

## **TWO REPRESENTATIVE WOMEN'S THEATRICAL OPERA COMPANIES: COMPARING TAKARAZUKA IN JAPAN TO ETSUGEKI IN CHINA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Most of the performing arts have been performed by men only or men and women together. But women have danced, sung and performed drama on stage for years; one example is TAKARAZUKA (宝塚) in Japan and another is ETSUGEKI (越劇) in China. Both have long histories. TAKARAZUKA was established 94 years ago and ETSUGEKI has 89 year history. Both women's opera companies have been performing not only for domestic audiences, but also for people around the world. And their fans support them enthusiastically. Their respective 94 years old and 89 years old histories have made it possible for them to offer beautiful performances to people everywhere. Their performances represent an example of the empowerment of women.

The Style of male roles in ETSUGEKI are more womanish than TAKARAZUKA girls, who play male roles, but such elegant styles are accepted and more admired by audiences, because in reality Chinese men, even in history, do not exist like men in the story so people love the ideal men on stages. The stage settings are obviously simple compared to TAKARAZUKA, which spends more money for the stage sets. So audiences can deeply appreciate ETSUGEKI actresses singing and playing roles with deep expression.

I would like to explain more comparing points of both women's opera companies at the presentation.

**Key Words:** Women's Theatrical Operas.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Chinese performing arts were brought to Japan over 1000 years ago and since then have been adopted in various ways. Most of these performing arts have been performed by men only, or men and women together. But women have danced, sung, and performed on stage for years in traditions such as

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Takarazuka (宝塚) in Japan and Etsugeki (越劇) in China. Both have long histories. Takarazuka was established 93 years ago and Etsugeki has an 88 year history. Both women's opera companies have been performing, not only for domestic audiences, but also for enthusiastic audiences around the world. Their long histories have made it possible for them to offer performances to a variety of people. Their performances represent an example of the empowerment of women.

## History

### Takarazuka (宝塚)

Takarazuka (宝塚), a women's opera company, was established by Kobayashi in 1913 in the suburbs of Osaka. He was the owner of the Hankyu railway company and wanted more business for his company, so he decided to produce a women's only revue show. At the beginning, he allowed only women of "good families," and his assistants quickly trained the women to perform on the stage, because their dancing, singing and playing appealed to visitors of the hot springs at Takarazuka. This was the original purpose of the Takarazuka Opera Company.

Gradually more women who wanted to perform on the stage applied and passed the auditions. Kobayashi really wanted them to play his own western style musicals, not in traditional Japanese styles. But actually many Japanese traditional dances and songs were copied and mingled with western style musicals. Those are the Takarazuka original performances that have been produced since 1914.

### Etsugeki (越劇)

Around the Shanghai area, around 88 years ago, about 350 local theaters existed. By the 1940's, actresses played men's roles in some dramas. As a result, their companies produced a synthetic art, including manuscripts, stage productions, music, and stage sets. And audiences enjoyed their performances.

In the 1950's, many theatrical companies spread, even in the northern parts of China including Beijing and in western China. Many professional Etsugeki productions were staged, so naturally these companies also produced movies and TV programs.

Gradually they gained more popularity than before. Moreover, they started going abroad to perform their original dramas, staging performances in Hong Kong, Japan, European countries, America and South Asian Countries.

In 1995, the Shanghai Etsugeki School was established and developed a high reputation. This School plays in 300 repertoire and has produced several famous actresses. For example, the School performed Kouroumu (紅樓夢), which is a long love story, with two actresses in the leading roles. This famous drama was reproduced in a new style in 1999. Since then, the drama and the School have been popular and famous. The drama was performed in Beijing and Shanghai, the two biggest cities in China.

### **Comparing Takarazuka (宝塚) to Etsugeki (越劇):**

#### **Basic Stage Performances**

Takarazuka have been performing western style musicals and dramas in their own style, arranged Japanese with traditional songs and dances (incorporating elements of Kabuki and Noh). Thus, it is a synthesized art.

Etsugeki performances are mostly traditional famous dramas, rather than in contemporary styles.

#### **Playing Men's Roles**

In attempting to portray “rough men” in Takarazuka tradition they perform very actively, while retaining aspects of femininity. Takarazuka actresses try to articulate in low tones to make their voices sound like that of men.

Fortunately, fans enjoy watching these female actors play men in romantic roles.

In the Etsugeki tradition, they play men's roles more femininely than do Takarazuka actresses, so audiences can more easily distinguish them through their voices and costumes.

#### **Stage Settings**

Takarazuka has more dynamic, gorgeous and decorated stages. Thus, audiences are attracted by the high quality techniques on the stage and sometimes miss nuances of the performance.

Etsugeki does not decorate the stage as does Takarazuka but does so much more simply. Audiences can therefore concentrate on listening to the music and viewing the performances.

#### **Hit Performances or Dramas in the Past**

Takarazuka has many popular works, for instances “A Rose in Versailles” (original musical), “Elizabeth” (Wien musical). Etsugeki also has a hit drama in “Kouroumu” (紅樓夢) (original production).

**Retirement**

Takarazuka has a retirement system, such that performers must retire at age 55 or when they marry. Etsugeki does not enforce a retirement system.

**CONCLUSION**

Japanese and Chinese women's theatrical performing arts are getting more popular. Only women perform the roles-male and female, young and old, king and queen. These companies have staged performances for some 90 years and have gained the admiration of people from both of their respective countries. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the actresses perform not only for domestic audiences but also for people around the world.