

Impressions from a Visit to the Takarazuka Revue : Theatre in the Parlours of Popular Culture

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ZATTSU REBYŪ (That's Revue) are the words that shine from glossy, glittery posters, billboards and advertisements in the underground railway. The *Takarazuka* Theatre's Flower Troupe is advertising this month's show at the grand theatre in Takarazuka, northwest of Osaka, a show in which all of the parts are always played by women. In addition to song and dance numbers, the show includes a play called *Mon Pari* (My Paris), a classic from 1927, which is being revived in connection with the 1997 celebration of the theatre's seventy-year anniversary.

Getting hold of tickets for a *Takarazuka* show, and especially for seats close to the stage where the audience sits just a metre from the projecting, half-moon shaped catwalk where the celebrated stars perform their song and dance numbers, is not an easy task. It requires either a great deal of advance planning or good contacts, and it is only due to the fact that one of the actresses is a regular at the same bar as me in Minamisenri in the northern outskirts of Osaka, that I am now on my way to watch a performance from one of the most coveted seats.

"*Kurisutina-san desu ne?* ...Mrs. Christina, I presume?" asks one of the ladies on the door, smiling at me from behind a small counter at the theatre entrance when I arrive to collect my ticket. It is a present from the owner of the bar who, by inviting me, is doing a favour for both the actress and me. Since the ticket order went through her, I am able to sit in one of the best seats in the house. Presents are part of Japan's established and seasonal social system which exists in all of the social strata. Within *mizu-shōbai* (the entertainment industry) and popular theatre, it is part of everyday life. There is a constant stream of women of all ages arriving with attractively packaged gifts and giant floral arrangements which they leave at the stage

door to be passed on to their favourite artists. The violet envelope containing my ticket almost resembles a gift in itself; a souvenir with the actress's name, and printed roses and butterflies on the flap, and on the back in fancy writing it says in English: *Misao Hoshihara Flower Troupe's performance.*

The theatre was damaged in the big 1995 earthquake in the Kobe area, but now, after major reconstruction, it truly is a glittering example of lowbrow theatre dressed up in all its finery. Adjacent to the auditorium are two floors filled with shops selling designer clothes, jewellery, souvenirs and flowers. There is also a variety of restaurants and cafés and a theatre bookshop selling books, videos, cassette tapes, CDs and photos of the most popular stars. The interior of the foyer is luxurious and many people are already standing in a queue outside waiting to come inside and rub shoulders with each other in the comfortable space decorated in warm, rich and elegant colours. As soon as they reach the entrance, the visitors get a whiff of the scent of the dream factory, and the luxurious experience reaches a climax in the velvet interior of the auditorium with its starry-sky lighting. The audience is predominantly made up of women (what is even more noticeable during the matinées) who talk almost exclusively about the dream they find themselves in, the interior of the theatre, the food, the music and the stars they idolize.

"She's so beautiful, so talented and has such a wonderful voice, *subarashii...!*," says a middle-aged woman, staring admiringly at a photo of the troupe's current most shining star, Maya Miki, on the wall of the foyer surrounded by photos of other well-known actresses in the troupe.

I walk over to the wall to take a closer look at the portrait of the actress and am immediately asked to move by a group of well-dressed ladies adorned with brooches, artificial flowers, bows and sparkling hair-slides.

"*Ekusukyūsu...Sōri...* Excuse me but we want to take photos of ourselves in front of the pictures and you are standing in the way."

I move to one side and they arrange themselves in various poses beside the flower arrangement next to the star photos. They all try to look cute and special by spreading their fingers in various ways in the air or cocking their heads to one side and dramatically placing a hand with fingers spread apart against their cheek. They call out to the photographer to make sure to include the pictures of the stars in the back-



Fig. The hanabill of ZATTU REBYŪ

ground. They take turns behind the camera calling out frenetically to each other to get ready.

“Torimaaasu... Chīzu Arigatō gozaimashita!... I’m taking the picture now... say cheese—thank you very much!”

Giggling with their hands in front of their mouths, they nod and bow to each other and when they hurry past me, one of them bows a little deeper and thanks me in Japanese-English “Sankyu!” which makes the others almost fall over with delight.

Inside the auditorium many people have already taken their seats and are reading the elaborate programme that contains short essays by writers/playwrights and direc-

tors, coloured pictures of the stars, photos from rehearsals, interviews with some of the actresses and the entire script of the play *Mon Pari*, including the lyrics of the songs. Many people have brought sweets, rice snacks or nuts in with them as well as small, neat drink packages containing juice or tea. Everyone makes an extra effort to be as polite as possible and they all try to outshine each other with their fashionably polished manners. When people want to pass someone to get into a row of seats, first they give a friendly bow, then they say “*Sumimasen!*” one or more times while passing and then, before taking their seat, they finish off with a bow and an apology in the past tense “*Sumimasen deshita!*” Sweets are offered to the right and the left, and further back in the room, people are wondering who is sitting at the front, as this is often indicative of a personal contact with one of the actresses. To me, the atmosphere is very Japanese, but with an extra Western veneer, an affected international finish. This is already evident in the foyer where a self-playing grand piano stands majestically next to the gala staircase up to the second level. On the other side of the staircase a couple of display cases surrounded by flowers display costumes worn in the past by famous actresses.

The third bell lets everyone know that the performance is about to begin and the people not already sitting down hurry to take their seats. You can feel the anticipation in the audience as soon as the orchestra strikes up the overture. There is a tense silence and it feels as if 2,527 people are simultaneously holding their breath.

The curtain rises revealing a giant staircase that covers the entire backdrop. Soon the actresses are running down the stairs towards the audience—some dressed as *otokoyaku* or male roles, and others as *onnayaku*, female roles—in a lavish opening scene in black and white. Sequins sparkle and feathers flutter while the singers sing in unison.

“...*Hana no rebyū... yume no rebyū... hito wa nanji o sane... Flower revue... dream revue... people praise you... Hana no rebyū... yume no rebyū... Ashita e no kibōgamoe-sakaru... Flower revue... dream revue... your desires for the future burn fiercely.*”

The black and white design is broken up by dashes of turquoise and pink, and an image of the Champs Élysées in Paris is projected onto the backdrop. The music changes and the orchestra starts to play the leitmotiv for the play, *Mon Pari*, at the

same time as an *otokoyaku*, dressed in a shiny turquoise silk costume and referred to in the programme as “Gentleman S” sings a solo.

“...Uruwashii o omoide... mon Pari... waga Pari... Beautiful memories... my Paris ... my own Paris...”

High up on the staircase a couple appears, she is dressed in a pink ball gown and he is wearing a turquoise dinner jacket. They glide down the stairs, pausing now and then in splendid poses while “Gentleman S” continues to sing alone and then in a duet with “Gentleman A” who joins him onstage. When both of the women, who in the programme are called “Mild, gracious woman—pink” and “Mild, gracious woman—white,” allow themselves to be dipped backwards by the chivalrous male characters in a dance routine, the first sighs of the evening are heard from the audience.

The presentation of the play’s content and musical themes in the introduction leads into the second scene with a rhapsody of famous songs from the show. The large staircase at the back disappears and the set is quickly changed from Paris to the 1920s and Asakusa, Tokyo’s pulsating entertainment district of that time. The opening number has seamlessly turned into the first act of the show which contains dialogue, singing and music blending naturally together.

It is 1928 and Taihei has come to Tokyo from the poor northern part of Japan with wild theatrical ambitions. He meets a pickpocket in Ueno Park and tells him about his intention to try to join the Takarazuka Revue that he has heard about. The pickpocket Genji laughs telling him that the troupe only accepts women and tips him off about a revue in Asakusa where he could find work.

The first few minutes of the play are accompanied by whispering and murmuring in the audience and many people applaud the Flower Troupe’s biggest star Maya Miki (who, like the other actresses in the programme, writes her name in the Western manner with her family name last—the reverse of the Japanese custom). She is an *otokoyaku* and is playing the somewhat dishevelled but charming young Taihei. Her powerful androgynous charisma is very apparent and she balances her own femininity with masculine nonchalance and youthful abandon—a demeanour that is just as carefully prepared as the female roles’ gentle and reserved mildness. Her admirers in the seats around me sigh and smile.

Six months pass in the play and we find ourselves at a *kabuki* theatre in Asakusa. Business has been poor lately and they are discussing switching to a more lucrative and simpler kind of show that is becoming more and more popular with audiences. A young girl called Sen is learning modern showdance so that she can perform in the new shows. She joins Taihei in trying to persuade the other, more conservative people at the theatre to give into the demand for light entertainment theatre. The story moves on and after Taihei saves Genji from an attack by a rival gang of pickpockets, he gradually gains the acceptance of his new surroundings and Sen soon falls hopelessly in love with him.

The theatre in Asakusa, however, fails in its attempt to put on a revue and goes back to presenting *kabuki* performances, with the result that Sen and the other showdancers have to look for work in another theatre. She leaves the theatre and Taihei without revealing her feelings for him. He has not achieved the success he was hoping for either, but refuses to give up, not even when the old nurse who looked after him as a child comes from his home town in northern Japan to try to persuade him to return home. Shortly after this, Taihei receives a much awaited phone call from the *Takarazuka* Revue asking him to come for an interview. The script that he submitted has beaten the competition and the troupe is interested in producing it. It is New Year 1931 and Taihei goes to Takarazuka with a few of his friends. To their surprise, however, he disappears right before it is time for him to attend the interview. When his friends find him again, he sadly reveals that he is going blind as a result of the fight when he saved Genji from the gang of pickpockets.

Once again a murmur spreads through the audience. No one was expecting this and we suddenly realise that after several years of toil, Taihei may not be able to see the result of his constant drudgery. His friends try to persuade him to go with them to the *Takarazuka* Revue anyway, but Taihei stays where he is and expresses his emotions in a song.

“... *Kokoro ni urei oboeta toki ni... rebyū wa yasashiku naoshite kureru...* When your heart is filled with sad memories... it is healed by the delightful revue... *Hito shirenu kanashimi ni shizunda toki mo... rebyū wa chikara o ataete kureru...* Even if people feel sorry for me ... the revue will make me stronger... *Sore wa hanayaka ni kagayaku ite... tokimeki ni mune wa tōru...* Its radiant magnificence fills my senses...”

Goka kenran butai wa mawari... hiroi sekai o kakemeguru... The brilliant splendour on the revolving stage... turning all around the big wide world...

Taihei tugs at the heartstrings with his heroic description of his love for the theatre and his friends turn away with tears in their eyes. The people in the audience are deeply moved by this tragic figure who, at the same time, is painfully beautiful and very attractive with a kind of feminine masculinity. When his song gives way to the leitmotif...*hana no rebyū... yume no rebyū...* an entire chorus of voices joins in and the act ends in a grandiose fashion with all of the main characters striking attractive poses.

During the interval the photography starts again and people talk about the stars and what they have just seen on stage. The queue at the refreshment counter selling juice and red wine in tiny glasses seems to go on forever, but moves quickly thanks to the impressive efficiency of the people behind the counter. Some people rush out to purchase photos of their idols, cassettes, CDs and videotapes in the shop on the second level, but most stand chatting over a drink at the small round tables in the dream-like atmosphere of the foyer. A remarkable number of people are taking photos of each other in various places in the foyer.

The second act begins with what is called a "Concert of Flower Poems," show numbers like *Parizetto* (Parisette) and *Būke damūru* (Bouquet d'Amour). The audience is familiar with these numbers and people sway from side to side in their seats. The dazzling set then transforms into a new scene from 1933 with Taihei busily helping to build a *Takarazuka* theatre in Tokyo. Genji, who has now put his life as a pickpocket behind him and is helping Taihei fulltime, tells Taihei that he has been in love with Sen for a long time and asks Taihei to inform her of this. Unaware of the fact that she is actually in love with him, Taihei speaks to her on behalf of his friend Genji. She becomes very upset when she realises that Taihei has not understood that she has feelings for him. She walks away from him in anger.

One day when Taihei and Genji are working on the decorative elements of the new theatre, the rival pickpocket gang returns and Genji is again attacked. When Taihei tries to save his friend, he falls off the scaffolding surrounding the unfinished building. After this incident he decides to go back to his hometown in northern Japan despite the fact that his injuries are not life threatening.

Six months later the theatre is ready and the next scene takes place a couple of days before it is due to open. Everyone is impressed by the theatre, but Genji is depressed because Taihei has gone home. In reality, however, Taihei has secretly returned with the help of the old woman who looked after him as a child. She has convinced him that he should be present at the opening of the theatre despite the fact that he has tried his best to put it out of his mind. Now he appears in front of the façade, completely blind and supporting himself with a white cane. The old woman is crying with a mixture of sadness and pride over his work. Suddenly Sen walks by. Her first reaction is to run away and not to make herself known to Taihei, but she stops and meets him anyway. He says that he knew she loved him, but since he did not know whether he would be able to make her happy, he denied himself the happiness of a life with her. Grateful for the opportunity of meeting her one last time, he says farewell and wishes her a happy life. As Sen watches him walking away, she starts to sing slowly and with great intensity. Taihei slows his pace and hesitates.

“...flower revue... dream revue... people praise you... your desires for the future burn fiercely...”

Sen cries while continuing her song.

“...when your tears have flowed in secret...the revue helps to show you the light ... when everything seems hopeless and you are in torment... the revue always helps ...”

Taihei looks blindly upwards with a broad and genuine smile on his face and begins to sing.

“...a spectrum of seven colours is shining... painting a brilliant rainbow...”

They begin to walk along slowly, singing together.

“...*Hyakka ryōran... miwaku no kaze ni... itsuka mugen no sora ni you...* Flowers of all kinds are spread all around... In the captivating wind... for once, dreams and visions will become spellbound in the sky.”

Slowly and dramatically, they walk together along the semicircle shaped catwalk out into the audience and the music guides the intensely expressive song into the leitmotiv “... *hana no rebyū... yume no rebyū...*”

There is a dead calm in the audience. Everyone is silent and totally absorbed by the lovers' bittersweet combination of fortune and misfortune, love and sorrow. When

they pass the centre of the semicircle and walk back towards the stage, the applause breaks out and the whole stage suddenly erupts into the big finale. Sequins and pearls, feathers and rustling silk, lace and taffeta fill the stage. The songs from the show are performed in lavish reprises and the actors take turns with the dancers and the chorus to shine in glamorous and powerfully sensual dream sequences. When the actresses playing male roles walk out onto the projecting catwalk, just one metre from the audience, their glances are mischievous and seductive, their smiles open and inviting. A controlled sensuality surrounds the characters as they enter the stage in one carefully created outfit after the other. A smile of recognition for someone in one of the front rows causes immediate and envious curiosity and whispering in the auditorium. The audience, which has been unusually quiet during the performance, is now a hive of activity.

The centre aisle fills up as soon as the show is over. On the way out I walk in front of a happy and blushing woman of about 25.

“He looked at me! Did you see him looking at me?” she says excitedly to her friend.

“Maybe,” says the friend, giggling into her flowery handkerchief.

“*Subarashii, suteki ne!* ...fantastic, so charming! Miki is the most handsome one of all,” says a middle-aged woman to her companion.

Only a hunchbacked old lady in her 90s, dressed in a discreet dark-green kimono, is silent. She stands motionless, facing the drawn stage curtain smiling.

From a window in the souvenir shop on the second level, I look down towards the stage door where hundreds of women of all ages are standing with flowers and presents, waiting for the princes and princesses of the dream factory to emerge.

Note

All of the lyrics quoted in this section are taken from the programme for the *Zattsu rebyū* (Takarazuka, 1997).