

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: THE REPRESENTATION OF WAR IN TAKARAZUKA REVUE'S PERFORMANCE STRATEGY

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Abstract: In this paper, I delve into Takarazuka Revue's performative representation of war, death and suffering with particular focus on the past ten years (since 2014). Based on extensive fieldwork and in-depth literature research, the four pivotal performances chosen as case-studies serve to highlighting the gradual shift from a worldview which rejects war as barbaric towards a vision of/for the future in which war is not only accepted but integrated into the quotidian realities as an inseparable phenomenon. Instead of fighting against war, it seems that the alternative solution proposed by Takarazuka Revue's recent on-stage developments is to acknowledge war as a means to an end, to achieve and maintain peace as foundation for political stability and economic prosperity.

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Keywords: *Japan, masculinity, stage arts, performative representation, late modernity*

Introduction: The Reality and Theatricality of War

War has become once again the current palpable reality. This paper tackles the problematic of war as displayed by the all-female popular musical theater Takarazuka Revue in Japan. Since its inception in 1914, Takarazuka Revue has accompanied Japanese society throughout the tumultuous 20th century and into the 21st century: approximately one third of the live performances staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater in the city of Takarazuka and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in Japan's capital follow the performance policy of displaying Japanese and Asian contents, with the remaining two thirds of the performances bringing in front of the (predominantly) Japanese (preponderantly) female audiences, as Takarazuka Revue's fan community is composed mostly of women from their mid-30s to their early 60s, stories with Western topics, oftentimes wrapped up in incredulous plot developments and characters' construction. The vast majority of performances, regardless of contents, adhere rather to Japanese traditions of dramatic architecture than to Western worldviews of late-modern perception and processing. In the forthcoming analysis, Takarazuka Revue's increasing display of warfare, death and suffering on-stage during the past ten years (since 2014) is critically observed and theoretically contextualized in an attempt to elucidate its mechanisms of theatrical representation and performative contextualization in affluent, post-industrialized, service-based societies.

To this aim, I proceed in three steps: first, I briefly introduce Takarazuka Revue as a socio-cultural phenomenon and its general approach to war, both narratively and meta-narratively; second, I refer to the concept of war as a juxtaposition of power and seduction in the interplay of theatricality and mass-media conveyed reality based on Robert Greene's elaborations on power (1998), seduction (2001) and war (2007); and third, I discuss four plays as case-studies, each displaying its own idiosyncratic approach to war. In the Conclusion, I approach the necessity to address war as a reality rather than the politically motivated, demagogic insistence on avoiding it while looking into two crucial insights revealed by Takarazuka Revue's role in representing war, proactively propagating war and eventually leading to war's general acceptance.

Methodologically, I draw on 20 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork on Takarazuka Revue as well as in the complex domain of

Japanese mass-media. I observe the multiple layers of the Takarazuka Revue's administration and self-orchestration such as performance politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of actresses and fandom (fans and fan communities) as well as the performances themselves and their meta-narrative concatenations. The sources consist of extensive performance attendance, archive research of Japanese documents and interviews with Japanese producers – Takarazuka Revue actresses, staff (directors, composers, assistants, teachers, etc.) – as well as with Japanese and non-Japanese fans and other consumers of products of popular culture, domestic and international. This complex procedure has been allowing me unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception and dissemination of quotidian events in Japan. Taking into account the fact that the Japanese media industry is extremely vivacious and almost painful in its superficiality, Takarazuka Revue's longevity with more than 100 years of uninterrupted activity is a powerful reminder that determination, hard-work and persistence are worthy assets in the hierarchy of human values – although not always forthrightly advertised as such. As to be seen from forthcoming elucidations, Takarazuka Revue relies on a long tradition of self-fashioning and self-advertisement while appealing to audiences' sense of purpose within mutually intertwining marketing strategies.

Takarazuka Revue and Its Theatricalization of War

Within Japan's highly corporative and unpredictably volatile entertainment industry, Takarazuka Revue has established itself throughout the decades as an important reference system, with equally stable ideological and aesthetical standards and serving, simultaneously, as a dynamic example of the power of hard-work, insight and persistence – compounded by kindness and a sense of responsibility barely ever taken into account when it comes to cultural products as a means to implement and transmit a specific set of values across generations. Founded in 1912 by Kobayashi Ichizō² (1873-1957), one of the most influential and progressive entrepreneurs in prewar

² Kobayashi Ichizō, Japanese industrialist and politician, is best known as the founder of the Hankyū Railways Company in 1907 with its main terminal at Umeda station in Osaka and for his successful development of the railway infrastructure in an adverse region in the northern part of Kansai (Western Japan) through the implementation of residential areas along the railway line, an amusement park, a department store at the railway terminal as well as, in time, the main attraction: the Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka (Iwahori 1972, 47; Watanabe 1999, 39).

Japan, Takarazuka Revue had started as a small theatrical arrangement set-up to attract more customers in the relatively isolated city of Takarazuka with its hot-springs (*onsen*) and its fresh air, provided by the surrounding forests on the majestic mountains. Since 1919, the exclusive, very competitive two-year Takarazuka Music School (*Takarazuka Ongaku Gakkō*) has been graduating 40 (female) actresses yearly who join the team of approximately 350 others performing on the stage of the Takarazuka Revue.

Similarly to the Takarazuka Revue (Company), the Takarazuka Music School changed its official designation several times since its inception. The current name dates back to 1946. At the center of the sociocultural phenomenon embodied by Takarazuka Revue resides the *otokoyaku* (“female impersonator of male roles”), a highly ambivalent construction combining Western physical appearance with Japanese inner qualities and exemplifying once again the powerfully (in)famous hybrid identity epitomized in the slogan *wakon yōsai* (“Japanese roots/spirit, Western technology/knowledge”) – the basis and crux of Japanese modernity (initiated in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration; see Jaundrill 2016, McClain 2002). In tandem with *otokoyaku*’s representation of masculinity on Takarazuka Revue’s stage and its public advertisement, *musumeyaku* (literally: “daughter-role” with the subliminal image of “maiden”) refers to female impersonators of female roles in Takarazuka Revue. Both *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* are subsumed to the category of “actress”, while their denomination within the Takarazuka Revue Company and its related contexts is *seito* (pupil) or *takarasienne*, introduced by director Shirai Tetsuzō (1900-1983), who compared the cute Takarazuka Revue actresses with the beautiful Parisiennes at Moulin Rouge (Robertson 1998, 104, Stickland 2008, 57). Two massive theaters with over 3.000 seats in major metropolitan areas of Eastern and Western Japan – Takarazuka/Osaka respectively Tokyo – built in 1924 and 1934, belong to Takarazuka Revue Company. They host ten performances weekly throughout the year staged by the five ensembles, encompassing a huge variety of topics and ways of tackling those topics. Thus, Takarazuka Revue Company has come to be recognized both as a mirror of Japan’s tumultuous 20th century and an important source of inspiration, as it reputedly facilitates – or essentially mediates – the import of non-Japanese, mostly Western, cultural assets to Japan and to its Japanese audiences.

Within the extremely strict hierarchy of Takarazuka Revue’s educational and performance system, the concept “golden combination” refers to the *otokoyaku-musumeyaku* pair (in Takarazuka Revue jargon: “topstar[s]”) at

the top of every of the five actively performing ensembles. It is important to mention that, while the acting staff is exclusively female, the administrative staff is to a great extent male, and was exclusively male from Takarazuka Revue's inception until 1999 (Kawasaki 1999, Tsuganesawa 1991, Watanabe 2002). This clear-cut separation of functions has been playing a fundamental role in Takarazuka Revue's evolution and its preoccupation with staging evolving patterns of sociocultural delineation and belonging as well as its dialectically pragmatic adaptation to the expectations of audiences while subtly influencing their tastes, preferences, and life choices. The unusually entangled dynamic between Takarazuka Revue administrators and its mostly fan-based audiences has led, in recent times, to more profound analytical approaches of a business-model relying on "deep-fandom" (see Jenkins 1992, Fuller/Goffey 2012). "Deep fandom" refers to those faithful fans who support a specific phenomenon throughout the years, instead of spending their money, time and emotions on a variety of entertainment tools, which might be labeled as "surface-fandom". There are clear disadvantages to Takarazuka Revue Company's business orientation, but its most obvious advantage is the profile clarity of the cultural institution engaging in the promotion of "deep-fandom" which emerges as a strong identification model and existential paradigm while challenging prevalent standards of "fan-service" in Japan.

Takarazuka Revue's general performance policy related to war has changed repeatedly throughout its more than centennial history since 1914. Nonetheless, it has been consistently playing a fundamental role in orchestrating the Japanese society on-stage in a representation strategy which encapsulates the tension between the reflection of the shifting layers of power throughout Japan's modernity and the proactive input towards socio-cultural transformation challenging superficial economic-political premises of change more recently. While during the first half of its history, Takarazuka Revue intently and intensively supported Japan's nationalist, expansionist project of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (*Dai Tōa Kyōeiken*) under Japanese domination, Takarazuka Revue's postwar history strictly follows a performance policy which promotes peace as the highest ideal of humankind and does not allow for the representation of Japan or Asia in modern and contemporary times in those Japan- or Asia-focused plays and instead focuses on plotlines located in atemporal Asian or Japanese societies as well as mythological or science-fiction narrative environments (Hashimoto 1999, Etō & al. 2007, Kawasaki 2005, Uchino 2009).

Since 2017, however, there has been an astonishing increase in war-related performances, with the year 2017 marking a significant step forward in that progression: six out of nine performances that year dealt with war, militarization, or revolution. By comparison, in 2016 there were three out of nine performances tackling wars that occurred exclusively in premodern Japan, and in 2015, six out of nine performances focused on wars, riots, and revolutions in various geographical and historical areas. Furthermore, 2018 and 2019 brought to the foreground of the performance strategy the gradual return to the pre-war performative vision of Takarazuka Revue's founder Kobayashi Ichizō of "mass-theater" representing of Japan and the Japanese people in their advancement towards becoming world leaders. The global pandemic of 2020 and 2021 still ramifying into 2022 accelerated in Takarazuka Revue's case the performative strategy of "globalization from within" as a means to attain internationalization through the display of human diversity, with the simultaneous, continuous deconstruction of the Japanese premodern heritage, the increasing spotlight on individual achievements, responsibility and freedom, as well as on the accumulating awareness of the practicality of the Latin dictum "if you want peace, prepare for war" ("Si vis pacem, para bellum"): it is in strength and preparedness for conflict – even war – as well as in the radical acceptance of others as one's equals despite their "otherness" that authentic global cooperation can become attainable. This appears, one might argue, in blatant contrast to Japan's political experiment of a *saisakoku* or the "renewed closure of the country" in 2020-2022 emulating Tokugawa period's historic-geographical isolation (1603-1868) and its policies of what Naoki Sakai called "hikikomori nationalism" (Sakai 2022) – that is, the retreat into its (in)famous attitude of detachment and non-involvement in foreign affairs unless directly interested.

As such, there seems to be an increasing display of warfare, death and suffering on Takarazuka Revue's stage during the decade starting in 2014. The procedure of elucidating the mechanisms of instrumentalizing violence and pain reveals its versatility in de-sensitizing audiences towards the evils of war on the backdrop of emotional-mental complacency and indifference in affluent, post-industrialized, service-based societies (Yamanashi 2012, Weber 2004). Moreover, as is to be seen in the four plays analyzed further below – *Napoléon, the Man Who Never Sleeps: Beyond Love and Glory* (2014), *A Song for Kingdoms* (2003/2015), *Rurouni Kenshin* (2016), *The Legend of King Arthur* (2016) – the problematic relationship between the *bushidō* ideology in Japan and current realities moves into the foreground.

Questioning, rather than glorifying, the “way of the warrior” as encompassed in the *bushidō* and its supposed premodern fame (see Yoshino 1992), draws back on the promotion of a more peaceful, cooperative approach towards life, which Takarazuka Revue proactively, compassionately juxtaposes over the gradual return to an ideology of “Japan First” in present-day Japanese politics – and painstakingly displayed by means of performative representation in Japanese mass-media.

As will be explained in the forthcoming lines, my conceptualization of Takarazuka Revue in the spirit of the Platonian theatrocracy with Benjaminian nuances has deep socioeconomic, and political-cultural implications.

Theatrocracy, Power and Seduction: The Meta-narratives of War

The relationship between theater and war has a long and complicated history as war is intrinsically connected to political strategies. Of all the arts, theater most directly resembles war in that it has traditionally been understood to involve the assemblage of people on two sides in a shared place and there is mutual involvement in displays of power, seduction and victory. The two sides of the theatrical act, though – performers and audiences –, differ from the members of wartime disputes and challenges in so far that their existence is limited in time and has a very predictable duration. Theater acknowledges artificiality, artifice, specific strategies within the competitive display of power and seduction, whereas war-established communities are often constructed in terms of great natural uncertainty and forceful participation. Theatrocracy is to be understood in the Platonian meaning as delivering the control to audiences rather than to performers and playwrights, directors, producers, and other participating parties (see Weber 2004, 68). Theater, albeit popular theater, appears as an agent of change and innovation, in contrast to Walter Benjamin’s critique of mass-media and the consumers’ famously conservative tastes, expectations, ideals (Benjamin 1980 [1935], 442; see Hori 2018). Then again, precisely because it targets audiences seen as monolithic and immutable, the seductive power of theatrical performances resides not in them staying the same, but in their potential for change and innovation, which is disturbing as it challenges and eventually transforms the prevalent order, the traditional authority, the existing hierarchies. Takarazuka Revue’s form of theatrocracy extracts its essence, vitality and longevity from two elements, which become particularly visible in its display of war: power and seduction.

The first half of the equation in the representation of war is power: in Robert Greene's conceptualization of power, "power requires the ability to play with appearances" (Greene 1998, 52) just like in theater. To this end, one must learn to wear many masks and keep an arsenal full of deceptive tricks; deception and masquerade are neither ugly nor immoral, as all human interaction requires deception on many levels. Deception is a developed art of civilization and the most potent weapon in the game of power – just like in theater where deliberately directing the audience's focus is one major strategy so that resistance to manipulation is bypassed and the flow of action seems to unfold organically. Moreover, one cannot succeed at deception unless a somewhat distanced approach to oneself is being employed: like an actor, one must be able to be or, better said, to become many different people, wearing the masks required at various moments with a flexible approach. In doing so, the actors' faces turn into malleable constructions, concealing the performers' true selves from spectators, while luring audiences into mental, emotional, sensorial traps. Playing with appearances and mastering the art of deception are among the aesthetic pleasures of life – or at least, this is how they are sold by actors who are key-components in the acquisition of power.

Furthermore, if dramaturgic deception is the most potent weapon in the theatrical arsenal, then patience is the crucial shield: like mastering emotions, patience is a skill which does not come naturally. Patience is a supreme virtue of gods who have nothing but time – and in emulating the gods on-stage as they recreate the world in real-time, actors mediate the illusion of slowing down time with the subliminal message that good things will happen, eventually, if one trusts the future. Impatience, on the other hand, only showcases one's weakness and appears as a principal impediment to power and control. Eventually, power is essentially amoral transcending rules and values; one of the most important skills to acquire in the game of power is the ability to see neutral circumstances rather than positive or negative situations, emotions, gestures. If power is a game precisely like theater which sells itself in the realm of playfulness and escapism, then the relationship between the parts involved – performers and spectators – is to be judged by the effect of their actions: in other words, there can only be those who influence by means of their performative power and those who are influenced in their quest for catharsis and limitless permission to "suspend [their] disbelief for the moment", in their longing for freedom without the attached responsibilities.

The second half of the equation in the representation of war is seduction. Theater as a space for seduction embraces warfare as the space where everything is fair: actors mastering the art of seduction are never self-absorbed. Their gaze is directed outward: as professional seducers, actors' first move when they encounter someone or create a character is to get inside that person's self and see the world through his/her eyes so that they can then represent it as such. This ability to transcend their innately human insecurities by projecting a persona of confidence, gives actors a buoyant spirit, so that spectators want to be around them, to feed off their positive energy, to glimpse into their limitless freedom. Moreover, getting access to someone else's self in creating the characters and delivering them on stage, imagining what it is like to be them, helps the actor-turned-seducer to gather valuable information, to learn what makes spectators tick, what will make them lose their functionality and the capability to think straight so that they fall, ultimately, into the trap of their own delusions. Armed with such valuable information, actors can supply focused and individualized attention – a rare commodity in a world in which most people see us only from behind the screen of their own prejudices. Getting into the target's subconscious by bypassing their protective mechanisms is the first important tactical move in the war of seduction as meta-narrative indoctrination and/or propaganda.

Actors as masters of seduction see themselves as providers of pleasure: the actor as seducer knows that people are waiting for pleasure – they never get enough of it from friends and lovers, and they cannot get it by themselves. A person who enters their lives offering adventure, romance, freedom cannot be resisted: pleasure is a feeling of being taken past our limits, of being overwhelmed – by another person, by an experience, by life itself. People are dying to be overwhelmed, to let go of their own usual stubbornness. More often than not, their resistance to us is a way of saying “Please, seduce me!”. Actors-seducers know that the potential of pleasure will make a person follow them and the experience of it will make someone open up, weak to the touch, vulnerable to influence. They also train themselves to be sensitive to pleasure knowing that feeling pleasure themselves will make it that much easier for them to infect the people around them by means of emotional contagion within the empathic space created in the realm of the theatrical representation. A master of seduction, the actor sees all life as theater, and everyone in it as an actor. Conversely, actor-seducers see all life as a seduction game in which there are those who influence and those who are being influenced. While most people feel they have constricted roles in

life, which makes them unhappy, actors as seducers on the other hand can be anyone and assume many roles and take the freedom to do that naturally. In their amorality, they are fluid and agile. In doing so, actors address spectators as targets, carefully avoiding the construction of relationships of compassionate interdependence which builds up the solid skeleton for functional communities and/or societies.

In displaying war on-stage, Takarazuka Revue conceptualizes theatrocracy as power through seduction; war is a sensorial experience, not some imaginary realm divorced from the quotidian reality. War is an eminently human arena, full of the best and the worst of our nature. Additionally, war reflects trends in society: the evolution towards more unconventional dirtier strategies like guerrilla warfare or terrorism mirrors a similar evolution in society where increasingly “almost anything goes”. The strategies that succeed in war, whether conventional or unconventional, are based on timeless psychology, and great military failures have much to teach us about human stupidity and the limits of brute force in any arena. The strategic ideal in war—being supremely rational and emotionally balanced, striving to win with minimum bloodshed and loss of resources—has infinite application and relevance to our daily battles. Inculcated with the values of our times, many might argue that organized war is inherently barbaric, a relic of man’s violent past and something to be overcome for good. To promote the arts of warfare in a social setting, it might seem, is to stand in the way of progress and to encourage conflict and dissension. The question “Isn’t there enough of that in the world?” might, again, seem reasonable and while this argument is very attractive, it is not at all reasonable. There will always be those in society and in the world at large who are more aggressive than we are, who find ways to get what they want. We must be vigilant and must know how to defend ourselves against such types. Civilized values are not furthered if we are forced to surrender to those who are crafty and strong. In fact, being pacifists in the face of such wolves is a source of endless tragedy. Instead of resisting the pull of war and the virtues of rational warfare or imagining that it is beneath oneself, it is far better to confront its necessity. Mastering the art of war will only make life more peaceful and productive in the long run, for it ensures the knowledge and ability to play the game and to win without violence. Ignoring it will lead to a life of endless confusion and defeat. Learning to look at things as they are, not as emotions color them, to judge people by their actions, not by their words, to depend on your own mind and soul instead of on externalized assets, to be wise, rational and pragmatic,

not aggressive, violent, brutal, to think strategically, not tactically – that is, to have long-term vision not short-term coping reactions –, to look inward for potential of progress, growth and improvement, are timeless ideals in the arena of life as theatrocratic representation.

These powerful lessons are outlined in the iconic case-studies further below: the performative orchestration of war as an interplay of power and seduction has been delivering impactful results in the shifting paradigm from the precept of “peace at all costs” towards the realization that “in order to achieve and maintain peace, there might come times when war becomes necessary.”

Theater as geostrategic medium: the narratives of war

In Takarazuka Revue’s case, the best way to analyze the shifting paradigms of war representation is through the lens of *otokoyaku*’s embodiment of the archetypal warrior. Four case-studies offer themselves, two of them brought to life by star troupe (*hoshi-gumi*) – founded in 1933 and associated with the delivery of strong, charismatic *otokoyaku* actresses – and two staged by snow troupe (*yuki-gumi*) – founded in 1924 and known for its Japanese traditional plays and the intensive Japanisation of Western plots – respectively by moon troupe (*tsuki-gumi*) – founded in 1921 and popular throughout decades due to its overwhelming ensembles scenes of grandeur and splendour in alignment with Japan’s future position as an international leader.

The first case-study is dedicated to the performance *Napoléon, the Man Who Never Sleeps: Beyond Love and Glory* (*Nemuranai otoko Naporeon: Ai to eikō no hata ni*), which was staged by star troupe in 2014, at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 1. January until 3. February and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 14. February until 29. March. The role of Napoléon Bonaparte was taken over by leading *otokoyaku* Yuzuki Reon and the role of Joséphine de Beauharnais, Napoléon’s wife, was attributed to leading *musumeyaku* Yumesaki Nene. The director of the performance was Koike Shūichirō, the composer was Gérard Presgurvic (French composer of Serbian ancestry). Within a powerfully romanticized framework, Napoléon Bonaparte (1769-1821) appears on-stage as a highly split person, with inner insolvable conflicts, revealing in front of the (preponderantly) female, (predominantly) Japanese audiences the struggles of men, contemporary or not, their need to be understood, appreciated and admired – and above all, their need to be loved and accepted for who they *truly* are. Napoléon’s actress Yuzuki Reon

could be described as one of the cult-*otokoyakus* of the last decade, with domineering stage presence and long-lasting impact on the creation and re-creation of masculinity on-stage – and ultimately off-stage. Correspondingly, her impersonation of the great warrior exudes firmness, decisiveness, to a certain degree ruthlessness, magnetically irresistible in his relentless pursuit of warfare-dominated expansion. His legendary hard-work and persistence as well as mental toughness turn war into an existential necessity, for which humans better prepare themselves than delude themselves into lofty slogans of peace, harmony and mutually beneficial cooperation. On the other hand, in this performative reconstruction of Napoléon as a man and as a historical figure, he turns from the Nietzschean *Übermensch* into a deeply flawed human being – with longings and failures, with misunderstandings and defeats, but also with brief moments of joy and excitement. In doing so, the Takarazuka Revue administrators deconstruct the historical “I” into a broader conceptualization of human essence as a juxtaposition of positive and negative elements, both individually and collectively.

The second case-study reflects even more efficiently this stress ratio between war as an inevitable necessity and war as a calamity to be kept at bay in the character of Radames, the young officer in the Egyptian army, from the performance *A Song for Kingdoms* (*Ōke ni sasagu uta*), staged in 2003 by star troupe and restaged in 2015 by cosmos troupe. The director of the performance Kimura Shinji based the plot-line on opera *Aida* from 1871, composed by Giuseppe Verdi on a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Star troupe’s Radames’ *otokoyaku*-actress Kozuki Wataru, like Yuzuki Reon, one of the cult-*otokoyaku* in recent decades, delivers a warrior figure keen on peace, fully aware that wars bring only misery and loss of human lives. The obtrusive appeal to keep peace at any cost and to avoid the war was at the time politically motivated, the year 2003 having been a difficult turning-point year for Japan as political tensions had arisen due to the US pressure to send segments of the “self-defense [military] forces” (*jieitai*) overseas in support of the UN military missions in Iraq, increasingly dividing a population famously regarded by outsiders and perceived by itself as a reputed monolith (Benesch 2014, Sugimoto 2015).

The public debate, energetically fueled by mass-media on all levels, ended with the victory of those few vigorously promoting the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq – which were officially promised on 9. December by then-prime minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō “for reconstruction efforts” – and despite the overwhelming opposition of a vast majority of the population

throughout the nationally negotiated process of reinterpreting the postwar constitution to employ the *jieitai* exclusively for “self-defense”, as the denomination itself asserts. An usually message-impactful performance, staged in 2003 from 11. July until 18. August at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka and from 19. September until 3. November at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo, this version focused intensely on the romantic trio between Radames, Amneris, the daughter of the king of Egypt enacted by topstar-*musumeyaku* Dan Rei and Aida, the Ethiopian slave girl who is disclosed to be, in fact, the princess of Ethiopia, embodied by secondary-topstar *otokoyaku* Aran Kei: therefore, the human drama is highlighted rather than the phenomenon of war itself which slides into the background. Nevertheless, when *A Song for Kingdoms* was re-staged in 2015 (from 5. June until 13. July at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka and from 31. July until 30. August at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo) by cosmos troupe (*sora-gumi*) – grounded in 1998 and associated with progressive plots, often conveying pilot-projects in attempts to test audiences’ limits –, the message of the performance changed radically, from the imperative commandment to keep and protect peace in the name of the human right to a life in freedom to the open acknowledgment that war might be at times necessary for restoring peace. Radames was enacted by topstar-*otokoyaku* Asaka Manato who generally portrayed warm-hearted masculine characters, so that her version of Radames emanated a sense of compassion and vulnerability, and in combination with topstar-*musumeyaku* Misaki Rion’s Aida the focus shifted towards the impossible choices leaders have to make and the heavy responsibilities which come with their privileged position. While war cannot be avoided, good leaders can make it short and less destructive.

The third case-study refers to *Rurouni Kenshin* (*Rurouni Kenshin*) from 2016, staged from 5. February until 14. March at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka and from 1. April until 8. May at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo, by the snow troupe, with topstar-*otokoyaku* Sagiri Seina as Himura Kenshin and topstar-*musumeyaku* Sakihi Miyu as Kamiya Kaoru. *Rurouni Kenshin* is a typical cross-medial phenomenon, which had emerged in the first half of the 1990s as *shōnen* manga publication (comics aimed at male teenagers) and moved through animation television series and independent productions (OVA) until live-action movies ever since. When director Koike Shūichirō adapted it for Takarazuka Revue, he had to overcome two major challenges – the (predominantly) female audience and the limitations of the theatrical genre as a live event – while keeping up with the aesthetic-technical details

of its performance standards and complying with the prevalent ideologies of the *wakon wasai* (“Japanese spirit, Japanese technology”) policies openly promoted by the Abe administration, thus aligning to similar ardent efforts within the Japanese entertainment industry and media landscape at the time (see Iwabuchi 2015, 422-424, Robertson 1998, 175, Valaskivi 2013, 489; see Nye 2004).

The plots follows Himura Kenshin (also known as “Hitokiri Battosai”, Himura the Manslayer), the former kill-for-hire assassin with incredible fighting skills who had helped the establishing of the Meiji Restoration by siding with the pro-imperialist *ishin-shishi* (nationalist patriots) against the shogunate’s forces, including the elite *shinsengumi* (newly selected corps) swordsmen, and who has become a wandering samurai who protects the people of Japan with a vow to never kill again in order to repent for his previous crimes. The dramatic transformation of the main character from a bloody kill-for-hire into a benevolent promoter of peace and compassion, turns through the topstar-*otokoyaku*’s embodiment into a symbol of faith and empowerment, in strong contradiction with Japan’s realities of the so-called “lost three decades”. *Rurouni Kenshin*’s life story spans violence, death and suffering as well as the pragmatics of attaining and keeping peace as the crucial pathway towards political stability and economic prosperity. The sense of futility and emotional frugality conveyed by the performance *Rurouni Kenshin*, which was one of the most successful performance of Takarazuka Revue’s recent history, running with closed ticket houses since the first day of the ticket-presale, is magnified by the austere stage design, in striking contrast with other typical Takarazuka Revue performances.

The fourth case-study is *The Legend of King Arthur* (*Āsā-ō densetsu*) by moon troupe starring Tamaki Ryō as Arthur, King of Camelot, and Manaki Reika as Guinevere, Arthur’s wife, the Queen) from late 2016 (at Bunkyo Civic Hall in Tokyo from 14. October until 19. October and at Umeda Arts Theater Dramacity in Osaka from 28. October until 9. November), which was the Japanese-language translation of Dove Attia’s and François Chouquet’s French-language musical comedy *La Légende du roi Arthur*, world-premiered on 17. September 2015 at Palais des Congrès de Paris in France’s capital, with Florent Mothe as King Arthur, Camille Lou as Guinevere, Charlie Boisseau as Lancelot du Lac, David Alexis as Merlin, Zoho as Morgan le Fay and Fabien Incardona as Maleagant. In importing *The Legend of King Arthur* from France and adapting it to the realities of Japan’s mid-2010s, Takarazuka Revue’s administrators revived particularly

the moderation aspect of King Arthur's character: to a remarkable degree, and from its very inception by mid-6th century, the narrative of King Arthur subverts the traditional model of warrior masculinity celebrated in the West. Arthur does not serve ends of glory or conquest, but is tied to the exercise of self-defense, preserving his group against the extremity of foreign invasion.

This stands in contrast to Achilles or Alexander the Great or Odysseus, heroes more commonly evoked for their image of grandeur and excess than for their quest and display of *modestia* (humility or moderation; Wheeler, 1992, 6-11). An intrinsically *vir modestus*, namely first of all a moderate man or a man of moderation, humility and compassion, Arthur as a warrior delivers an alternative understanding of power which actively rejects violent aggression and its identification with heroic masculinity, and instead is majorly preoccupied with achieving and maintaining peace as the foundation for political stability and economic prosperity. To this original projection of the Arthurian ideal, Takarazuka Revue juxtaposes negatively the model of the premodern samurai – and makes it very clear, once again, that it is crucial to keep in mind that the exalted narrative of the samurai as a functional *modus operandi* in Japan had been inaugurated by Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* from 1904 which had reconstructed the “way of the warrior” or *bushidō* for Western readerships and, in a curious development of strategic cultural (re-)imports, made it strikingly popular among Japanese intellectuals and subsequently among Japanese regular citizens throughout the decades (Turnbull 2004).

This dialectical tension becomes visible from the beginning of the performance in the title-song composed especially for the Japanese version, which speaks of leadership as a compositum of kindness, sense of responsibility, moderate vision of/for the future, so that the subjects love the leader and follow him out of trust and awe, and not out of fear and lack of alternatives. By placing the domineering stardom embodied by the lead-*otokoyaku* in the position of the master-turned-disciple who learns valuable life skills and eventually finds in the very act of treason a fresh life purpose, Takarazuka Revue's version of *The Legend of King Arthur* turns the scenic act into a huge parable on humility and respect. Highly idealist, Takarazuka Revue's version of the *vir modestus* – “the moderate man” or “the humble man” – described by Gildas the Wise in Britain's 6th century performatively displays the ideal of “empowered masculinity”: a high-caliber man so stable in his masculinity that he can afford to be gentle and forgiving, in his aspiration for peace and harmony in his kingdom and

in the world despite historical challenges. As a means to an end, war is to be employed parsimoniously while accepting it as an inevitable part of life.

Conclusion: Violence as Catharsis, Peace as Subversion

The mesmerizing, breathtaking war scenes which underscore both high-quality group coordination reminding the entire company's focus on collective excellence emerging from individual excellence, are the result of long hours of focused training, hard-work and perseverance, often culminating in touching, soft, inconspicuous confirmation of intense work ethics and professional discipline. More subtly or more overtly, leaders are gradually portrayed as seeking the love, appreciation, respect of those who entrust them with that function – and which they have to earn again and again. Beneath this stylistic cacophony, ideological inconsistency and aesthetic contradictions, a rigorous, disciplined lifestyle as the pathway to individual fulfillment, individual excellence and individual agency emerges. War is transcended in exceptional individuals who disclose their “humanity of vulnerability”: Napoléon and Radames, Himura Kenshin and King Arthur alike, the idealization of the warrior was a process initiated immediately after it had become obsolete, with their appeal and fascination residing in their historically inaccurate perfection, compounded by the ambiguous roles the warriors, soldiers, war-lords had played in premodern and early modern times both as defenders of the old order with its crystalized structures and as forth-bringers of the new order with its scary, but necessary changes. This leads to two crucial insights in conceptualizing war as a performative representation.

The first insight is that teatrocracy has the meta-narrative function to make-or-break historical systems by means of power and seduction in the service of live performances. It might seem as a paradox, but in a performance on war and warriors as well as their inscrutable death ethics, the fleeting moments of togetherness and acceptance are celebrated alongside traumatic memories of wiped-out communities and their mercilessly slaughtered inhabitants. On the more specific background of the actresses' strict educational system within the Takarazuka Music Academy, in which “friendship, hard-work and (individual) excellence” serve the more comprehensive model of a dynamic community based of compassion, respect and trust among its members – after all, the supreme goals of any enlightened society in late-modern era (Miegel 2007, Eisenstadt 1996,

Žižek 1998) –, the characters and the ideals they represent, believe in and fight for evolve towards metamorphosing into tangible goals for average participants in the audiences, compounded by specific elements included in Takarazuka Revue as a geopolitical and historical appearance.

Catharsis is, therefore, replaced by contradictory emotions, by the self-aware immersion into the frugality of life without expectations of moral teachings or profound messages. Precisely because it openly displays the horrors of war, Takarazuka Revue manages to equally depict humanity as a tender, soft endeavor. It envisions a more compassionate cooperation between humans both within the same society and among different nations, which could eventually, successfully, replace the Western project of modernity engineered by efficiency and competitiveness.

The second insight is that the shifting dynamics of war representation and its performative impact on the narrative dimension naturally associates men with war. In the process of reconfiguring Japanese masculinity in accordance with renewed historical and geostrategic requirements by means of live performances which focus on the ambivalently charismatic symbol embodied by *otokoyaku*, Takarazuka Revue's administrators are keenly observing sociopolitical tendencies and both reflecting and subtly influencing them in a continuous dialectical movement. In doing so, they are fully aware of the danger of cultural essentialization lurking in the basements of cultural constructs of identity models and of masculinity paradigms in highly romanticized, highly fictionalized mass-media set-ups (see Eagleton 2003, Watanabe 2002; see Drucker 1981) – and they cautiously avoid it.

Takarazuka Revue's reconfiguration of the symbol embodied by the warrior had to happen under the sign of a rediscovered curiosity for life, so that the disintegration of the "old world" as materialized by death ethics appeared as a necessary condition for the emergence of the "new world", organically integrated in the flux of history. Therefore, it is individual excellence rather than blind obedience and courage rather than unconditional loyalty augmented by the vulnerability encompassed in a deep-rooted love for life and for all beings which define the "new approach to war" of early 21st century. This allows combatant sides to empathize with their opponents, to understand them and to learn to accept them in their fundamental alterity or "radical otherness", as Emmanuel Levinas (1995) famously put it, and to view them as humans despite – or precisely due to – their differences, flaws and inconsistencies. In the all-too fluid identity representations of the warrior characters throughout Takarazuka Revue's past decade, a sense of

acknowledging the existence of a greater whole than the national limited geographies becomes palpable, with perfectionism questioned in light of the necessity of the many “others” who share historical avenues with Japan on planet Earth.

The comprehension of the supreme value of life clashes against the codex of honor, loyalty and self-sacrifice which dominated premodern and early modern narratives of war: not incidentally, Takarazuka Revue’s *otokoyaku*’s warrior as orchestrated by its administrators relies on demystifying it as a deeply, strongly reinvented ideal in the shadow of its historical dissolution, while at the same time presenting it as a valid ideological structure to be remembered and acknowledged as such. Respect replaces loyalty and vulnerability replaces stoicism; in the process, new layers of compassion and self-awareness emerge which allow for universalism (see Fukasawa 2009, Kristeva 1974, Hidaka 2010).

Japan’s exceptionalism seems to have lost its charm and *raison d’être*. What has started like a modest cultural import decades ago, even more intense since late 2000s, turns gradually from a means to define and re-define supremacy, Japanese and otherwise, into a paradigm of coping and cooperating with the “others” in the universal vortex. In doing so, Takarazuka Revue – its actresses, its administrators and last, but not least, its faithful audiences – compose(s) an impactful discourse on the redemptive power of love, of peace, of acceptance, while (re-)negotiating its position within the world community.

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