

Towards a Phenomenology of Awe: *Suspension of Disbelief for the Moment* and Takarazuka Revue's Sublimation of Ruptures

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Abstract

This paper aims at critically observing the alternating concatenation of seasonally inspired numbers and Japanese legends from time immemorial in the show *Sekdashō* (「雪華抄」, *Snowflake Anthology*), staged by the Japanese all-female musical company Takarazuka Revue's Flower Troupe in late 2016. The goal is to disclose some of the strategies employed by Takarazuka Revue's administrators in pursuing a necessary agenda of breaking with the tradition while steadily moving forward towards a future of self-reinvention, without disappointing the deeply conservative fans' vast community. The analysis occurs both historically and systematically: on the one hand, the year 2016 was a "bridge" year between 2015, with its two major reconfigurations of the decade-long image of Takarazuka Revue as a bastion of *shōjo* culture firmly anchored in a delusional past and its stubborn rejection of common sense as well as historical reality, and 2017, with its blatant reconfiguration of soft power priorities in terms of theatrical representation; on the other hand, *Sekdashō* itself is a symbolical gem of Takarazuka Revue's most typical features, signifying an effective yet dignified statement of not so much criticizing the past, but releasing oneself from its almighty grasp so that one can change the direction of the present towards a type of future different than the familiar flows of history so far.

Keywords: mass-media, performativity of culture, live performance(s), annihilation of identity, invented tradition(s), transcendence of history

1. Introduction: Pragmatic love, visionarism, and discipline

The initial idea of this paper stems from a convivium on education, Japan, and the future of the world held at the beginning of 2022. It was one of those spontaneous intellectual gatherings at a time when the global pandemic seemed both to regress and to throw new challenges while people were doing their best to cope with whatever might come their way. Then again, countless reports on Japan's "uniqueness and homogeneity and timeless ethereality" tried to make sense of the nation's – its politicians, its population, its economists and business-managers – stubbornness in clinging to outdated norms and regulations. Famously inflexible in facing uncomfortable truths and in adopting the strategy of rather ignoring problems than courageously addressing them, the clock-bomb of socioeconomic collapse has uninterruptedly been reminding Japanese citizens of the necessity to reevaluate their own systems and to start exploring new avenues of moving towards the future. In this process, the first step becomes the reconsideration of the relationship with the past and with the construction of traditions and cultural representations meant to secure Japan's privileged position among nations as unchallengingly special. One such point of rigid self-definition is the stance towards nature and, more particularly, towards seasons with their purported significance within Japan's classic hierarchy of aesthetic and ideological orchestration.

This paper aims at critically observing the alternating concatenation of seasonally inspired numbers and Japanese legends from times immemorial in the show *Sekkishō* (「雪華抄」, *Snowflake Anthology*), staged by the Japanese all-female musical company Takarazuka Revue's Flower Troupe in late 2016 at Takarazuka Grand Theater from November 11, 2016 until December 13, 2016 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from January 2, 2017 until February 5, with Senna Ayase 仙名 彩世 and Asumi Rio 明日海 りお in the lead-roles. The goal is to disclose some of the strategies employed by Takarazuka Revue's administrators in pursuing a necessary agenda of breaking with

the tradition while steadily moving forward towards a future of self-reinvention, without disappointing the deeply conservative fans' vast community. The analysis occurs both historically and systematically: on the one hand, the year 2016 was a "bridge" year between 2015, with its three major reconfigurations of the decade-long image of Takarazuka Revue as a bastion of *shōjo* culture firmly anchored in a delusional past and its stubborn rejection of common sense as well as historical reality, and 2017, with its blatant reconfiguration of soft power priorities in terms of theatrical representation; on the other hand, *Sek Kashō* itself is a symbolical gem of Takarazuka Revue's most typical features, signifying an effective yet dignified statement of not so much criticizing the past, but releasing oneself from its almighty grasp so that one can change the direction of the present towards a type of future different than the familiar flows of history so far. Fierce pragmatism in facing historical advancement on the global scale and radical responsibility in the proactive reinvention of the self are the two major ideological strategies inaugurated by *Sek Kashō*: the display of "Japanese elegance" in the spirit of *nihonmono* (Japanese-style performance) unfolds gracefully on-stage, starting with the glorious scenery of spring, the glittering waves of summer, the autumn moon, the fascinating world of dancing snowflakes and culminating in the overwhelmingly blooming cherry blossoms, intertwined with famous legends and folk-tales, and sends a message of honoring the past while building up a future in the service of freedom as the fundamental meaning of life – life being itself the most valuable asset one possesses and could ever possess.

Additionally, this paper focuses on the necessity to develop a sense of pragmatic love by means of its phenomenological experience as awe in theater so that audiences learn to embrace – rather than reject, as traditionally taught – their budding or, respectively, their blossoming uniqueness. "Awe" is understood as an existential attitude which allows the consistent exploration of one's individual embedding into the ecosystem, be it external or internal, in a lighthearted, non-judgmental manner; this puts "awe" in direct correlation to the "sublime" as described by Robert Greene (2001, 2018) in his writings: a combination

of Romain Rolland's and Sigmund Freud's "oceanic feeling" and the Stoics' understanding of one's mortality as expressed in "memento mori." Particularly efficient in the practice of discovering, experimenting, and mindfully expanding the boundaries, challenges, intricacies of "awe" has proven the proactive attendance of performances with little to no prior extensive explanations, so that a mental-cognitive loop emerges, in which performers and audiences are engaged in a spiral-like process of empathic communication – and, to a certain degree, of mutual learning.

Accordingly, the current analysis encompasses the three dimensions of "awe" as corporative entertainment in the manner in which it is comprised in live performances as educational protocols during the past five to seven years: humanity's experience of emulating nature; the acceptance of imperfection and impermanence as existential paradigms; self-sacrifice and the protection of others in the hope for a better future one might not – shall not – live to enjoy. The performance *Sekkishō: Snowflake Anthology* from 2016 serves as the independent variable in the anthropological laboratory: the live performance at the intersection of the Japanese and the American visions of life, love, and humanness conveys overwhelming messages of past reluctance to see beyond a static identity model with the simultaneous subliminal push towards understanding one's own impact on the world. In doing so, it reveals the individual's propensity to becoming a self-stylizing architect capable to grasp freedom in the name of radical responsibility, so that he/she turns from a "victim of history," to whom "life happens," into an active agent in the creation – or co-creation – of the future and of reality. Important elements in the analytical pursuit are the architecture of the sublime and the dynamics of controlled ecstasy as enacted by Takarazuka Revue and culminating in the cathartic display of Romain Rolland's and Sigmund Freud's "oceanic feeling" with its juxtapositions of power and seduction, of genuine charisma and hard-labored excellence, of openly marketed self-confidence and intimately negotiated degrees of humility.

To this outcome, I proceed in three steps: firstly, I explain the function and history of Takarazuka Revue as a sociocultural phenomenon embedded in specific politico-economic contexts and

subject to relentless technological progress and educational paradigms. Secondly, I observe the temporalities circumscribing the importance of nature and of seasonal referentiality in Takarazuka Revue's performance strategy in 2015 and 2017, under the pressure of developing fresh visions of and for the future. Thirdly, I delve into the mechanisms of rewriting the relevance of seasons and their paradigmatic relationship with classic legends, tales, rituals, thus elucidating the function of the nature as an abstract concept within the protocol of an increasing vulnerabilization of the human individual throughout modernity. The discussion of the "vulnerable self" takes into account three major challenges of late-modern individuation and/or self-actualization – compassion, courage, commitment, – which allow for historical referentiality while promoting a wide spectrum of choices and individual accountability. The conclusion wraps up the necessity to address vulnerability as a strategy to attain self-reliance and healthy maturity by delivering strength in authenticity and self-awareness of one's own responsibility in late-modern Japanese society as well as Takarazuka Revue's role in representing vulnerability, proactively propagating it, and eventually leading to its implementation on a real-life scale – by incorporating the past as an intellectual construction, not by retreating into it out of reluctance to accept the present.

Methodologically, I draw on 20 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork on Takarazuka Revue and on the slippery domain of Japanese and global mass-media. The phenomenological experience is socio-culturally contextualized, emulated on Takarazuka Revue as a discursive mass medium and a performative display of an authentic self and resistance against conformity, uniformity, and the alleged superiority which comes from their association. Hence, it reveals the highest level of existential transcendence: the consumerist strategies visible in the Japanese society of late modernity turn out to be plain symptoms of a forever-postponed confrontation with the individual reality, and not a sustainable solution in terms of personal fulfillment and/or social cohesion [Allison 2013, p. 17, Sugimoto 2013, p. 25]). I observe the multiple layers of the Takarazuka Revue's administration and self-

orchestration as cumulative symbols of Japanese mass-media and of Western live-action productions and as cultural phenomena arrested in the stress ratio between visual representation and musical intertwining, between arts and mass media, embedded in bureaucratic structures of administration and self-organization such as the release politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of actresses and fandom, and the performances themselves and their meta-narrative concatenations [Kawasaki 1999, Uchino 2000, Watanabe 1999]. I rely on extensive fieldwork with long-term participatory observation and empirical data collection; my sources consist of extensive performance attendance, archive research of Japanese documents and informal discussions as well as interviews with Japanese producers – Takarazuka Revue actresses, staff (directors, composers, assistants, teachers, etc.) – and with Japanese and Western fans, experts, and other consumers of products of popular culture, both domestic and international. These rendered unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception, assimilation and reproduction of media phenomena in Japan. Taking into account the fact that the Japanese media industry is extremely vivacious and almost painful in its superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, 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. Fostered with loving care in the educational process, such values lead to a healthy sense of self which then allows for vulnerability to flourish. In this understanding, vulnerability refers to the ability to display and perform authenticity (more commonly known as “to be one's true self”) both towards oneself and towards others, despite Japan's prevalent sociocultural pressures to wear symbolic masks and to play predetermined roles.

The following lines, therefore, strive for the clarification of whether the production and promotion of vulnerability is achieved by the instrumentalization of fundamental values such as determination, hard-work, and persistence, or, rather conversely, whether the

representation of vulnerability encourages the development and proactive employment of these values, by observing Takarazuka Revue's performative representation of seasons and their configuration as the essence of Japaneseness throughout Japan's history with the resulting "death of vulnerability" in human individuals. Demystifying nature and unifying our shared human condition into a coherent whole has turned from a delusional gesture of self-aggrandizement into a quotidian quest with unlimited possibilities. Hence, a new type of "educational ecology" emerges: the major goal of education through arts is to accompany and occasionally guide consumers on the journey of self-exploration towards discovering one's inner potential, attaining it and generously expanding it towards self-actualization (Abraham Maslow) or individuation (Carl Gustav Jung). This transcends the Humboldtian or Rousseauian model of education's goal of preparing individuals for the adjustment to society's requirements based on its collective expectations and measured by their potential contribution to it.

2. Takarazuka Revue's marketing of awe as corporative entertainment

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 hardly 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 Ichizō 小林一三,¹

¹ Kobayashi Ichizō (1873–1957), Japanese industrialist and politician, one of the most influential and progressive entrepreneurs in prewar Japan. He 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

one of the most prominent entrepreneurs and businessmen in prewar Japan, the unusually popular all-female musical theater Takarazuka Revue started as a small theatrical arrangement set-up to attract more customers in the relatively isolated city of Takarazuka with its hot-springs (*onsen* 温泉) and its fresh air, provided by the surrounding forests on the majestic mountains and as part of an economic-political project to develop the North-Western area of Osaka within the rapidly emerging industrialized society.

The Company² developed within a few years from the initial small organization of 16 teenage girls, who had their first performance at a theater converted from an indoor swimming pool in a building attached to the main hot-spring resort, into an increasingly successful enterprise carrying various denominations throughout the decades: a dynamic institution with a strictly stratified corporative structure. The initial *Takarazuka Shōkantai* (宝塚唱歌隊 Takarazuka Choir) turned into *Takarazuka Shōjo Kageki Yōseikai* (宝塚少女歌劇養成会 Takarazuka Company for the Training of Girl's Revue) and became increasingly popular, so that even an own 2-year training institution – Takarazuka Music School 宝塚音楽学校 *Takarazuka Ongaku Gakkō* – was founded in 1919; eventually, in 1940, it changed its denomination into the current Takarazuka Revue [Company] (宝塚歌劇[団] *Takarazuka Kageki[dan]* [Tsuganesawa 1991, pp. 22–36; Watanabe 2002, pp. 29–33].³ With

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, p. 47; Watanabe 1999, p. 39].

² Takarazuka Revue is the mass-media phenomenon whereas Takarazuka Revue Company is the fiscal entity. Takarazuka Revue administrators did not possess a specific level of fiscal awareness before 1945 so that they changed the names of the institution several times in accordance with the political tendencies of the time.

³ Since 1919, the exclusive, very competitive two-years Takarazuka Music School (宝塚音楽学校 *Takarazuka Ongaku Gakkō*) delivers yearly 40

two massive theaters with over 3,000 seats in the major metropolitan areas of Eastern and Western Japan, Takarazuka/Osaka and Tokyo, built in 1924 and 1934 respectively, and five ensembles spanning ten performances weekly during the whole year, encompassing a huge variety of topics and manners of tackling those topics, 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 into Japan and to its Japanese audiences. The unusually strong dialectics of the relationship 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” [Jenkins 2012, p. 36] – that is, those faithful fans who support a specific phenomenon throughout the years, instead of dissipating their money, time, and emotions on a variety of entertainment tools, which might be labeled as “surface-fandom”: there are, of course, clear disadvantages to this business orientation, but its most obvious advantage is the profile clarity of the cultural institution beneath “deep-fandom” which emerges as a strong identification model and existential paradigm – while challenging prevalent standards of “fan-service” in Japan.

At the center of the sociocultural phenomenon embodied by Takarazuka Revue stays *otokoyaku* (男役 namely “female impersonator of male roles”, literally “man-role”), a highly ambivalent construction combining Western physical allures with Japanese inner qualities and exemplifying once again the powerfully (in)famous hybrid identity painstakingly epitomized in the slogan *wakon yōsai* – the basis and crux of Japanese modernity (和魂洋才, “Japanese spirit/roots, Western technology/ knowledge,” initiated in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration

(female) graduates who join the team of ca. 350 actresses performing on Takarazuka Revue's stage. Similarly to Takarazuka Revue (Company), Takarazuka Music School changed its official denomination several times since its inception. The current name dates back to 1946.

[Jaundrill 2016; McClain 2002]). In tandem with *otokoyaku*'s representation of masculinity on Takarazuka Revue's stage and public advertisement, *musumeyaku* 娘役 (literally: "daughter-role" with the subliminal image of "maiden") refers to female impersonators of female roles in Takarazuka Revue [Etō & al. 2007, p. 32; Ueda 1976, pp. 34–42]. 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* (生徒 pupil) or *takarasienne* (タカラジェンヌ), introduced by the director Shirai Tetsuzō (白井鐵造, 1900–1983), who compared the cute, graceful Takarazuka Revue actresses with the beautiful Parisiennes at Moulin Rouge [Robertson 1998, p. 104; Stickland 2008, p. 57]. 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 [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, life choices. As to be shown further below, in centering upon *otokoyaku*'s construction of masculinity and her dramaturgic versatility of reformulating both historical figures and regular citizens, Takarazuka Revue displays Japan's global ramifications long before the awareness of international impact had entered the "Japanese mind" with the simultaneous dissolution of past referential systems.

3. The premises of the sublime and its performative temporalities

3.1. *Sakura* (2007): From 2006 to 2008

The exploration of the architecture of the sublime as displayed in *Sekdashō: Snowflake Anthology* from late 2016 and its symbolical instrumentalization as transition must be pursued in the context of a similar – and similarly unique – performance from the year 2007, *Sakura* (the first part of the typical performance *Cherry Blossoms/Secret Hunter: There Is Nothing in This World I Cannot Steal* 『さくら/シークレット・ハンター：この世で、俺に盗めぬものはない』 *Sakura/Shikuretto Hantā: Kono Yo de, Ore ni Nusumenumono wa nai*), staged by star troupe at Takarazuka Grand Theater from March 23, 2007 until April 30, 2007 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from May 18, 2007 until July 1, 2007. Like *Sekdashō: Snowflake Anthology*, *Sakura* was supposed to mediate a potentially smooth progression from the year 2006 with the overwhelming retirement of three cult topstar-*otokoyaku* of the previous years – Waō Yōka 和央 ようか (Cosmos Troupe), Kozuki Wataru 湖月 わたる (Star Troupe) and Asami Hikaru 朝海 ひかる (Snow Troupe) – which almost naturally ended an era of what might be regarded in hindsight as the climax of post-*The-Rose-of-Versailles* decades (since 1974), towards 2008 – a year in which two groundbreaking performances were staged as pilot-projects of the Cosmos Troupe with its subliminal association with progress and forward-movement. Moreover, like *Sekdashō: Snowflake Anthology*, *Sakura* included exclusively gorgeous, breath-taking costumes in Japanese traditional style with typically Japanese choreography and, to a staggering extent, Japanese music in the Takarazuka Revue classical manner of adapting it to Western orchestra. *Sakura* was meant to symbolize the necessity to bid farewell to the past and to move on to a future modeled on different paradigms than prior ones. Nevertheless, unlike *Sekdashō: Snowflake Anthology*, *Sakura* remained a minor performance, probably due to the abrasive novelty of the year 2008,

in which the performative pilot-projects clashed against audiences' expectations and conservative ideals too brutally: *A Morning Breeze: The Challenge of Shirasu Jirō, the Samurai-Gentleman* (『黎明の風：侍ジェントルマン白洲次郎の挑戦』 *Reimei no kaze: Samurai Gentleman Shirasu Jirō no Chōsen*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from February 8, 2008 until March 17, 2008 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from April 4, 2008 until May 18, 2008), attempts too obviously to renegotiate Takarazuka Revue's postwar performance strategy of not ever staging modern and contemporary performances centered upon Japan as well as Asia while employing classical, archetypal models of masculinity as symbolized by Shirasu Jirō, one of the most important businessmen in postwar Japan, and therefore acutely re-actualizing the *wakon yōsai* [Japanese spirit, Western knowledge/technology] slogan which he embodies in his synthetic figure. Though educated at famous schools in England, Shirasu Jirō bares his soul for Japan's welfare and defies Douglas MacArthur with the words: "Japan has lost the war, but that doesn't mean Japan has been enslaved." He dashes like a "morning breeze" through the turbulent twentieth century, firmly determined to devote himself entirely to Japan's postwar reconstruction and to the restoration of its sovereignty.

On the other hand, the next performance by the Cosmos Troupe which went on testing the waters of innovation, both in terms of challenging the U.S.-Japanese relations and of overcoming historical humiliation, was *Paradise Prince* (『パラダイス・プリンス』 *Paradaisu purinsu*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from September 26, 2008 until November 3, 2008, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from November 21, 2008 until December 27, 2008), which employs the classical technique of geographical displacement to confuse, or avoid, censorship: topstar-*otokoyaku* Yamato Yūga plays Stuart Green Menfield, a promising and talented painter from an upper-class American family with a long tradition of successful artists. Stuart leaves his well-groomed home to make his own luck in the world of animation, in the present-day U.S.: the opening scene, where Stuart wanders across the United States from New York to Orange City, obviously the Mecca of the *anime* world,

while singing “Do not give up your dreams; even if today everything goes wrong, there is also tomorrow,” is iconic in its self-referentiality. After several petit-bourgeoisie adventures, Stuart Green Menfield is shown in the homely finale watching his own successful television *anime* series together with his wife and their (obligatory) two kids. It includes, of course, obvious insinuations to Japan as the *anime* stronghold worldwide, and its efforts to propagate and implement its cultural assets. Instead of becoming the beginning of a new era, the year 2008 turned into the prelude to an era of stagnation and decline for Takarazuka Revue, which managed to start recovering in the second half of 2013 and fully celebrated its centennial in 2014 with “safe” performances neither challenging nor reinvigorating the status quo but validating audiences’ expectations and needs.

3.2. 2015’s three pivotal performances

Then again, the necessity to reformulate Takarazuka Revue’s reputation both in terms of ideological orientation and aesthetic pursuits was active, so that the year 2015 showcased three performances which did – this time successfully – manage to gradually help audiences navigate change and progress towards the farewell to the past which would be *Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology* in late 2016. The first such performance was *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* (『1789 : バスティーユの恋人たち』 *1789: Basutīyu no koibitotachi*, Moon Troupe, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from April 24, 2015 until June 1, 2015 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from May 12, 2015 until July 2, 2015) based on the eponymous original French musical *1789: Les Amants de la Bastille* with music by Rod Janois, Jean-Pierre Pilot, Olivier Schulteis, William Rousseau, and Dove Attia and produced by Dove Attia, Albert Cohen, and François Chouquet. World-premiered on October 10, 2012 at Palais des sports in Paris, *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* essentially rewrites the storyline and historical orientation of the blockbuster *The Rose of Versailles* as it is a love story between star-crossed lovers: Olympe, an aristocrate, and Ronan, a farmer, in times of the French Revolution.

There are several fundamental differences between the original French performance, 1789: *Les Amants de la Bastille*, and its Japanese Takarazuka Revue version, 1789: *The Lovers of Bastille*. On the most superficial level, in the French version, the human dimension of the characters overshadows the historical events, while in the Japanese performance the historical events are in the foreground, with the love story itself serving as an additional element to highlight the discrepancies between the old and the new historical periods circumscribing the French Revolution. In order to analyse and comprehend the function of these differences, it is important to take into account the fact that, while the French Revolution marked the ideological beginning of modernity with its declaration of human rights, stating the position and definition of the human being both as an individual and as an entity belonging to an immediate community [Bauman 2000], Takarazuka Revue displays on stage the role of the history and of the community as prevailing over individual destinies, and, in doing so, actively re-constructs the human being as an “enlightened” existence from the point of view of the Japanese standards and classical views. The sociocultural, economic, and political background of this performance re-negotiates the parameters which defined the European modernity and, consequently, the Western modernity at its very roots. Within this process of emotional channelling of historical messages, Takarazuka Revue carefully constructs a world of soft, colourful dreams within the grasp of social actors, and encourages the faith in change, as a voluntary act of raising the awareness of the audiences [Kawasaki 2005].

Besides being the popular messenger of change, Takarazuka Revue and its actresses have become the very symbol of change: in an audacious move, the function and significance of the French Revolution as the foundation of Western modernity is extracted from an original French rock-opera and transformed into a Japanese modernity project – an unexpected gesture to design national progress and individual self-actualization.

The second revolutionary performance reflects even more efficiently this stress ratio between the past and the future as an

inevitable necessity while highlighting 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* 『王家に捧ぐ歌』 *Ōke ni sasagu uta*, staged in 2003 by Star Troupe and restaged in 2015 by Cosmos Troupe. The director of the performance, Kimura Shinji 木村 信司, 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 湖月 わたる, 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 preserve peace at any cost and to avoid 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 units of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) overseas in support of the U.S. military mission in Iraq, increasingly dividing a population famously regarded by outsiders and perceived by itself as a reputed monolith [Benesch 2014, Sugimoto 2013].

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 was officially promised on December 9 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 JSDF exclusively for “self-defense,” as the denomination itself asserts. An unusually message-impactful performance, staged in 2003 from July 11 until August 18 at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka and from September 19 until November 3 at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo, this version focused intensely on the romantic trio between Radames, Amneris, the daughter of the king of Egypt played by topstar-*musumeyaku* Dan Rei 檀 れい, and Aida, the Ethiopian slave girl, who is disclosed to be, in fact, the princess of Ethiopia, played by secondary-topstar *otokoyaku* Aran Kei 安蘭 けい: 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 June 5 until July 13 at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka and from July 31 until August 30 at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo) by Cosmos Troupe (宙組 *sora-gumi*) – formed 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 preserve 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 [Eagleton 2003]. Radames was played by topstar-*otokoyaku* Asaka Manato 朝夏 まなと, 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 face 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 revolutionary performance was supposed to urge audiences to rethink Japan's historico-geographical position as well as its continuous delusional referentiality to the premodern past: Snow Troupe's *The Night When the Stars Met* (『星逢一夜』 *Hoshiai Hitoyo*), staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from July 17, 2015 until August 17, 2015 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from September 4, 2015 until October 11, 2015, was directed by Ueda Kumiko, and had Sagiri Seina and Sakihi Miyu in the lead roles of a provincial samurai named Amano Haruoki, also known as Kinosuke, compelled to live at the central court in Edo (nowadays Tokyo) due to his exceptional ability to read the stars, and his childhood sweetheart Sen. Sen belongs to the oppressed farmers' majority living in unfathomable poverty, and ends up marrying their common friend: *The Night When the Stars Met* opens the series of performances questioning the almighty ideology of the stress-ratio between *giri* (social obligations) and *ninjō* (individual emotions; [McClain 2002, p. 173; Mason and Caiger 1979, pp. 84–87]), circumscribing the vast majority of dramatic plots

in premodern Japan and immutably permeating the current social reality. The tragic story of this romantic triangle reverberates in the collective subconscious of contemporary predominantly female Japanese audiences with subliminal instructions of compassion and resistance. It also brings forth the increasing awareness that returning to the past, even symbolically, even as a means to withdraw from current realities at times too uncomfortable to deal with, is not an alternative anymore and that decisive action, proactive gestures of liberation and empowerment are both existentially necessary and pragmatically inevitable [Anderson 1998]). Thus, in the fragile, slender stature of the *takarasienne* as individuals and as a collective, one can discover a dynamic alternative to the late-modern Japanese everyday life, infused with Western influences, dominated by consumerism, suffocated by excess and surplus.

3.3. 2017's three *parimono* and Paris' relevance

The transition Takarazuka Revue's administrators were pursuing through *Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology's* staging in late 2016 turned obvious from the very beginning of the year 2017 at Takarazuka Grand Theater, which included three *parimono* performances out of the total of nine performances per year, reinvigorating the tradition initiated by *Mon Paris* in 1927, plus a celebratory performance organized, managed and financed yearly by the affiliated company Takarazuka Creative Arts titled *TCA Special*: in the case of 2017, it was *Takarazuka Special 2017: Je t'aime Revue – 90th Anniversary of Mon Paris* (『タカラヅカスペシャル 2017 : ジュテーム・レビュウーモン・パリ誕生90周年ー』 *Takarazuka Special 2017: Je t'aime Revue – Mon Paris tanjō 90-shūnen*) and involved the Flower, Moon, Snow, Cosmos troupes and several superior members, who performed at Umeda Arts Theatre Main Hall on December 21 and 22, 2017. Its unveiled celebration of a performance which both announced and instilled the aggressive war politics of expansion and conquest while re-defining the dynamics of modernity and progress subliminally accesses memories of supremacy and questions public statements of love, cooperation, and understanding, as openly displayed

by the colorful, magnetic world of Takarazuka Revue [Hashimoto 1999]. It might be precisely this cacophonous orchestration of acceptance and respect, on the one hand, and superiority and perfectionism, on the other hand, which mediates a superficial image of alternative modernity in the realm of compassionate communication, while quietly promoting “the Japanese dream”, whichever this might be, as the necessary paradigm shift in late modernity.

Mon Paris (『モンパリ : 我が巴里よ』 *Mon Pari: Waga Pari yo*) by director Kishida Tatsuya (1892–1944) was Japan’s first revue patterned upon Western models and, more specifically, emulating the Moulin Rouge-type of musical-theatrical mass entertainment: the train-dance 汽車踊り *kisha odori* appears as the foundation of the later line-dance ライン・ダンス *rain dansu*, typical for any Takarazuka Revue performance: the train-dance referred to a dance towards the end of many performances, in which 20 to 30 actresses danced while carrying costumes with train-wheels on their trousers and imitating through their body movements the forward-movement of a train. There were the three keywords of “*ero-guro-nansensu*”, which defined the so-called Shōwa modernism of the 1920s and which contributed to a powerful shift in the Japanese perception of self and others. That shift would lead, eventually, to the subsequent movement of militarization and political expansion of the 1930s and 1940s [Watanabe 2002]. More than it is comfortable to publicly declare nowadays, the all-female musical theater Takarazuka Revue played a fundamental role within this process, as its extremely popular performance *Mon Paris*, clearly, obtrusively established a standard of displaying the self and the others, with Japan and its population at the very core of the project of modernity [Watanabe 1999]. A typical “traveller’s tale”, *Mon Paris* included a vast diversity of themes, from the orientalist worldview accompanying the political preoccupation with military expansion and economic empowerment to the slightly sexualized freedom of Japan’s roaring 1920s and their creative movement(s) based on the unusual display of eroticism, grotesque fantasies of the human life and confrontational debates slightly touching the nonsensical fashion of the European avant-garde [Kawasaki, 2005].

The *parimono* genre emerged: *Parimono* signifies those performances located in Paris, France's capital. *Mon Paris* supported and propagated Japan's budding militarist, colonialist, fascist policies by means of sociocultural appropriation and numbing and was highly successful, being restaged repeatedly until 1945 [Hashimoto 1999]. *Mon Paris* has continuously provided nostalgic undertones and ideologic orientation since its world-premiere, in spite of never being re-staged after Japan's surrender in August 1945, but after *The Rose of Versailles*' world-premiere in 1974 and starting with 1977, every 10-year anniversary is flamboyantly celebrated. Since *Mon Paris* in 1927, Paris is the most represented location in Takarazuka Revue performances, resulting in the *parimono* subgenre, with the French Revolution being the most prevalent topic and historical setting (e.g., *The Rose of Versailles*).

The three *parimono* performances premiered in 2017 displayed different aspects of the French capital: *Le Chateau de la reine* (*The Queen's castle*) tackles the experiences of a group of Japanese tourists in Paris, a crucial shift from the postwar dramaturgic politics of refraining from representing Asia or Japan in modern times. *Le Chateau de la reine* was performed by the Cosmos Troupe with Asaka Manato and Misaki Rion in the lead roles, at Takarazuka Grand Theater between February 3, 2017 and March 6, 2017 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater between March 31, 2017 and April 30, 2017. It is a clear return to Kobayashi Ichizō's ideal of Takarazuka Revue as a theater for the average people and representing them, their ideals, and their yearnings. Staged by the Cosmos Troupe, the youngest troupe among the five performing troupes, founded in 1998, and thus the carrier of most progressive contents, at the meta-narrative level [Kawasaki 1999, p. 63], the performance suggests the metamorphose of the theatrical medium "Takarazuka Revue" back into an instrument of reflecting, promoting, propagating, implementing, and thus providing alternative role-models and existential paradigms to audiences within the neo-liberal undercurrents crisscrossing Japan's public discourse in 2017 – (in)famous for its increasingly conservative tendencies.

A similar message of loyalty and confidence is contained in the next performance carrying the English title *All for One*, with a plot centered

on the adventures of the three musketeers and of d'Artagnan, but completely independent from the Alexandre Dumas' original (who is not mentioned at all). *All For One* was performed by the Moon Troupe with Tamaki Ryō and Manaki Reika in the lead-roles, at Takarazuka Grand Theater between July 14, 2017 and August 14, 2017 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater between September 1, 2017 and October 8, 2017. In their staging of the unconditional loyalty for France under Louis XIV, the Sun King, the members of the Moon Troupe, the oldest and most conservative troupe founded in September 1921, which is known among fans for its meticulous handling of group performances [Kawasaki 1999, p. 71], address the concept of friendship and endurance while subtly fulfilling the transition from brotherhood to *hakuai/yūai* in the translation process of the ideal of the French Revolution of 1789, even if it re-locates it temporally roughly 100 years ahead.

The answer to the rhetorical question of what friendship can provide within the very fabric of society lies in the performance *Robespierre: On the Road Full of Light* depicting Maximilien Robespierre's efforts to bring up order in the aftermath of the French Revolution. *Robespierre: On the Road Full of Light* was performed by the Snow Troupe with Nozomi Fūto and Maaya Kiho in the lead-roles, at Takarazuka Grand Theater between November 10, 2017 and December 15, 2017 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater between January 2, 2018 and February 11, 2018. Associated with dreamy, airy stage representation, the Snow Troupe, founded in July 1923, gives life on stage to the chaos of the post-Revolution, leading to the Reign of Terror and culminating, eventually, with the execution of its very initiator, Robespierre. Thus, it lays the subliminal premises for the *wakon wasai* ("Japanese spirit/roots, Japanese technology/knowledge") strategy, with friendship (*yūai*) and kindness (*yasashisa*) as core parameters of a new paradigm of humanity, which transcends the (Western) modernity – having been emulated by Meiji technocrats into the *wakon yōsai* ("Japanese spirit/roots, Western technology/knowledge") slogan [Mason & Caiger 1979]. Unlike the (Western) modernity project, based on efficiency and competitiveness and prioritizing economic growth and technological progress over political

stability [Anderson 1998], the Japanese solution brings into foreground cooperation and compassion as sociocultural parameters, compounded by integrity and harmony as tools to attain and keep peace, both within nations and, more importantly, between/among nations.

Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology from late 2016 incorporates this dimension of the theatrical performance, which allows for freedom of expression and exploration of potential worlds. It also delves into new ways of interpretation of familiar circumstances. The Japanese version of stage representation as provided by Takarazuka Revue, though, raises more questions than it attempts to answer, not least due to its unilateral view of history and historical circumstances. In light of recent events and increasingly strained political relationships both with its Asian neighbors and its Western (particularly French and U.S.) counterparts, it seems as if Takarazuka Revue possesses an uncanny ability to foresee history's development and to reflect it *avant-la-lettre* on its shiny stage. It also distracts from quotidian challenges: the problem remains, of course, the fact that the world at large is a far less shiny stage – and far less favorable to the Japanese view of reality than Takarazuka Revue would gladly want to convince its audiences.

4. Controlled ecstasy: 2016 and *Sek Kashō*'s gentle ruptures

Historically speaking, the year 2016 brought forth nothing special: the same old political rifts, globally, directly or indirectly impacting domestic developments. In Takarazuka Revue's case, one major performance continued the distancing process from the models of the past, particularly those related to the Edo period: *Rurouni Kenshin* (『るろうに剣心』) from early 2016 (February 5 – March 14 at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka, and April 1 – May 8 at Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo) of the Snow Troupe with Sagiri Seina as Rurouni Kenshin and Sakihi Miyu as Kamiya Kaoru. An emblematic case of “media transfer” or “cross-mediality” (starting as a popular *shōnen* manga by the mid-1990s with sequels in the early 2010s, including an additional light novel in

1996, evolving to a cult television animation series and six OVAs targeted at the same *shōnen* audience from 1996 until 2001, and four live-action movies in 2012, 2014, and 2021), the *Rurouni Kenshin* brand remains in the consciousness of the 1990s' teenagers as a symbol of faith and empowerment, in strong contradiction with Japan's realities of the so-called "lost decade."

Conversely, Takarazuka Revue Company's staging of *Rurouni Kenshin* in 2016 had to overcome two major challenges – the (predominantly) female audience and the limitations of the theatrical genre. For non-Japanese audiences unfamiliar with Takarazuka Revue's complicated background, the sense of futility and emotional frugality conveyed by the performance *Rurouni Kenshin*, which was one of the most successful performances of Takarazuka Revue's recent history, running with closed ticket houses since the first day of the ticket-pre-sale, is magnified by the austere stage design, reminding intensively of those fleeting moments of togetherness and acceptance and in striking contrast with other typical Takarazuka Revue performances. In Takarazuka Revue's *Rurouni Kenshin*, the cathartic experience of the live performance is backed by a specific social-political agenda reinforced by aesthetic-ideological patterns reminiscent of the Japanese establishment, and slowly but decisively complying with the prevalent ideologies of the *wakon wasai* ("Japanese spirit/roots, Japanese technology/knowledge") policies openly promoted by the Abe administration in those years: a reinvigoration of modernity and humanity as a tender, soft endeavor, characterized by a more compassionate, more profound communication and interaction between human actors both within the same society and among different societies.

Even more stunning, therefore, is the fact that *Sekakashō: Snowflake Anthology* turned out to be such a pivotal performance, embedded in the traditional structure with a quasi-insignificant and conventional theatrical play *The Golden Desert* (『金色の砂漠』 *Konjiki no sabaku*) tackling the hardly unveiled star-crossed love-story between a princess and a slave – in itself, nothing short of cheap drama and strong contradictory emotions. Combined with *Sekakashō: Snowflake Anthology*, though, in

the powerful staging of the Flower Troupe – subliminally associated both with solid tradition and with its proximity to classic Western opera and equally being the oldest extant performing ensemble, *The Golden Desert* appears as a shocking contrast, compelling audiences to rethink their emotional proclivities and mental priorities.

The official translation of *sekkashō* is “Snowflake Anthology”, but its literal meaning is a combination of 雪, or snow, with the Japanese reading of *yuki* and the Sino-Japanese reading of *setsu* 華, or flower, with the Japanese reading of *hana* and the Sino-Japanese reading of *ka*, and 抄, or excerpt, with no Japanese reading and Sino-Japanese reading of *shō*. “Sekkashō” would therefore mean “an excerpt of snow and flowers” or “an excerpt of snow-flowers” with the possible figurative meaning of “an excerpt of snowflakes.” *Sekkashō: Snowflake Anthology* is composed of seven segments, which follow, on the one hand, the yearly cycle of seasons with their particularities in Japan, and reminisce, on the other hand, of legends, stories, familiar encounters between fantasy and reality which dissolve the fourth wall of traditional performances and create a sense of belonging and warmheartedness as well as unconditional communication between performers and audiences.

Sekkashō: Snowflake Anthology opens with a *Prologue: Red Plum, White Plum* (「プロローグ：紅梅白梅」) which gorgeously displays in a full symphony of colors and sounds what might be labeled “Japanese splendor.” The entire ensemble is gathered on stage when the lights go on and the fluid movements unfold in the dynamic rhythms alternating with moments of pensive reflection. The music is a typical Takarazuka Revue combination of pentatonic sonorities and symphonic orchestration clearly of Western orientation, thus dialectically highlighting Japan’s (in)famous hybridity. Gorgeous costumes appear against the background of impressive stage designs which, again in the Takarazuka Revue emblematic style, underscore technological versatility and geographical stability. Memorable melodies flow in a mesmerizing polyphony of voices and instruments within a joyous oscillation between solo articulations and chorus numbers, once again generously showcasing the meanwhile legendary technical abilities of Takarazuka Revue’s performers, both as

individuals and as a collective. The second segment, *The Camelia Flower* (「花椿」) is a stunning solo number of *buyō* 舞踊, or Japanese classical dance, brought forth by one of Takarazuka Revue's veteran performers Matsumoto Yūri 松本悠里, who had joined Takarazuka Revue as a *musumeyaku* in 1957 and had been active until 1974 in Snow Troupe and thereafter until her retirement in 2021 as a superior advisor. Throughout her career, she had been known particularly for her gracious abilities in Japanese traditional dance – which she elegantly reiterates in *Sekakashō: Snowflake Anthology*.

The music is exclusively Japanese, bringing together *koto* sounds and irregular rhythmicities reminiscent of the *jo-ha-kyū* principle (序破急, “beginning, break, rapid”), which originated in ancient court music, also known as *gagaku* 雅楽, and had been theorized by Zeami for Nō theater: striving to explain the movement patterns of all things, *jo-ha-kyū* refers to the slow progression of events, their subsequent, brief acceleration, which culminates into an explosion, ending abruptly. A refreshing contrast is the next number, *The Hawk and the Eagle* (「鷹と鷲」), which assembles on stage the main *otokoyaku* performers of the Flower Troupe impersonating warring birds in spring on the lookout for dominance and hierarchical structures. The music is engaging and unexpectedly powerful, with the electric guitar leading the discourse in a clearly rock'n'roll style while the rather sparse stage architecture allows for the open demonstration of choreographic virtuosity: on the one hand, the lead-*otokoyaku* Asami Rio decisively monopolizes the entire development of the scene; on the other hand, the ensemble of *otokoyakus* supports and encourages her conduct in an equally discrete and seemingly aggressive manner, so that the general impression is one of dynamic competitiveness, playful togetherness, strength and coordination, respect and trust. It is during such performance fragments that audiences, as individuals and as a collective, begin to sense the level of commitment and generosity enacted by Takarazuka Revue actresses.

A more complex structure is delivered by the fourth segment, *Tanabata Fantasy* (「七夕幻想」), which starts with a quasi-realistic reproduction on stage of the tradition also known as the “Star Festival”

(星祭, *hoshi-matsuri*) on the evening of July 7 each year, when young people gather in nature, usually by the riverside, and express their mutual affection, dressed up in *yukata* (summer kimono): the legend of Chinese origins (Qixi Festival) reenacted by Tanabata celebrates the meeting of the deities Orihime 織姫 (“Weaving Princess”) and Hikoboshi 彦星 (“Cowman” or “Cowherd Star”, literally “Boy Star”), represented by the stars Vega and Altair respectively, which are separated by the Milky Way (*Amanogawa* 天の川 in Japanese, literally “heavenly river”) and are allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month of the lunisolar calendar.

This legendary meeting is then orchestrated on stage into one of the most touching sequences in Takarazuka Revue’s recent history: the alternance between reality and fantasy finds itself challenged by the dissolution of boundaries between dream and the actual world, in a manner similar to legends and fairy-tales which seamlessly intertwine with our quotidian lives. Then again, the next number, *Waves and Flowers* (「波と華」), faithfully reproduces on stage the Yosakoi Soran Festival, taking place every summer in Sapporo on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaidō: the specificity of this particular festival among Japan’s numerous similar celebrations seems to be the combination of music employing a Yosakoi percussion instrument called *naruko*, *a small wooden clappers used initially to keep birds away from the vegetable garden or rice fields*, and a folk song stemming from Hokkaidō and referred to as *soran bushi*, which is an ancient type of song apparently invented by northern fishermen. In addition, the modern interpretation of the *awa odori* dance associated with the *soran bushi* *dance, which mimics fishermen pulling nets, in which the dancers punctuate their steps with naruko, creates a dynamic impression of waves flowing and ebbing, but under human control*. On Takarazuka Revue’s stage, this illusion of control and generous cooperation as well as proactive coexistence with nature is generated by the presence of the entire ensemble and its highly coordinated participation in the musical and dancing conglomerate, which is projected onto the magnificent stage design reproducing Hokkaidō’s lush nature in summer.

The last two segments remind of two crucial aspects of human existence as embedded in the universal circuit: for once, the sixth section, *The Tale of Kiyohime* (and Anchin, 「清姫綺譚」), reactualizes the Heian period tragic story of Kiyohime, the young lady who had fallen in love with Anchin, a Buddhist priest, who lied and betrayed her; consequently, she chased him and got so angry that eventually she metamorphosed into a snake and ended up burning Anchin to death within the bell in which he had hidden at the temple Dōjō-ji. This time, a symbolical stage design is chosen compelling audiences to let their imagination wander based on their previous knowledge and their own sensitivities. Anchin's frailty and Kiyohime's strength are presented in a light more appropriate with current ideologies, so that Anchin's cowardice and Kiyohime's unbridled passion appear as complementary, not mutually exclusive. Altogether, it is a genuine masterpiece of simultaneously bringing back into collective consciousness the lively dramatism of folk-tales and legends and of questioning their unconditional interpretation as repositories of tradition and continuity rather than mirrors of humanity's shared experiences and transcendental condition.

This becomes even more obvious in the *Finale: Dream Fantasy of the Blossoming Cherry Flowers* (「桜花夢幻」), which reunites the entire crew of the flower troupe in a slow, ascendent progression towards the climactic farewell peppered with pink petals falling from above: while deluding ourselves with beautiful sounds and soothing rhythms might seem like the best instant gratification one can get in terms of escaping crushing or at least uncomfortable quotidian realities, facing those realities, learning to solve them or to face them with courage and honesty appears as the sustainable solution in the long run. Anew, Takarazuka Revue delivers its serious, impactful messages by means of soft suggestions which turn, over time, in imminent certainties which need to be addressed and cannot be hidden in denial, rejection, or passive aggressiveness. Furthermore, it chooses the pathway of delicate reinforcement of tradition which subsequently transforms into its own final solidification and then disappearance. The goal of such a procedure is less to replace the old with the new and more to transcend the old in

the new so that continuity, rather than rupture, emerges – even when ruptures are, de facto, history’s inevitable results.

Superficially, *Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology* highlights

“Japanese natural aesthetics” – with the theme of Japanese elegance, a magnificent picture scroll presented in dance that unfolds gracefully. Starting with the glorious scenery of spring, then the glittering waves of summer, the autumn moon, and then from a pure silver world of dancing snowflakes to an ode to the riotously blooming cherry blossoms, the dazzling scenes build up one after another. The Japanese time-honored legends are woven together with modern essence and arranged in the Takarazuka style into an ambitious *nihonmono* revue, splendidly extolling the beauty and allure of the four seasons. (Takarazuka Revue Company, official advertisement, 2016:23)

In-depth, *Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology* is a swan’s song: it replaces the typical show, which is an intrinsic part of the performance layout counterbalancing the theatrical piece which, with very few exceptions, is of rather questionable musical-dramaturgic standards but of extremely high technical, visual and entertainment – a.k.a. calculated emotional impact on audiences – principles. It also subtly, inconspicuously, quietly, bids farewell to what had come to be imagined as “Japan,” “Japanese aesthetics,” “Japanese spirituality”: a fully ideological conglomerate of ideas, imaginaries, projections imported from various geographical and historical sources and integrated within an eclectic system through the process of what Claude Lévi-Strauss labeled “bricolage,” which ended up japanizing those very ideas, imaginaries, projections without delivering, in fact, elements for the construction of a coherent, convincing, autonomous sense of national identity and global belonging. *Sek Kashō: Snowflake Anthology*’s smooths out the farewell between what had been so far a beautiful delusion and the honest reality of what needs to be done – and like in the case of two lovers who love each other profoundly but are also aware of their incompatibility, regardless of the reasons, teaches a crucial lesson in letting go with integrity, compassion, and, perhaps equally important, with grace. I would argue that the gracefulness in *Sek Kashō*:

Snowflake Anthology conveys a state of awe as child-like curiosity and ecstasy in front of the unfolding world while enjoying the present moment, which turns this otherwise quite conventional *nihonmono* show into an archetype able to tectonically shift paradigms.

5. Conclusion: “Oceanic feeling” and the celebration of feminine excellence

Sekdashō: *Snowflake Anthology*’s sublimation of ruptures by including them into the musical-visual flow of dramaturgic architecture perpetuates and even reinforces the function of arts as mediators of Wordsworth’s “suspension of disbelief for the moment” and simultaneously sublimates historical transitions into quotidian experiences. This connects softly with Romain Rolland’s and Sigmund Freud’s “oceanic feeling” as “a sensation of eternity and a feeling of being one with the external world as a whole, a sentiment of being limitless, unbounded”, (as explained in their letter exchange [Freud 1927, 1929]): a sort of fragmentary vestige of the type of consciousness possessed by an infant who has not yet learnt to differentiate him-/herself from other people and from things surrounding him/her. To be sure, Takarazuka Revue’s cathartic elements reminisce to a certain degree of the mystic experiences of Ramakrishna (who had served as initial inspiration for Rolland’s expression “oceanic feeling”); in addition, the entire phenomenon, the way it has been promoted, advertised and marketed at least since the mid-1970s, encourages indeed the unconditional immersion into the “magical world of love and dreams,” which it is supposed to embody, but distances itself from being an atemporal appearance, which hinders its audiences from participating in everyday life. On the contrary, Takarazuka Revue’s administrators and ideologues have been constructing it as a refuge-like universe with the function to both reflect Japan’s continuous reality and to deliver necessary inputs in pushing the development of the daily activities and occurrences towards the greater goal of historical-geographical relevance: Takarazuka Revue is a place to stop, rest, and

learn, so that moving forward is not only possible but also productive and constructive; it is not a parallel dimension.

Accordingly, the “oceanic feeling” disseminated by Takarazuka Revue, a process in which *Sekkaishō: Snowflake Anthology* has become a central piece, is meant to inspire self-aware agency and autonomous thinking, as encompassed in the performative display and educational practices resulting in the “feminine excellence” humbly, pragmatically, and dialectically manifested by the *takarasienne*, as individuals and as a collective. Unlike the mystical origins of Rolland’s experiences of “oceanic feeling,” Takarazuka Revue grounds its performance, advertisement, and marketing strategy in the immediate realities of the palpable world and by no means attempts to replace those realities with delusional claims of eternity, oneness, unconditional surrender to divine consciousness, which were, and still are, core prerogatives of those promoting that type of experiences. Decisively distancing itself from them, Takarazuka Revue aims at an integration of entertainment as a tool and as an ideal within the more globally relevant vision of a Japan belonging to the international community instead of isolating itself from it. This is, possibly, an extension of Kobayashi Ichizō’s ideal of Japan encapsulating Paris, and therefore (Western) modernity, via Takarazuka Revue, and subsequently proposing its own version of both Paris and modernity – more humane, more beautiful, and definitely (more) Japanese.

In its celebration of feminine excellence as the core of transcendental experiences which do not imply the loss of self but the transcendence of self through the access to collective generosity, empathy, gratitude, *Sekkaishō: Snowflake Anthology* tenderly suggests the pathway away from socioeconomically implemented regulations of femininity and masculinity as well as from their consequent political preservation towards self-sufficient models of individuality – as humans and as a nation – to emulate, in a first step, comparable paradigms of Western nations, and to serve, at a later stage, as an alternative to those paradigms.

Being itself the larger-than-history phenomenon that it has been constructing throughout the decades, Takarazuka Revue (Company) can

afford the luxury to question prevailing models of “doing business” in Japan and to step over the boundaries of what is domestically acceptable in terms of public discourse: on the one hand, it is the most technologically advanced institution of mainstream media, both domestically and globally, a characteristic powerfully underscored by the incredibly high level of training in performance skills of its students and actresses; on the other hand, it possesses the most comprehensive architecture as external design and internal configuration clearly circumscribing outlined ideologies and their corresponding aesthetics, unlike similar appearances in Japan, some of them highly successful, e.g., Studio Ghibli, which have been developing according to the principle of adding new structures to already existing ones without bothering to address the foundations, at least once in a while.

One can identify, indeed, throughout Takarazuka Revue’s centennial history basic frameworks which seem to delineate its mechanisms, functions, features, being periodically reviewed in light of factual events and trends, so that a firm grasp can be maintained on its extrinsic reputation and its intrinsic constitution. From this perspective, *Sekkashō: Snowflake Anthology* emerges as a pivotal performance, comparable solely with 2007’s *Sakura* but essentially much more influential, bringing forth the vital necessity to leave behind the past not by nullifying it but by letting go of it with kindness and warmheartedness, acknowledging the imperative to live in the present moment while temporally suspending one’s judgment so that clarity, honesty, and self-awareness can arise, and celebrating individual excellence as the core foundation of collective excellence – in short, fundamentals for a future of compassionate pragmatism, courageous commitment, and creative awe.

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