and kabuki plays. The acting methodology follows some principles of Stanislavski and Tadashi Suzuki, such as the importance of physical action to generate feelings and not feelings to generate physical actions. Training in classical ballet and traditional Japanese dances harmonize and discipline so that the *kata* of *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* are well defined and hierarchical. The focus of *otokoyaku* is on the *bishounen* identity, the man of impossible beauty. The presentation of this type problematizes the hegemonic masculinity of Japan in a satirical way, as the man, in this case, occupies the place of fantasy object once occupied by women. The contrast between the position of the boy, who is allowed a certain fluidity or passivity in relationships, and that of the adult man, distorts the hegemonic constructions of domination that traditionally place women in the passive role. The boy opens the possibility for the woman, or even the man, to take over the male body to satisfy his desires.

Overall, the performativity of takarazuka theater comes from the artistic and commercial choices of the founder's project, an astute entrepreneur who reconciled the *battle of the genders* with the *fantasy of genders* through a duality and binarity that still permeates the discussion of women in art in the Japanese archipelago. A discussion that still has a long way to go.

The unique contribution of this research is not only to discuss a theatrical language little evidenced in the academic-artistic field in Brazil while revisiting a theater already popular in Japan for a long time. Here we can observe the breaches in a patriarchal system within the performing arts through the experience of women from the Far East. It is evaluated that there is much more beyond the hierarchies of classical theaters, such as kabuki and noh, exhaustively studied in Brazil, and that there are strategies, even if embryonic, indicating the future ruin of gender binarisms. We are, at least, left with the provocation⁶.

Notes

- ¹ Families of artists. The term is also used to identify different schools of performing arts (noh and kabuki). In the case of geishas, the families were led by the elders. A *ryu* determines a style, an aesthetic a specific aesthetic and poetics within the artistic niche. From *ryu*, traditions are born.
- ² It is worth remembering that the present article works on the definitions of "male" and "female", as well as "man" and "woman", within the framework of the cisgender system and binarism, therefore, considering the gender role within the common sense regime from Japan's perspective. The discussion of transgenerity and intersexuality is extremely recent in the archipelago. In order not to commit certain asynchronies and anachronisms, therefore, it was chosen to deal with the subject from the binary perspective.
- ³ Sequence of movements and postures within the performing arts, the body arts, and the martial arts. The *kata* is pre-established within a school as a common language by the practitioners so that there can be a game, a fight. The mastery of the *kata* allows the mastery of the strikes or dance variants of that school.
- ⁴ There are three words for "androgyny" in the Japanese language: *ryosei*, coined to refer to someone with both genitalia or both gender characteristics; the out-

dated concept of hermaphrodite. Nowadays *ryosei* has been used to refer to intersex bodies or to people who behave in the same common sense registers as what is considered “male” and “female”. *Chusei*, on the other hand, has been used as a synonym for “neutral” or “in between” and therefore neither woman nor man. “*Ryosei* emphasizes the juxtaposition or combination of gender differences, *chusei* emphasizes the erasure or cancellation of differences” (Robertson, 1992, p. 429). In Japan, the term *chusei* has been used since the turn of this century to name three basic types of women: “[...] those whose bodies approximate to the male stereotype; those who are charismatic, unconventional, and therefore not feminine women; and those who have been designated to do the ‘masculine’ gender or who have appropriated on their own initiative” (Robertson, 1992, p. 435).

- ⁵ Great novel written by Murasaki Shikibu during the 11th century. It is about the saga of the young prince Genji in Japan. His adventures and loves. It is considered the “first novel of Japan”.
- ⁶ This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

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