The Dream World of Takarazuka

Jane Singer

The on-stage couple embraces with as much ardor as their feathered headdresses will allow. The leading man, slim and dapper in a white tuxedo, is more than handsome: He's pretty. Wait—hand me those opera glasses. Why, that's no man . . .

What you're watching can only be the Takarazuka Revue Company (Takarazuka Kagekidan), the world's best-known professional theatrical company composed entirely of unmarried women. Begun in 1914 by railway mogul Kobayashi Ichizo (1873-1957) in a bid to revive a failing hot-spring resort at the terminus of his train line near Osaka, Takarazuka is now an 82-year-old institution. And despite recessions, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, competition from touring Broadway musicals and changing entertainment tastes, the theater is thriving, with audiences averaging 2.5 million a year.

Kobayashi envisioned the Takarazuka Revue Company as a troupe of supervised young women from good families, who would provide "strictly wholesome entertainment" for other members of the middle class, unlike the all-male kabuki and other, rather disreputable performing troupes then popular. An aspiring playwright and opera buff, Kobayashi wanted his troupe to combine elements of traditional Japanese theater with Western opera and dance, which were then entering Japan. He began an academy, the Takarazuka Music School, to train his young performers in song, dance and drama, and he later built two large theaters, in the city of Takarazuka and in Tokyo. From the start, the company has emphasized opulent musicals and revues, with women playing both men's and women's roles. The otokoyaku, who play the men's roles, sing in hearty baritones and swagger about, while the women role-players are coquettish and sweet in petticoats and lace. The company's official motto, "Modesty, fairness and grace," is still in force, along with the requirement that women leave the troupe when they marry.

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holidays or social life? Many, of course, are drawn by the huge popularity of Takarazuka and the devotion of its fans. But a bigger reason may be that, outside of the neighborhood karaoke bar, there are few decent venues for stage-struck Japanese women to stand in the spotlight and hone their skills. Schools of the performing arts are rare, and Japan lacks the regional repertory companies or local dinner theaters so common in the United States, or the thriving small-theater scene of Britain. As Terai Yoshiki, headmaster of the Takarazuka Music School, put it, "Many of the girls here are looking for a career in television or cinema. The Takarazuka Revue Company serves as an excellent training ground, making it easier for them to move on to other things."

The company has 370 performers and 150 other staff members, including in-house playwrights, composers, directors, orchestra musicians and producers. The performers are equally divided into four troupes: Hana (Flower), Tsuki (Moon), Yuki (Snow) and Hoshi (Star), each with its own character and separate popularity. The Yuki troupe, for instance, is considered strong in singing and drama, but with uninspired dancers, while the Hana troupe is known for its masterful dancing and energetic revues. Takarazuka stages eight major musicals a year, each paired with a song-and-dance revue, at its 2,500-seat Grand Theater in Takarazuka, seven productions at its Tokyo venue, and dozens of smaller-scale shows at the 500-seat Bow Hall in Takarazuka and theaters throughout Japan and overseas. In 1994, they staged 38 productions in all, according to producer Iwasaki Fumio. Some of these were Broadway or other Western musicals, translated and adapted to the Takarazuka sensibility, but most were original works, based on Japanese legends, cartoon stories and other sources.
Takarazuka was the first theater to present a domestic production of a Broadway musical with a 1967 staging of *Oklahoma*. Since then they have put on such imported musicals as *West Side Story*, *Guys and Dolls* and *The Sound of Music*. To defray some of the costs of staging Western musicals, and to supplement their notoriously poor advertising efforts, these days Takarazuka seeks Japanese corporate sponsors for these productions. The current production of *Me and My Girl*, for example, is sponsored by UCC Ueshima Coffee Co.

The company made its first overseas tour in 1938. In recent visits to London and New York, Takarazuka performed both Japanese and Western-style revues. Public relations staffer Koba Kenshi summed up the response this way:

"The audiences seemed to like the Western-style revues best. Our revues at Lincoln Center in New York were especially popular. Not many companies can afford to stage large revues anymore, so it may be nostalgic for foreign audiences."

The production I saw in November 1995 at the Takarazuka Grand Theater was a typical offering. Actually a restaging of a musical written in the mid-1970s by Takarazuka playwright Shibata Yukihiro, *Akan Sesu Murasaki no Hana* was inspired by two poems in the *Man'yoshū*, a famous eighth century anthology of verse. The story is of a love triangle, in which two brothers, imperial princes in the late seventh century, fall in love with the same woman, Princess Nukata. The second half of the show, entitled *Ma Belle Etoile*, featured a pastiche of song-and-dance numbers set in Paris, Shanghai and Tokyo, with a grand, high-stepping finale by all 90 cast members.

The musical's beautiful Heian era (794–1185) costumes and sets made this a popular show, but the production was ponderous and confusing. The story, with its flashbacks and numerous love elements, was difficult to follow, and the weighty Chinese-influenced costumes, especially those of the female characters, allowed for little movement. The acting was all grand, overwrought gestures, with kabuki-like poses as the lead performers entered from the wings, but there was a singular lack of charisma among the stars—the *otokoyaku* performers seemed interchangeable. The singing was strong and impressive, in both the musical portion and the second-half revue, and the dancing was certainly well-drilled, but passion and personality were lacking. One senses that this is not the fault of the performers. Some are very talented actresses, singers and dancers. Blame instead the forgettable libretto, the stale choreography, the hammy direction. Or look around the theater, at the dreamy-eyed fans clutching their programs in moist-palmed delight, and realize that this, for them, is heaven.

The point, perhaps, is that applying critical dramatic standards to Takarazuka is rather like sending a noted restaurant reviewer to critique a Baskin-Robbins banana split. It's a plebeian treat that's certainly too rich and probably not very good for you, but it is a delight to the senses. The acting is not naturalistic, as in Western drama, but intentionally artificial. As American writer Leza Lowitz observed in a November 1993 *Winds* magazine article, "Part of Takarazuka's magic may rest in
the fact that, like a Japanese garden, the artifice is considered more arresting and beautiful than the reality, being itself the art. Gender is the only ambiguity, and the ambiguity is clearly attractive." Takarazuka offers what its fans like: a chance to escape into a glitzy, glamorous world where love conquers all, where women are swept off their feet by men who are dashing and romantic. In short, a world very different from that of the ordinary Japanese housewife, who must defer to a demanding, overworked husband with little time for her or her concerns. As noted social critic Donald Richie recently told me, "Takarazuka is a fairyland—it features men without the threat of maleness. It's a more refined version of reality, where you can find true romance."

And while women acting in men's roles may seem strange to Westerners, it is nothing new for Japanese, who have a 400-year-old tradition of cross-dressing in the theater. Kabuki, with its hyperfeminine onnagata male actors, is well known, but Japan's first theatrical gender-bender was a young girl in the service of the Izumo Shrine, who in the early 1600s dressed like a man and danced to raise money for the shrine. Today, transvestites are guests on daytime television talk shows, and cross-dressing enka singers are fixtures on family-oriented variety shows in Japan. But while recent shows and movies featuring transvestites in the West, like La Cage aux Folles or To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, deal frankly with sexuality, Takarazuka is, if anything, completely lacking in sexuality. Where most Westerners regard women acting as men to be "camp," Japanese fans and the Takarazuka management see only an idealized masculine loveliness. As Leza Lowitz put it: "Camp rests on irony, which it is said the Japanese lack. Judging by the audience's responses [to Takarazuka performances], where I saw camp, they saw beauty. Camp, like beauty, was apparently in the eye of the beholder."

Nowhere was this divergence more apparent than during a July 1994 visit by Takarazuka to London. The troupe was savaged by the famously difficult London drama critics, but it was a great hit with an unexpected audience: cheering British gays and lesbians, who whooped and hollered when top star (but since retired) otokoyaku Anju Mira pranced about and fondled her female partner.

I

While strutting about the stage in a slicked-back pompadour and embracing a woman actress may not be every young woman's dream, legions of Japanese girls would give their eye teeth for the chance to become an otokoyaku. To join the company, though, one must first attend the Takarazuka Music School, a notoriously strict two-year training ground for voice, dance and drama. All graduates are guaranteed places in the Takarazuka Revue Company, so, as Music School Headmaster Terao Yoshiaki explained, "The school entrance examination is really the first audition for the theater company."

And what an exam it is. Only 40 of the nearly 2,000 girls aged 15 to 18 who apply in a given year are accepted. In an average year, the success rate for applicants
is one in 48, according to dean of students Tanabe Reiji. Entry got slightly easier in 1995, however. Chances improved to one in 42 as a result of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.

Iwasaki Michiko knows well the sacrifices involved in getting accepted to the Music School. She is the mother of Yabuki Shō, a leading okoyaku who has been with the Yuki troupe for 10 years now. This tall, stylish Nagoya matron has long been a fan of Takarazuka, and she took her daughter to shows from an early age. When Shō (her real name is Chiharu) was seven or eight, she announced her desire to join the troupe, and she began studying piano and ballet at a Nagoya school that specializes in training youngsters for the stage. She added voice lessons in junior high school, then, six months before she was to audition, Chiharu and her mother began all-day classes every weekend at the Takarazuka Music School, traveling by bullet train from Nagoya to Osaka, then changing to local trains for the long commute. She said, “Some girls flew down from Hokkaido every weekend for classes, so we didn’t consider it so difficult. It helps to get to know the teachers and to learn the Takarazuka style—many of the successful applicants attended these weekend classes.”

The applicants are judged on their vocal and dance abilities and poise in spoken interviews. Once accepted, they will start a group lifestyle that is a rude departure from their pampered upbringings. First-year students begin cleaning the school facilities each morning by 7:10 A.M. They scrub floors, hallways and toilets with damp cloths and go over practice room floors with gummed tape to remove any substances that might cause students to slip. They must open doors for and bow deeply to the second-year students, and are prohibited from walking ahead of them. The student stairways provide mute evidence of the rigid seniority system. The steps are worn down along one side, from generations of first-year students hugging the wall as they climb single file up and down the stairs. Along with music, drama and dance, they learn proper greetings and expressions which, as founder Kobayashi intended, will help them become good wives and function in proper society.

The school itself, a threadbare but clean three-story ivy-covered building, is a 10-minute walk from the theater, on the grounds of the Takarazuka Family Land amusement park. At the entrance, a row of umbrellas stand at attention, all facing the same direction, arranged in the order of seniority of their owners, with separate stands for first- and second-year students and for beginners. Said Tanabe, “In the theater you must know where props and other things go, so we are strict about placing things in their proper place. It seems old-fashioned, but it works.”

The school’s 80 first- and second-year students are divided into groups of 10 for intensive study with dance and voice instructors. Classes are from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., with extra practice after dinner for those who need it. On an early afternoon in late November, a group in black leotards performed pliés and pirouettes under the watchful eye of their ballet instructor. The taller girls, who will become otokoyaku, all had their hair closely cropped; their shorter classmates had their hair neatly pinned up in chignons. Fifteen minutes later, the same 10 students were on the floor
above, practicing their scales, as their singing teacher prodded the otokoyaku in the diaphragm to help them lower their voices. All the girls wore prim gray uniforms, with the hair of the shorter students pulled back into two precise braids. Tanabe explained that the girls must shower and change from leotards to uniforms in 10 minutes. “They must learn to make quick changes for the stage, so they get used to doing things rapidly,” he said.

From the second year, the otokoyaku and female role players begin separate training, with otokoyaku undergoing rigorous instruction in learning how to move, act and sing like a man. The teachers decide whether students will play male or female roles, although those of in-between height can sometimes make the decision themselves. It’s much more difficult and takes longer to master the otokoyaku roles, but all the Takarasiennes, as the Takarazuka performers are called, know that only otokoyaku can become top stars, and naturally, most hope that their height will cooperate with their lofty ambitions.

The school’s resemblance to army boot camp is a source of pride for headmaster Terai, who noted that traditional Japanese values and moral discipline are rarely enforced at Japanese schools these days. He said, “We emphasize manners and proper behavior. Because the theatrical company is a group lifestyle, you must know how to live in a group. Our training is rigorous, and everyone struggles for two years, but it builds character.” When asked if this kind of conformity to the group and its rigid norms doesn’t stifle the individual personality that a theatrical star must express, he laughed. While insisting that the drama coaches encouraged each student’s individuality, he said, “If you didn’t endure this kind of experience and group training, you wouldn’t be able to properly express yourself.”

Although most of the school graduates enter the performing troupe and later retire (or “graduate,” in Takarazuka parlance) to marry or enter show business, graduates have recently been weighing more varied careers. “About one-quarter of our students go into the theater or film,” said Terai. “Others get married. Some become singers or musicians. A few go on to university and professional careers. For example, one graduate who became an economist. They learn confidence from studying here, so they can do anything.”

In the 1995 election for the House of Councilors (Upper House) of the Diet, two former Takarasiennes won seats as candidates of the opposition Shinshinto party. I spoke with one of them, Hayashi Kumiko (stage name: Tajima Kumii), a 25-year veteran otokoyaku with the Hana troupe. She felt that her long Takarazuka experience had proven tremendously helpful as a Diet member. “The physical strength and strength of movement I mastered as a former dance specialist have helped me in the grueling political world,” she said. “And my experience as a leader of my troupe for many years helped me learn teamwork and a desire to take on new challenges,” she said. “The Diet is even more of a closed, structured world than Takarazuka, so my training in the theatrical organization has proven a real plus.”
After two years at the Takarazuka Music School, students are placed in one of the four troupes of the acting company, with the production staff selecting members who will balance each troupe's strengths and character. Then they continue to study dance, movement and theater as they progress to larger roles in Takarazuka productions. All performers are called students in Takarazuka, and they are ranked strictly according to the year they enter and the talent they display in yearly exams. They are paid fixed wages for the first seven years, then they sign annual "talent" contracts with the management. Since only one player per troupe can be the top star or even a leading performer, most of the performers leave after a few years when they wish to marry, or when it becomes apparent that their upward progress has slowed. As each year sees 40 new entrants into the company, an additional 40 performers or so must graduate to private life to keep the numbers balanced.

Although Takarazuka no longer finds spouses for its performers, as founder Kobayashi once did, Takarasiennes are known for making good matches in marriage. Osaka fan Kitamura Kazuko explained: "With their varied experiences, Takarazuka performers make good wives. They know how to deal with older fans and their seniors in the company, they can use polite language, and the otokoyaku understand the men's point of view. They're much more mature than others their age. Many marry doctors or wealthy businessmen." This may not be so true, however, of the top performers, who have been pampered by their fans for years and may not remember how to lift a damp cloth or shop for groceries.

It ordinarily takes an otokoyaku about 10 years to rise to the top of the troupe, while women-role players, who have an easier time of it in playing their own gender, can become leading players in five or six. Junna Risa, for instance, who is the top female star in the Hana troupe and starred in Piano, an NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.) television morning drama series in 1994, is only a sixth-year student with the troupe. An exception to the rule is recently departed otokoyaku Amami Yūki, who was the company's biggest star in the past year or two, and was only in her ninth year.

I spoke with Ichiro Maki, the personable, feminine and articulate top star of the Yuki troupe, at the Takarazuka offices in November, shortly before she announced her resignation from the company, with her last show to be in Tokyo in June. Tall and slim like all Takarazuka otokoyaku, a lock of red-tinged hair curled gently over her forehead. She tugged on the sleeves of her gold-fringed black top as she responded in a softly determined manner. Ichiro first joined the Yuki troupe 14 years ago and has been their top star for the past three years. I asked her how a top star is decided. "Until the third or fourth level, your position is usually decided on the basis of your order in joining the troupe," she said. "You can tell the rank of the performer from the size of her photo in the program. I know who comes after me—you can't suddenly rise to the level of top star. It depends on the performer's true ability and 'plus alpha'—appeal or attractiveness."
Ichiro is a highly unusual otokoyaku in that she has played both male and female roles in various productions. "One of my favorite shows was Gone with the Wind," she said. "I performed in it three times—the first time as Ashley Wilkes, then as Rhett Butler and this past year as Scarlett O'Hara. That's unusual, but in a play with a major female lead like this one, you need a top star for the female role, so the part came to me. Fortunately, I am able to switch from a female to a male singing voice fairly easily. Some otokoyaku have lowered their singing voices through using tobacco or alcohol, and they have a hard time singing in a higher register."

I asked her if it was difficult to act like a man. "It's very hard, especially mastering men's movements," she replied. "Even if you copy it fairly well, to be able to move quite naturally takes about 10 years. And you must train to lower your speaking and singing voice, as well." And what is it like to be onstage—doesn't she ever get embarrassed in the love scenes? She laughed, saying, "If I'm embarrassed, the audience will be even more embarrassed. Like any other actor, in a love scene I'm just playing a role. In practice or on-stage I think to myself, 'I'm a woman but I'm playing this role,' and I'm able to think that the female-role player is lovely and I'm in love with her, without embarrassment." But can she remain personally unaffected by playing a man for all these years? She said, "Takarazuka is a world of pretend love, of fabrication, so you can distinguish your theatrical from your ordinary self. Everyone can make that switch, so we don't worry much about it."

When asked what her future plans might entail, she admitted that her future in the troupe wasn't long. "The top stars at Takarazuka must appear brilliant and fresh to our fans. Before they start to say 'she's getting old,' you have to consider what you'll do next," she said. "What I'd really like to do is get married," she added with a laugh. "But I'll need to take time before making any major decision. While you're in Takarazuka, you just concentrate on the present—it's work 24 hours a day, so you can't really think about the future," she said. "You see, the Takarazuka world is not really a part of show business, but a unique world of its own, existing apart from the major cities. While you're in it, you can't see the outside world."

III

Takarazuka is indeed its own, micromanaged world—or at least a subculture, with a unique vocabulary, customs and mores perpetuated by the company and its legions of fans.

Perhaps no other theatrical company can claim fans as passionately devoted as those of Takarazuka. Many of them belong to fan clubs that sprout up to support a single performer, and that make their operating revenues selling such goods as sweatshirts bearing the star's picture, and from hanadai, the small processing fees added to the cost of tickets, which they buy in bulk and resell to their members. Producer Iwasaki estimates that the total number of such fan clubs exceeds 300. The official Takarazuka fan club, Tomonokai, which sells Takarazuka-related goods and
discount tickets, lists 70,000 members. The average fan club member, according to a book recently published by the Takarazuka Research Group, a collection of journalists and die-hard fans, spends ¥200,000 to ¥300,000 annually to attend 20 performances and to purchase Takarazuka-related videos, magazines, cookie tins, calendars and other goods. In fact, revenues from videos alone totaled ¥1.5 billion in 1994 for Takarazuka Creative Arts, the subsidiary that markets these goods.

Outside the Takarazuka Revue Company’s main building on a frigid Monday morning in December 1995, about 250 women, most of them young, were arrayed in neat clusters, waiting patiently and silently for the chance to greet their favorite performers. Each fan club had its own spot, some standing near the entrance to the underground garage where the performers park, others ensconced atop the brick walkway near the building entrance. Members of top stars’ fan clubs are said to outrank fans of up-and-coming performers, so they get the best viewing perches. Fan club officials (“guards”) made sure that no one stepped out of place or obstructed the performers’ progress. When Todoroki Yū, the third-ranking otokoyaku of the Yuki troupe, burst onto the sidewalk on her way into the theater a group of 20 fan club members blossomed around her. She thanked them as she scooped up homemade gifts from the fans—box lunches, letters on stationery adorned with kittens and flowers, hand-knitted slippers, crocheted vacuum bottle covers—then swept into the theater as the fans, in unison, wished her luck. And so it went as each performer approached the theater. Low-ranking performers were greeted by at most one or two fans, while top stars, like Ichiro Maki, who was the only performer dropped off right at the entrance, could claim an entourage of 30 or 40 gift-bearing followers.

Mori Misaki, a stout woman in her mid-30s, joined the Ichiro Maki Kansai-area fan club seven years ago, and is now a top official in the club, which claims about 2,000 members in the Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe area. She was impressed by Ichiro’s singing talents, and has spent the past several years watching her perform and carrying out club duties. Ichiro’s recent announcement of her impending retirement left her feeling “lonely,” but she says she’ll continue to cheer on her stage career. Others were not so sure. A young woman standing near Mori admitted that she was “in shock” at Ichiro’s retirement after being a fan club member for 10 years, and she doubted she would come to see Takarazuka after her idol leaves.

I was given a crash course in Takarazuka fandom by Kitamura Kazuko, an outgoing 60-year-old Osaka housewife who, if she wasn’t devoting her considerable energy to the theater company, could probably be a dynamite businesswoman. Kitamura first saw a Takarazuka show as a fourth grader during World War II, and in the midst of wartime deprivation, she said, “It was a fantastic dream to me.”

She says of Takarazuka fans, “Half of them, especially the younger ones, wish they themselves could become stars, while the other half are like me—content just to gaze from afar. It’s actually not unusual to see three generations of female fans—grandmother, mother and daughter—at Takarazuka performances; the company’s popularity spans the ages. It’s nice—I can speak comfortably with young girls and

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very old women, because we share common interests." Kitamura is in the fan club for otokoyaku Yabuki Shō, whom she first spotted at a performance featuring newcomers when Yabuki was in her fourth year. "I was impressed by her enthusiasm. Like many fans, I think it's fun to spot a rising star and follow her career. Although I have met and spoken to Yabuki, she's too busy with lessons and performances to meet with fans very often. So I often write letters to her and give her advice from a fan's perspective about her performance." Kitamura goes religiously to shows featuring Yabuki, saying, "If it's a show I really like, I'll go see it up to 20 times during its six-week run."

Kitamura goes to see musicals by other companies as well, including Gekidan Shiki, the troupe that first brought the musical Cats to Japan. She admits that their musicals, with real men in the cast, "have more power," but added that "Takarazuka is a world of longing and dreams. In Takarazuka, I become completely lost in this dream world, and for three hours I forget my age and problems at home. When I emerge into the lobby, I'm surprised to be back in the real world. But I emerge with enthusiasm, with more verve for living."

The great majority of fans are enthralled by the otokoyaku actresses. I asked Kitamura why. "Otokoyaku are different from real men, like dream men," she said. "Female-role players might remind you of your daughter, and you think she's very cute. But with otokoyaku, you are more in the realm of fantasy. Even though the performer is younger than you, you feel longing for the male character."

Far beyond Kitamura in fan devotion, in the upper reaches of obsession, are the otsuki (assistants), the fan club officials who have literally dedicated their lives to the stars they love. Nishikawa Takako is one of them. A rather brusque, stocky part-time office worker in her 30s, she has been a member of the Ichiro Maki fan club for 14 years, since Ichiro joined the Yuki troupe, and for the past 10 years she has been the club's president. As part of her responsibilities, she and about 20 other staff members plan the ochakai, the sponsored teas usually held at hotel banquet rooms at which fans can meet their star, pose for photographs, ask her questions and even hear her belt out a song or two. Nishikawa also helps put together the quarterly fan club newsletter and assists with club operations. But her most important role, when the Yuki troupe is in Takarazuka, is to drive Ichiro to and from the theater in the morning and evening, using a car borrowed from another fan. Since she must do this twice a day, every day except Wednesday, the company's holiday, she can only work at paying jobs when the Yuki troupe is out of town, in Tokyo or on the road, where local fan club officials perform the same function. As Nishikawa lives alone in Takarazuka, where she moved from Osaka to be near the troupe, she has a difficult time making ends meet. "It's a constant source of concern for my parents," she admitted, although she is probably helped financially by wealthier fan club members.

Takarazuka Producer Iwasaki echoes the official management line when he says, "The theater company is not involved in the fan clubs. What happens between the individual performers and the fans is their business." In truth, though, neither
Takarazuka nor the fan clubs could exist without each other. Most of the fan clubs include a few top officials like Nishikawa. These club officials not only chauffeur the performers, but they also clean their apartments, do their laundry, shop and select the vast array of flashy clothing a star needs for photo sessions and other appearances. Wealthy older fans make up for their inability to offer their time, as the younger fan club officials do, by donating expensive gifts—jewelry, designer apparel, even automobiles. When the performers are in Tokyo, many stay in fans' vacant apartments or hotel rooms paid for by the fans. "It's said that as long as a girl is in Takarazuka, she need never open her wallet," noted Sasaki Junko of Tokyo, who is a close friend of some Takarazuka stars.

When a troupe performs in Tokyo, their fan club otsuki can be found in the dressing rooms, where they arrange for meals, set out makeup and accessories, and help the performers with costume changes. Other otsuki perform as unpaid "managers," arranging the hectic daily schedules of the stars. All of this is no doubt a great financial help to the Takarazuka Revue Company, which is burdened with the tremendous overhead of maintaining their theaters and paying for a company of 700 people. At least the company can save on dressers, managers, caterers and other peripheral personnel. And fan club efforts allow the company to keep performers' wages low—reputed to be below those of the typical "office lady."

But while the fan club groupies fuel the company's financial success, they also pose the greatest hurdle to its artistic growth. Iwasaki acknowledged that Takarazuka could take more risks in tackling serious topics or new dramatic treatments, but they then risk alienating fans who want their daily dose of light and frothy entertainment. Although recent shows have touched on such weighty topics as John F. Kennedy's assassination and the falling of the Berlin Wall, both were just used as novel spins on the real theme of any Takarazuka musical: love and romance. "We do try new things in alternative venues, however, such as halls in downtown Osaka," he said, "and we are now considering how to attract more men and young people, and staging more family-oriented or couple-oriented productions."

IV

A recent tour of Takarazuka facilities made clear the extent of the company's investment and major financial pressures. Backstage in the Grand Theater building are the Takarazuka offices, and two floors of practice and recital rooms. On a weekday afternoon, members of the Tsuki troupe were rehearsing for the Tokyo performance of the musical Me and My Girl, with the female-role players in leotards and ballet slippers, and the otookyaku in mid-heeled boots, tight pants and loose tops. In the next room, half of the members of the Hoshi troupe were sitting on folding chairs for an initial meeting for a revue to be staged in a downtown Osaka dinner theater, while down the hall, smaller groups were practicing classical Japanese dance, doing ballet exercises at the barre, or singing scales in small practice rooms.
The theater is a marvel of computerized operation, with a huge revolving circular floor backstage and backdrops that swing into place at the touch of a button. Although the theater was completely rebuilt in 1993 from the original, circa-1924 building, it was badly damaged by the January 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, with the computerized facilities totally destroyed. The theater was forced to close for the first time since World War II, but it reopened after just 73 days. (On the morning of the earthquake, though, even with no trains running and the theater in ruins, about 100 fans gathered near the backstage entrance, hoping to see their idols.) The tremor topped the seven-point Japanese scale of intensity in Takarazuka, which is near Kobe. The extent of the damage can be seen during a stroll down the reconstructed brick walkway, or "Dream Road" that leads from the Hankyū train station to the Grand Theater. The walkway was formerly lined with small wooden homes and shops; now you mainly pass empty lots and prefabricated structures.

Said producer Iwasaki, "The earthquake was a great shock. The Hoshi troupe was just starting to rehearse a new production. We tried to continue rehearsals, but with no gas or water it was difficult, so we had to borrow various facilities in Osaka. However, we were able to open February 3 in Nagoya as planned, and our fans were very grateful."

Unlike other theaters, where a few people are involved in show planning, in Takarazuka 80 to 100 people are involved in a single production. If the in-house 35-piece orchestra and other staff are included, Takarazuka employs up to 300 people for a single show. Yet Iwasaki said that the company is flourishing, with "audiences that have grown by 60 percent in the past 10 to 15 years."

As an operating unit of the Hankyū Railway Corporation, which is itself part of the Hankyū-Tōhō group, the theater company does not announce its results independently, but spokesman Koba said that the company has been in the black for the past five or six years. Business seems to have been helped, rather than hurt, by Japan's long-running recession. "If Japanese can no longer afford overseas trips for leisure, perhaps they are more likely to go see Takarazuka," Iwasaki said.

Iwasaki, an affable, graying businessman in his late 40s, is a manager with Hankyū Railways temporarily assigned to the theater company, as are all the other Takarazuka producers. For these men (and almost all the managers and non-performing staff at Takarazuka are men), their most important role, rather than providing artistic vision, is to cut costs and manage the details. For a railroad man, the Takarazuka members are just a different kind of rolling stock. Don't expect them to widen anyone's artistic horizons with controversial shows on AIDS or fin-de-siècle angst. But for most of the fans, Takarazuka is fine just the way it is.

"Takarazuka is lovely. I first came to see it when I was 15," said a 75-year-old woman in a mauve kimono who had come to a show with a group of 120 women from distant Gifu Prefecture. "Sixty years now, and it hasn't changed a bit," she said with a satisfied smile.