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Elisabeth

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ELISABETH. Music by Sylvester Levay. Book and lyrics by Michael Kunze. Originally adapted and directed by Koike Shuichiro. Snow Company, Takarazuka Revue Company. Takarazuka Grand Theatre, Takarazuka, Japan. 5 June 2007.

Takarazuka Revue Company performs musical revues and Western-style musicals with all-female casts for predominantly female audiences. With five different companies, ten shows a week at a permanent house outside of Osaka that seats over 2,000, a second theatre in Tokyo, tours throughout the country, and occasional international performances, the group is a commercial and cultural phenomenon: performing to over 2.5 million people a year, it has also inspired a video game, several anime series, and a number of YouTube clips. In a country where the mass culture of digital entertainment and *manga* (comic books) dominates the youth scene and traditional culture is revered but rarely attended, Takarazuka has a unique niche, appealing primarily to young women through fairly conventional live theatre productions. Unlike the all-male kabuki and noh theatres, Takarazuka has little recognition outside of Japan. The companies perform various styles, from Broadway shows like *West Side Story* to a musical adaptation of *War and Peace*, to Las Vegas-style dance revues, to all-women kabuki/noh pastiches.

Elisabeth, a German musical with music by Sylvester Levay and book and lyrics by Michael Kunze, is a plot-driven show with little character development mostly in the English-language style of sung-through mega-musicals, with many reprises of catchy songs. *Elisabeth* has been in Takarazuka's repertoire, with only minor costume changes, for over a decade. It amalgamates numerous theatrical and popular traditions and demonstrates a somewhat unusual approach to cross-dressing that focuses on women's strength while eschewing sexualized objectification. The production additionally evokes many elements of youth culture, including rock concerts, manga, and anime. Unselfconsciously theatrical and almost completely earnest, it employs myriad commercial techniques (manipulating the amplification levels; large-scale, repeated use of stage fog; hydraulic lifts toward heaven; and obviously mechanical manipulation of scenery) with only a single hint of the irony or pastiche that seems so common in many Western musicals today.

An epic tale based on the life of Elisabeth of Bavaria, the show begins as her murderer—an anarchist—is undergoing a trial in purgatory. Claiming that Elisabeth (Yuri Shirahane) and Death (Natsuki Mizu) always loved each other, the anarchist stages

Elisabeth's life as his defense. Throughout her life, Elisabeth and Death continually flirt with mutual love. Toward the end of her life that attraction becomes overwhelming; at one point, Elisabeth finally asks Death to take her, but Death refuses, wanting not just her life but an affirmation of her love. This only happens after the murder, as the couple transcends toward heaven, dressed all in white on a hydraulic platform evoking, *Cats*-like, a tire with the requisite fog and lights.

While originally written for both male and female performers, the Takarazuka production of *Elisabeth* subverts Western expectations about the sexualized nature of cross-dressing. While men wrote the original show and adapted and directed it for the Takarazuka Revue Company, *Elisabeth* employs cross-gender casting without the familiar objectification of women for a presumably male viewer: the company portrayed male roles in a passionate, dramatically committed, and esthetically minimal style by altos in tailored but not tight clothes (the performers of male roles are known as *otokoyaku*), while sopranos in skirts portrayed women (*musumeyaku*). The *musumeyaku* dancers freely wore skimpy outfits; there was no need to hide any voyeuristic elements under the guise of cross-dressing. The makeup and wigs emphasized European facial characteristics, but all the women had a strong "feminine" style. No stubble, facial hair (with the exception of one mustache), or lines tried to trick the eye; close-up photos demonstrate that the male characters clearly are played by conventionally "attractive" women, although a willing suspension of disbelief worked to make the male characters believable. The representation of Death seemed inspired by manga and anime: black leather, high boots, long blond hair turning green at the edges, green lips, and intricate embellishments along one hand. Death generally read as an effeminate male character, but sometimes a strong feminine side appeared as the gender representation continually disrupted expectations.

Much of the staging seemed formulaic, but a few moments demonstrated surprising sophistication regarding gender and cultural issues. Toward the end, Elisabeth's son rebuffed Death's sexual advances. After the son killed himself, Death sucked a long kiss from his still-warm mouth and the audience cringed, not because of homophobia, but because Death was so clearly Elisabeth's lover and he shouldn't be cheating on her with her son. Or perhaps it was the implied necrophilia. But the cringe here (combined with the approval for Elisabeth and Death's kiss) indicated that the characters had become fully realized, even as the production team was not trying to overly romanticize Death. The show opened in purgatory where dancing jurors, all in white with carefully articulated masks,

served both as a jury and then as stagehands, evoking the black-clad *kyōka* of traditional Japanese theatre. An “around-the-world-in-three-minutes” tour highlighted the cultural simulacrum of the production and featured the only irony in the show. Cartoonish caricatures of each country appeared: a Statue of Liberty with a green metallic dress and large torch, a woman with bright yellow hair and Dutch wooden shoes, and an equally reductive caricature of a geisha woman—all slyly poking fun at their own representations of everyone.

The cast of almost eighty had numerous costume changes, a curtain-call outfit with dozens of peacock feathers that put Florenz Ziegfeld to shame, and stylized, sometimes histrionic, acting styles. Several staging conventions stood out. The theatre features a runway around the orchestra pit, evoking the *hanamichi* of its kabuki counterparts though with less audience interaction and more modesty for the actresses with skirts since it does not run directly through the audience. One of Death’s numbers evoked rock concerts, with a rising hydraulic lift and enough stage fog to articulate the beams of light as he repeatedly pulsed his knees and hips. Another scene evoked a striking gothic fantasy: Death’s six minions all in black with wings rising from their right shoulder blades, while their left arms mirrored the feathered wings.

Takarazuka is very much a social event. Shows are scheduled for off-peak commutes; indeed, a railway magnate founded the company for that purpose. From Osaka, groups of young women laughed throughout the train ride (I was the only woman alone on my train in both directions). The theatre is several blocks from the station; numerous merchants catering to the audiences fill the entire walk. Once inside the theatre, a variety of meal options are available for the half-hour intermission. Finally, after the musical ended, a twenty-minute finale showed off the dancing of the company: a Rockette-style chorus line with thirty-six dancers, followed by twenty ballroom couples evoking Fred and Ginger on a huge lighted stairway; then the leads tangoed on the runway, culminating in a dance with the entire company. In shorter shows, the entire second act could be a revue; a performance at Takarazuka Revue Company wouldn’t be complete without it.

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THE AMERICAN GIRLS REVUE. Book and lyrics by Gretchen Cryer. Music by Nancy Ford. Directed by Mea M. Hack. American Girl Place, Los Angeles. 27 October 2007.

I believe that Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) is a cultural pedagogue. As corporations further their reach into today’s world, I am interested in interrogating what these companies “teach” young people vis-à-vis their popular performances like *The American Girls Revue*. Viewing the production confirmed my suspicion that children would be indoctrinated into consumer identities and encouraged to avail themselves of the plethora of American Girl products available in the adjoining shop. More surprising and perhaps more troubling for me was the *Revue*’s implicit yet deeply embedded hegemonic discourse that prescribed social roles based on children’s race, class, and gender.

The *Revue* framed itself as an act of consumption well before curtain time; even my short walk to the theatre was part of a larger performative event that thrived on the commodification of “America” and girlhood. While strolling down the brick-paved central avenue of The Grove—the upscale outdoor shopping plaza housing American Girl Place—I passed manicured gardens, viewed a choreographed water show, and stood aside periodically for passing trolleys. Street musicians’ songs, farmer’s market aromas, and the sight of endless retail establishments evoked the essence of twenty-first-century Main Street USA à la Disney. The experience hailed me through all my senses and thoroughly interpellated me as a consumer.

Upon entering American Girl Place, I obtained my ticket from the “concierge desk” (a term seemingly preferred to “box office” and perhaps indicative of patrons’ expected social class) and was directed to the theatre. To reach this space, I first had to pass through several large retail areas where young people could buy dolls, books, multimedia products, child-sized clothing, and a plethora of other American Girl consumables. Once I was seated for the performance proper, rapid exposition revealed a meeting of an “American Girls Club,” the members of which were portrayed by eight mid-elementary-through middle-school-aged actors. From the first words of the overture—“Look to the past, learn for the future”—the production was steeped in educative rhetoric. The girls, initiating new club member Laura, needed to teach her how it functioned.

Although Laura was unsure of her role at first, the others quickly assured her: “We’ll teach you everything.” The leader declared, “Let’s show Laura how we play American Girl,” and expounded the show’s