Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
Research Article, JISC 2025:3, 91–109
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2025.1360.8

Counter-Hegemony
Takarazuka Revue's Alternative Hollywood Blockbusters

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the Takarazuka Revue negotiates and reshapes cultural identity in late-modern Japan by reconfiguring the relationship between producers and consumers of popular culture. Drawing on more than two decades of fieldwork – combining phenomenological observation, audience and performer interviews, and archival research –, I analyze the mechanisms through which Takarazuka Revue productions stage and market broader narratives of nationhood, gender, and power. The guiding question addresses Takarazuka Revue's adaptations of well-known Western stories and their function as cultural mirrors: not simply reproducing imported material, but re-inscribing it with Japanese neo-nationalist and increasingly post-nationalist sensibilities. As case studies, the analysis focuses on three high-profile productions derived from Hollywood cult movies: *Ocean's Eleven* (performed by the star, flower, and cosmos troupes in 2011-2012, 2013, and 2019, respectively), *Once Upon a Time in America* (snow troupe, 2020), and *Casino Royale* (cosmos troupe, 2023). These performances, while situated within the commercial logics of musical theatre, also reflect shifting socio-political currents. During the 2010s, they projected conservative messages of masculinity, national pride, and hierarchical order, often couched in aesthetics of glamour and romance. In contrast, post-2020 stagings reveal a subtle but significant re-orientation: a move towards envisioning a pluricentric world characterized by cooperation, compassion, and courage – an imaginative response shaped in part by the global pandemic and its cultural aftermath. By situating these productions within Japan's wider mediascape, this study shows Takarazuka Revue's strategies of simultaneously preserving, contesting, and re-imagining the cultural scripts through which national identity and collective belonging are performed.

Keywords: musical theater, (re-)negotiation of modernity, soft power, masculinity, co-creation of the future

1. Introduction: Leaning into the Subtility of Inconspicuousness

Despite largely promoted efforts to unify the world since the end of WWII, the global community is increasingly divided nowadays both on the East-West and on the North-South axis. One central point of reference is military supremacy which brings with it economic-political and sociocultural supremacy nobody dares to seriously challenge at the moment – or when the current world order is questioned in some form, it happens rather symbolically or with dire consequences in case of severe situations (Dalio, 2021; Miegel, 2007; Castells, 2015). Nonetheless, one way of managing ideological resistance without attracting the retaliatory wrath of the ruling power is by means of counter-hegemony,

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How to cite this article: Grajdian, M. M. (2025). Counter-Hegemony: Takarazuka Revue's Alternative Hollywood Blockbusters. In: *Alternative Realities, Special Issue of Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, 2025:3, 91–109.*
Submitted: 30.06.2025
Accepted: 07.07.2025

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occurring mostly culturally: the movement of turning cultural assets belonging to the apparently almighty structures into local phenomena and, subsequently, instilling them with elements of the importing actor.

Throughout the decades, the Japanese all-female highly popular musical theater Takarazuka Revue has proven masterfully the subtle, but powerful tactics which make counter-hegemony a credible yet difficult to pinpoint strategy in asserting oneself on the global stage. Taking as case-studies three performances directly derived from Hollywood cult releases of recent history – *Ocean's Eleven* (2011-2012, star troupe; 2013, flower troupe; 2019, cosmos troupe), *Once Upon a Time in America* (2020, snow troupe) and *Casino Royale* (2023, cosmos troupe) – with their narrative and meta-narrative concatenations, the forthcoming analysis observes in a phenomenological and comparative approach Takarazuka Revue's marketing of neoliberal messages of masculinity and nation on the background of subliminal associations of power, enlightenment and love throughout the 2010s and the discreetly orchestrated shift towards a pluricentric world of cooperation, compassion and courage during the early 2020s – in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Traditionally associated with strictly conservative gender politics and socio-economic hierarchies, military-like instruction methods and performance standards which transcend the wildest expectations while pushing the entertainment industry beyond the limitations of technological progress, fans' requirements and technokrats' visions, Takarazuka Revue 宝塚歌劇[2] has been accompanying Japan since its foundation in 1914 (Stickland, 2008; Watanabe, 1999; Yamanashi, 2012). Simultaneously a faithful mirror of Japanese society and a lucid barometer-like institution for the future, Takarazuka Revue's hallmark is its all-female cast impersonating both male (男役 *otokoyaku*) and female (娘役 *musumeyaku*) roles divided in five performing troupes which bring on the stages of the two major theaters in West-Japan (Takarazuka Grand Theater in the city of Takarazuka) and in East-Japan (Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in the posh district of Ginza in Japan's capital) during ten weekly performances throughout the entire year a huge diversity of topics covering all genres and historical-geographical areas (Tsuganesawa, 1991; Watanabe, 2002).[3]

These elements are embedded in theatrical live performances with Western popular music, laborious choreographies and impressing singing acts, luxurious stage designs, sparkling – and quickly changing – costumes compounded by discrete displays of individual excellence. Moreover, since 1974's blockbuster *The Rose of Versailles* 『ベルサイユのばら』, Takarazuka Revue has been essentially circumscribing the so-called *shōjo* culture (少女文化 *shōjo bunka*): the framework delineating femininity, feminine identity and feminine corporeality by means of instrumentalizing female teenagers within Japan's rapacious systems juxtaposing consumerism, sexuality and public discourses on love, marriage, reproduction (Kawasaki, 2005; Allison, 2013). In recent years, especially since the beginning of the new era in Japanese historiography in 2019 (the Reiwa period) and even more accelerated since the big reset posited by the global pandemic of 2020-2022, a tremendous paradigms shift has been occurring with a renewed focus on expanding the

[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 (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.

traditional business model centered around "deep fandom" (Jenkins, 1992, 36; see Nehring, 1997), referring to a rigidly delineated fan community composed mainly of stay-at-home housewives and female financially powerful seniors, aged 35 and above, towards a more diverse consumers' basis to include male theater-goers of all ages, reflected in correspondingly diversified performances to encompass a greater variety of preferences, interests and ideals.

Based on more than two decades of on-site fieldwork comprised of extensive phenomenological experiences and detailed empiric inquiries with both producers and consumers of Japanese popular culture and, distinctively, of Takarazuka Revue's releases as well as comprehensive archival literature research, this paper aims at hermeneutically elucidating the three performances' mechanisms of confronting audiences with uncomfortable narrative reconstructions while suggesting credible visions of a future based on universal values of (healthy) self-love, compassion and mutual respect: the very fact that these values are taken for granted by late-modern social participants leads to them being jeopardized in populist discourses on "the greater good", "pastoral premodernity", "technological evil". Therefore, raising awareness of their historical perishability functions as a sustainable counter-force to current global efforts employed in the dissolution of modernity and its accomplishments towards their replacement with new forms of autocracy, totalitarianism and oppression. After the detailed analysis of the three performances, the Conclusion briefly delves into the main strategies associated with counter-hegemony as an existential attitude – both national and individual – to assert one's own right to self-determination, dignity and responsible freedom.

2. Ultra-Conservative Innuendoes: Takarazuka Revue's *Ocean's Eleven* (2011/2012, 2013, 2019)

When Takarazuka Revue Company took over *Ocean's Eleven*'s plot to turn it into a live-action performance in 2011, it seemed to follow the premise of post-2008 global financial crisis: an increasing uneasiness with the American Dream of unlimited potential and possibilities as long as one was audacious enough and ready to deal with the corresponding risks and potential consequences. Nonetheless, *Ocean's Eleven* 『オーシャンズ 11』 carried substantial narrative and ideological elements to allow for the inclusion of Takarazuka Revue's typical characteristics into the staging protocol, thus resulting into an eventual re-interpretation of the American Dream towards its Japanisation in the manner it had previously happened with Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* (『風と共に去りぬ』, repeatedly staged by Takarazuka Revue Company since 1977) or *The Great Gatsby* (『華麗なるギャツビー』, respectively 『グレート・ギャツビー』; Takarazuka Revue Company was the first institution globally to turn F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel from 1925 into a musical performance in 1991, 2008 and 2022; (see Yamanashi, 2012).

The troupes designated to take over *Ocean's Eleven*'s performance were star troupe in 2011-2012, followed by flower troupe in 2013 and cosmos troupe in 2019: among Takarazuka Revue's five currently performing troupes – flower troupe 花組 *hana-gumi*, moon troupe 月組 *tsuki-gumi* (both founded in 1921), snow troupe 雪組 *yuki-gumi* (founded in 1924), star troupe 星組 *hoshi-gumi* (1933-1939 and since 1948), cosmos troupe 宙組 *sora-gumi* (since 1998) – each of them being associated with specific characteristics which then color the message of the performances themselves, star troupe, grounded in 1933, in the same

year as the original Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre was inaugurated, but banned from performing between 1939 and 1948, is said to deliver strong, charismatic *otokoyaku* performers (such as Kozuki Wataru 湖月 わたる 2003-2006 and Yuzuki Reon 柚希 礼音 2009-2015) in performances with memorable messages (Hashimoto, 1999, 49-53; Kawasaki, 1999, 111-113). Thus, star troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 11. November 2011 until 13. December 2011 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 2. January 2012 until 5. February 2012 with Yuzuki Reon as Danny Ocean, Yumesaki Nene 夢咲 ねね as Tess Ocean, Suzumi Shio 涼 紫央 as Rusty Ryan and Kurenai Yuzuru 紅 ゆずる as Terry Benedict in the lead-roles appeared emblematic for the neo-conservative tendencies in Japanese mass-media of early 2010s: while it draws on US-American practices of entertainment and nonchalant attitude towards rules, the focus in Takarazuka Revue's version laid on Danny's and Tess' marriage (who, unlike in the original movie, are still married, with Danny declining to sign Tess' divorce papers, countless times) and Danny's efforts to win her back.

The characters' interactions are more important than the goal of their pursuit – robbing Terry Benedict's casino – and its alleged immorality, which serves, in fact, to underscoring their humanity, their flaws, their expectations (see Giddens, 1991; Castells, 1995). Moreover, the broken marriage of Danny and Tess is placed at the center of the plot-line, with the remaining cast implicitly looking as if they were mainly tools in Danny's attempts at regaining his still-wife from Terry's rapacious hands. Consequently, Terry himself is portrayed as a demonizing force disrupting the marital bliss, emblematically displayed in one key-scene added in Takarazuka Revue-style to the original movie script: a dream-like set-up in heaven with Tess as Eve, being notoriously, shamelessly tempted into sinful interaction by a devil-turned-snake Terry and miraculously rescued by an angelic Adam-like Danny. At the same time, Danny's nefarious personality, his shady endeavors, his emotional abuse, past and present, towards Tess, which had been keenly depicted in the original movie and had shaped the narrative development into Danny's recovery to learning from his mistakes and becoming a better human, respectively a more suitable life-partner for a respectable lady like Tess, are fully obscured in Takarazuka Revue's iteration of *Ocean's Eleven*. They were replaced by a fuzzy idea of romantic love as able to inspire abnegation and a groundless willingness for sacrifice in wives towards the preservation of their marriage, regardless how useless, abusive, downtrodden their husbands might be.

The all-encompassing emphasis on marriage and unequal gender relationships continued in flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 8. February 2013 until 11. March 2013, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 29. March 2013 until 5. May 2013, with Ranju Tomu 蘭寿 とむ as Danny Ocean, Ranno Hana 蘭乃 はな as Tess Ocean, Hokushō Kairi 北翔 海莉 as Rusty Ryan and Nozomi Fūtō 望海 風斗 as Terry Benedict in the lead-roles. Grounded in 1921, flower troupe is largely perceived as the most treasured of the five ensembles, with larger budgets and more lavish stage and costume designs as well as more powerful and impactful performances (Hashimoto, 1999; Robertson, 1998, 152-156); accordingly, flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* amplified its orchestration of the romantic bond between Danny and Tess, both by involving the two of them in more shared stage time, with focus on their mutual attraction and irresistible chemistry and by caricaturally demonizing Terry and his attempts at materialist over-compensation due to his lack of human qualities. While carefully avoiding to downplay the importance of material safety and financial stability within the marital constellation, flower troupe's version of *Ocean's Eleven* equally cautiously bypasses the realist explanation of Danny's pursuits, the absence of an honest source of income, work-skills, civil

engagement, sense of morality and deontological mindset, instead fully focusing on his unwaveringly passionate love for Tess, while nullifying any allusion – which persisted in the initial movie – that Danny might chase Tess mainly out of spite and competitive drive against Terry and his, obviously superior, success in life in the three areas which matter in the capitalist logic of things: money, power and status, women (see Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012).

More than in the previous version of 2011-2012, in which Yumesaki Nene delivered a powerful Tess which leads with her head and can have her own voice among the cacophony of male egos dominating the stage – as Julia Roberts' presence had convincingly done in the original Hollywood release –, Ranno Hana's Tess loses her vitality and strength and becomes almost an "accessory" employed to highlight Danny's overwhelming "alpha masculinity", in opposition to Terry's whiny, fragile sense of self. This directorial approach additionally bolsters the polarization of masculine role-models in a world – both on- and off-stage – increasingly at odds with a healthy grasp on the real challenges emerging from the extremely toxic radicalization of existential attitudes, expectations as well as coping strategies (see Hook, 2004; Sugimoto, 2013).

In a historical comparison, what had started with a questioning of US-American values and their media-conveyed portrayal in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* movie from 2001 by means of star troupe's counter-representation of a rather diluted "alpha masculinity" rooted in Western ideas, but turned into hyper-masculinity by topstar-*otokoyaku* Yuzuki Reon's personal charisma, acting skills, stage presence, metamorphosed in flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* into an almost incomprehensible amalgamation of concepts and messages, poorly hidden underneath the classically glamourous dramaturgic architecture, stage design, choreographic vision and performers' own undisputable skills, training, commitment to individual as well as collective excellence.

Eventually, cosmos troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 19. April 2019 until 27. May 2019, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 14. June 2019 until 21. July 2019, with Makaze Suzuho 真風 涼帆 as Danny Ocean, Hoshikaze Madoka 星風 まどか as Tess Ocean, Serika Toa 芹香 斗亜 as Rusty Ryan and Sakuragi Minato 桜木 みなと as Terry Benedict, materialized as the ultimate continuation and indelible solidification of its previous performances based on US-American sources: the most preeminent was cosmos troupe's 2013 *Gone with the Wind* (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 27. September 2013 until 4. November 2013 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 22. November 2013 until 23. December 2013) which had in turn validated flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* earlier that same year. Accordingly, the members of the cosmos troupe delivered in 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* the most conservative version of the play, indicating a return towards 'classical' values and traditions with the restoration of masculine dignity and hegemony and the simultaneous reiteration of male supremacy within the all-encompassing aura of the nuclear family as the foundation and existential model of any functional, sustainable, solid nation-state (Sakai, 2022; Yoshino, 1992).

At this point it is crucial to point out that cosmos troupe, founded in 1998, is commonly associated with a non-conformist allure, breaking prevailing standards in Takarazuka Revue's tradition; the employment of the cosmos troupe in any performances is supposed to strike in audiences' perception a chord of experimental, explorative exuberance; in comparison to other troupes, the cosmos troupe is regarded as less bound to any sort of image Takarazuka Revue – as a socio-economic or cultural phenomenon – might have established, and many of its performances appear as "pilot-projects" with the

administration virtually "testing" the boundaries of audiences – that is, whether audiences are ready, willing, able to accept new themes being addressed on-stage, new approaches to old themes as well as new performance styles (Hashimoto, 1999, 65-70; Kawasaki, 1999, 123-128). More often than not, such "pilot-projects" fail due to audiences equivocal rejection, only to be re-hashed eight to ten years later on in a slightly modified manner and by a different troupe, when they are (usually) enthusiastically embraced.[4]

Thus, the combination between cosmos troupe's public image of future-leaning performativity and 2019's *Ocean's Eleven*'s overly conservative, indeed somehow retrograde demeanor and message, indicated an unexpected return to the idealized world of the 1970s

[4] Historically speaking, as two examples of cosmos troupe's progressive role in bringing on-stage Takarazuka Revue Company's administrative efforts in exploring new areas of representation and experimenting with innovative technologies, creative designs, unexpected topics, 2008's performances *A Morning Breeze: The Challenge of Shirasu Jirō, the Samurai Gentleman* (『黎明（れいめい）の風：侍ジェントルマン白洲次郎の挑戦』, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 8. February 2008 until 17. March 2008, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 4. April 2008 until 18. May 2008) and *Paradise Prince* (『パラダイス・プリンス』, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 26. September 2008 until 3. November 2008, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 21. November 2008 until 27. December 2008) stand out. In *A Morning Breeze*, the employment of classical, archetypal characters as symbolized by Shirasu Jirō, one of the most important businessmen in postwar Japan, enacted arguably somewhat over-the-top by cult-*otokoyaku* Todoroki Yū 轟悠, was meant as the acute re-actualization of the *wakon yōsai* (和魂洋才, "Japanese spirit/identity, Western knowledge/technology"; Howland, 2001, 173; Havens, 1970) slogan which he embodies in his synthetic figure. Though educated at famous schools in England, Shirasu Jirō bared his soul for Japan's welfare and defies General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) during the occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1951, almost caricaturally embodied by topstar-*otokoyaku* Yamato Yūga 大和 悠河 with the words: "Japan has lost the war, but that does not mean Japan has been enslaved." Shirasu Jirō dashed like a "morning breeze" through the turbulent 20th century, firmly determined to devote himself entirely to Japan's postwar reconstruction and to the restoration of its sovereignty and its people's dignity. Even more so, few months later, topstar-*otokoyaku* Yamato Yūga brought forth in *Paradise Prince* Stuart Green Menfield, a promising and talented painter from an upper-class American family with a long tradition of successful artists, but who wants to become an *anime* creator like the real-world globally renowned Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎 駿 explicitly mentioned as a role-model in the show. Stuart leaves his well-groomed home to make his own luck in the world of animation; after several petit-bourgeoise adventures, he is shown in the homely finale watching with his wife and their two kids his own successful television animation series, as he symbolically celebrates the fulfilment of his own life motto expressed in the title song: "Do not give up your dreams; even if today everything goes wrong, there is also tomorrow." Both performances were meant to remind audiences of Japan's past greatness and of its current achievements and to performatively defy its dependence on USA, but were extremely poorly received by audiences, a situation only exacerbated by 15. September 2008's Lehman shock. Nonetheless, when performances with similar messages were staged in the second half of the 2010s – e.g., *Le Chateau de la Reine/The Queen's Castle* (『王妃の館』, cosmos troupe, 2017) which combined the popular *parimono* framework (since 1927's *Mon Paris* 『モン・パリ：和が巴里よ』, *parimono* パリモノ referring to the category of performances with narrative lines located in Paris, France's capital, totaling ca. one third of all shows) with the attempt to overcome the narrative avoidance of Japan's modernity by humorously describing the adventures and misdemeanors of a group of Japanese tourists in present-day Paris, or *Company: Lessons, Passion and Companionship* (『カンパニー：努力、情熱、そして仲間たち』, moon troupe, 2018) about the daily life of a widowed Japanese employee ("salary-man"), displayed in an idealized show of late-modern Japan by providing reassuring testimonials to what has been assiduously constructed throughout the decades since 1945 as a "homogeneous harmonious society" with solely exemplary citizens joyously fulfilling their duties and no outcasts (Sugimoto, 2013, 165; see Leheny, 2018) –, they were joyfully, wholeheartedly, unquestioningly celebrated by audiences. Essentially, such performances overtly demonstrated Japan's and its population's sense of empowerment and global domination independently of USA's validation or even counter their growing internal and external struggles. Subsequently, performances addressing present-day Japan, which had been a huge taboo since 1945 due to Takarazuka Revue's outrageous role in promoting Japan's militarist, expansionist, fascist policies in prewar and wartime eras, became widely accepted by Takarazuka Revue's audiences, fans and fan communities and are a regular part of its ongoing repertoire.

seen from a disenchanted historical distance of almost 50 years and delivering a Takarazuka Revue-baked vision of "how things should be" or at least "become". One might argue that such a vision emerged as an unexpected turn in light of historical developments, with debates on gender equality/equity and the quest for alternative forms of work-family balance which would enable parents and children to spend more time together, and therefore, to overrun discourses on inter-generational trauma, lack of emotional connection in the metropolises of the world, endemic loneliness, mental exhaustion, despair dominating the headlines (see Giddens, 2020; Conti, 2021; Castells, 2009).

Performed at a key-moment in Japan's recent history – the abdication of the Heisei emperor Akihito and the beginning of a new era, Reiwa period, under the ruling of his eldest son Naruhito took place on 1. May 2019, an event which had not happened since 1817 –,[5] 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* symbolically marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, with more simplicity, a revival of old structures (or their enhanced preservation) and a sense of community which excludes those who do not adhere unconditionally to this new historical order – and void of any genuine reflection on the past. The undermining of the American Dream with its audacious disrespect towards communal values in the name of individual fulfilment and its replacement with ultra-conservative ideologies which go so far as to disguise romantic and marital abuse as love with the goal of reinforcing marriage as the ultimate vehicle of socioeconomic stability while actively rejecting any contemplation of authentic change is what turns Takarazuka Revue's *Ocean's Eleven* from its first iteration in 2011/2012 through 2013 until 2019 into a paradigmatic example of the dangerous strategies employed by right-wing intellectuals not only to re-write history and present it to larger consumer groups as "facts", but, more importantly, to reconfigure the future with elements extracted from the intentional distortion of history, thus leading to its (self-)destructive repetition.

3. The Dissolution of the American Dream: Takarazuka Revue's *Once Upon a Time in America* (2020)

Takarazuka Revue's version of *Once Upon a Time in America*, officially based on novel *The Hoods* (1952) by Harry Grey (1901-1980, real name Herschel Goldberg), but, in fact, heavily influenced by the eponymous movie from 1984 *C'era una volta in America* (directed by Sergio Leone on music by Ennio Morricone), infers several variables: Japanese language, cross-gender representation due to the all-female cast, live performance, the (predominantly) female (predominantly) Japanese audiences.

Snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America*, carrying the same title in Japanese which ran at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 1. January until 3. February 2020, and was scheduled to run at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 21. February until 22. March 2020)[6] and its golden combination's *otokoyaku* Fūtō Nozomi as David 'Noodles' Aaronson and *musumeyaku*

[5] The last abdication in Japan's history took place in 1817, when Morohito 師仁 (23. September 1771-11. December 1840), posthumously honored as Emperor Kōkaku 光格天皇, 119th emperor of Japan according to the traditional order of succession and who had reigned since 1779, abdicated in favor of his son Ayahito 恵仁 (16. March 1800-21. February 1846, posthumously honored as Emperor Ninkō 仁孝天皇. After his abdication, Emperor Kōkaku ruled as Daijō Tennō 太上天皇 ("Abdicated Emperor", also known as a *Jōkō* 上皇) until his death in 1840 (Mason & Caiger, 1979, 275; McClain, 2002, 57).

[6] Originally scheduled to run from 21. February 2020 until 22. March 2020 at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, *Once Upon a Time in America* was interrupted on 28. February due to the global pandemic, restarted on 9. March until 11. March, and then reopened on 22. March for its final two shows.

Maaya Kiho 真彩 希帆 as Deborah and secondary *otokoyaku* Ayakaze Sakina 彩風 咲奈 as Maximilian 'Max' Bercovicz, delivers a performance which rigorously transcends the original cinema version, with less display of armed violence and brutalized sexuality (Ebert, 1984; Frayling, 2012) – still, far more than common on its deeply sanitized and aesthetically curated stage – and more focus on the inner development of the characters as well as their complex interactions underlying the diversity of possible life choices and their outcomes.

In hindsight, snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America* appeared as part of the ongoing paradigm shift in Takarazuka Revue's performance and marketing strategies from the commonly encompassed *shōjo* imagery, characterized by beautification efforts to flamboyantly idealize romance and sexuality, towards narrative lines bringing into foreground anti-social – or para-social – elements: antagonists such as gangsters, assassins and terrorists circulating among the population of late-modern Japan without, crucially, turning them into heroes on their initiation journeys seeking enlightenment towards maturity through overcoming hardships and achieving greatness. This pivotal turn had been initiated by *Ocean's Eleven*'s stagings (2011-2012, 2013, 2019) and their stunning success with audiences: US-American dubious characters are presented with their questionable intentions and actions, nevertheless always integrated within the archetypal ideology of the hero's journey, while connecting them with the parallel development of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's stage to be discussed in greater detail further below (see Hashimoto 1999; Uchino 2009).

Snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America* in early 2020 simultaneously draws a long line to 1968's world-premiere of the Japanese version of *West Side Story* (『ウエストサイド物語』 based on the eponymous musical by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim from 1957) by moon troupe and snow troupe (and reiterated in 1998 and 1999 at the main theaters by moon troupe and star troupe and in 2018 by cosmos troupe at smaller theatrical institutions), which won the nationally recognized Culture Prize and brought on stage the brutal realities of gang-rivalries, armed violence and quotidian murders on the background of a star-crossed love-story à la *Romeo and Juliet* but racially motivated, with its universally known denouement. Thus, Takarazuka Revue's premiere of *Once Upon a Time in America* appears as both a climax of this approach to USA's representation by Takarazuka Revue and equally a paradigm shift: it takes Noodles' iconic character (admirably embodied in the US-American original by Robert de Niro in one of his most insightful if not celebrated roles) and strives for the clarification of the question of whether the production and promotion of masculine identity can be achieved by the instrumentalization of money, sexuality and power as key-elements of freedom or, conversely, of whether the on-stage display of fundamental values such as determination, hard-work and persistence can lead to their reinforcement in real life (see Hooks 2004; Kimmel 2012). Then again, the phenomenon of masculine vulnerability as the ability to connect with one's emotions and therefore to those around oneself in an authentic manner is both observed and performatively encouraged, keenly reconstructing Noodles' inner structure, in the pursuit of developing and pro-actively employing these values as a means to transcend the impeding "death of vulnerability" in human individuals of late modernity (see Bauman, 2000; Eagleton, 2003). Essential in understanding *Once Upon a Time in America*'s pivotal role in Takarazuka Revue's – and implicitly Japan's – efforts in reconfiguring the world order and its global dynamics are three dimensions: the historical moment in which it was world-premiered in Japan, the parallel history of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's

stage since 1967 and the employment of the snow troupe in the staging of the Japanese version of *Once Upon a Time in America*.

Firstly, the historical moment at which *Once Upon a Time in America* was world-premiered on Takarazuka Revue's stage and in Japan as a Japanese musical is drawn into discussion: early 2020. *Once Upon a Time in America* was the first performance of the year and, ironically, the last performance to be fully performed at Takarazuka Grand Theater before the pandemic-caused massive disruptions and months-long closing until the regularization of the schedule by mid-2022. The administrators' choice of this temporal placement turns Takarazuka Revue's *Once Upon a Time in America* above all else into a political statement on the necessity for radical change both within Japan and on the global level – with Japan as its locomotive, to be sure (see Stickland 2008; Tsuganesawa 1991). As already detailed, prior to *Once Upon a Time in America*, 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* manifested as the continuation and reinforcement of 2013's *Gone with the Wind*, in which the members of the cosmos troupe delivered the most conservative version of the play since its world-premiere in 1977, clearly echoing the neo-conservative discourses crisscrossing Japan's political discourses and widely parroted by mainstream media during the 2010s.

Secondly, the parallel history of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII stage starts with 1967's world-premiere of Japan's first musical based on a Broadway performance: *Oklahoma!* 『オクラホマ！』, drawn upon the eponymous musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from 1943, which was followed in 1969 by the world-premiere of the Japanese version of *Carousel* 『回転木馬』, based on the eponymous musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from 1945: the down-to-earth personality of Curly McLain, the main male character from *Oklahoma!*, delivered a new model of masculine existence, who provided material support and moral orientation to his fellows. Furthermore, world-premiered in 1977 and staged repeatedly throughout the subsequent decades due to its unexpected box-office success, the Takarazuka Revue's version of *Gone with the Wind* displays Japanese visions on love, family, historical heritage, gender roles and race hierarchies, thus transcending its US-American origins (Hashimoto, 1999, 63; Tsuganesawa, 1991, 148). While officially inspired by Margaret Mitchell's novel from 1936, it *de facto* relies heavily on its film adaptation from 1938 with Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in the lead-roles and openly plays with technologies of representation employed by producers of popular culture to construct patterns of gender and race: *otokoyaku*'s ambivalence embodies both the struggles of masculinity as an ongoing project of defining the self in its own core identity and the fantasies of feminine power as a field of desire, resistance and negotiation in the modern world – Japan included (Yamanasahi, 2012, 162; see Žižek, 1998).

After the 2008's debacle with cosmos troupe's *The Wind of Change* and *Paradise Prince* (see Footnote 3), snow troupe's performance *Shall We Dance?* (with the same title in Japanese, which ran at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 8. November 2013 until 12. December 2013, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 2. January 2014 until 9. February 2014) took over the role of the cosmos troupe in representing US-American contents to Japanese audiences in the highly ideologized light of a reverse hierarchy of nations: itself a re-import of the eponymous US-American movie from 2004, directed by Peter Chelsom, with Richard Gere, Jennifer Lopez and Susan Sarandon in the lead-roles, which had been based in its turn on the Japanese movie with the same title from 1996, directed by Suo Masayuki 周防正行, the Takarazuka Revue version keeps the US-American setting as well as the US-American background and main characters' names, the married couple Hailey and Jocelyn Hartz and the dance instructor Ella, portrayed by "golden combination" consisting of

topstar-*otokoyaku* Sō Kazuho 壮 一帆 and topstar-*musumeyaku* Manaka Ayu 愛加 あゆ and future topstar-*otokoyaku* Sagiri Seina 早霧 せいな. It is a plain performance, focused on family life and potential betrayal and on the restorative power of strong values and a deeply seated sense of duty, while at the same time meant to educate and familiarize Japanese audiences – and consumers of cultural goods – with their role in the upcoming world-order.

Thirdly, the symbolical employment of snow troupe comes into focus: among the five active troupes, each of them being associated with specific characteristics which then color the message of the performances themselves, snow troupe stands out due to its conservative atmosphere in bringing forth "traditional Japan", with its classic imagery of the stress-ratio between *giri* (義理 social obligations) and *ninjō* (人情 individual emotions) as the highest form of human transcendence encapsulated within plots commonly set in premodern Japan (Mason & Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002; Sansom, 1931). Part of Takarazuka Revue administration's postwar policy to never again represent Japan or Asia in modern times resulted from its nefarious – and unconditional – support of Japan's expansionist militarist colonialist politics in the first decades of the 20th century; naturally, *jidaimono* 時代物 or historical performances with narrative lines located in Japan's premodernity which ended in 1868, were chosen since 1945 and they make up ca. 30% of the yearly program.

While other troupes equally stage Japan-themed performances and snow troupe takes over various narrative lines as well, snow troupe's major features is the referential "Japaneseness" in the *wakon yōsai* (和魂洋才, commonly translated as "Japanese spirit/roots, Western technology/knowledge") framework which underlies Takarazuka Revue's hybridity in tune with Japan's modernity and delivers the crucial "Japanising" element(s) to all its performances – Japan-related or not (see Mason and Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002). In this train of thoughts, the snow troupe inauguration in 1924, simultaneously with the opening of the first Takarazuka Grand Theatre, is virtually connected to its image as the upholder of traditional dance and opera for the entire company and has the reputation of being the vanguard of classical Japanese drama, so that the fact that it premiered in Japan in 1996 the Vienna-original musical *Elisabeth* from 1992 as *Elisabeth: The Rondo of Love and Death* 『エリザベート：愛と死の輪舞』 has symbolical underpinnings, with 'appropriation' and 'Japanisation' as one of the main preoccupations.

Curiously enough, Takarazuka Revue's Noodles – more specifically, snow troupe's topstar-*otokoyaku*'s Fūtō Nozomi's Noodles – resolutely distances himself from its US-American original and turns into a human archetype: in this version, more normative concerns such as the integration of the individual within the community and the permanent references to one's origins while consistently alluding the religious affiliation, the friendships he develops throughout his formative years which do not over-shadow the importance of family, the counter-intuitive representation of money and career as a means of making a living and not as an ultimate existential goal, turn to the foreground and gradually lead to the formulation of a re-solidified identity paradigm which emerges as a self-reflexive project harmoniously unifying courage and perseverance, lucidity and compassion, honesty and respect (see Bauman, 2000; Eagleton, 2003). This seems to be the core of the *homo tener*, the tender human, calling for a (more) affectionate relationship with the self and the other. Much more than in the novel or in the live-action movie, Noodles becomes an ontological paradigm: to that extent, one must recall that throughout Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII

history and its orchestration of identity, the androgynously charismatic and ambiguous figure of *otokoyaku* mainly transported its ideals.

In contrast to the apparently submissive and conformist *musumeyaku*, *otokoyaku*'s position has been suggesting a strongly dialectical movement between traditional role-models and innovative consumption patterns. Kobayashi Ichizō's famous statement that audiences should desire the *otokoyaku*, but identify themselves with *musumeyaku* (Kobayashi, 1955, 37; Iwahori, 1972, 33; Tsuganesawa, 1991, 183) turned into the foundation of an explosive liquefaction of identity structures during the exuberant 1970s and 1980s, which subsequently made place for new identificatory models during the 1990s until late 2010s: in Takarazuka Revue's version of staging humanity, every *otokoyaku* was supposed to abandon the sphere of her own identity and to infiltrate the public space (see Watanabe, 2002). She would metamorphose into a symbol for something which she cannot possibly be, while obeying the limits, rules and circum- stances imposed upon her from the outside. Similarly to Don Quixote in another spatial and temporal culture – who meets in the second part of the novel people who have already read the first part of the novel, so that he has no other choice but to be faithful to the book he has himself become while protecting it from misapprehensions, counterfeits and apocryphal continuations, to paraphrase Michel Foucault (1966, 73) –, an *otokoyaku* keeps on following her own discourse and transforms herself into an object of the process which she had herself originally created as a subject.

The perplexing androgynity of the *otokoyaku* is compounded by her 'racelessness', mirroring the instability and ambiguity of Japanese modernity as a reputed monolith and simultaneously challenging Takarazuka Revue's self-advertised position as a self-conscious icon of modern Japan: a unique synthesis of Japanese spirit and Western knowledge/technology blatantly splurging on her all-too fluid identity representations. This progression is brought to a halt by the staging of *Once Upon a Time in America*, with its fallible, humble Noodles and its more self-reflexive secondary characters: Max, who eventually takes unequivocal suicide as the final solution to his ruthless life, and Deborah, who returns to the indissolubly stable values of family and motherhood, against the background of the socio-creative tendency to facilitate closeness between male and female citizens, in an attempt to teach them the sense of mutual compassion, acceptance and curiosity.

4. Progress through Entertainment: Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* (2023)

It is on the foundation of questioning technological development and the focus on individual excellence located at the center of 2006's live-action movie *Casino Royale*, directed by Martin Campbell and starring Daniel Craig in his first appearance as James Bond, that Takarazuka Revue's administrators conceptualized their version of *Casino Royale* in 2023 and brought it forth as a pivotal performance in the revamping of its post-pandemic business model. Staged by cosmos troupe, a choice which determines in Takarazuka Revue Company's advertising and marketing strategy the message of each performance, *Casino Royale: My Name Is Bond.*『カジノ・ロワイヤル：我が名はボンド。』, was officially based on Ian Fleming's novel in its Japanese edition translated by Shiraishi Rō 白石朗 , published by Tōkyō Sōgensha 東京創元社 in 2019, as much as on previous adaptations in Western media. Staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 11. March 2023 until 17. April 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 6. May 2023 until 11. June 2023 and starring Makaze Suzuho 真風 涼帆 as James Bond, Jun Hana 潤 花 as

Delphine, Serika Toa 芹香 斗亜 as Le Chiffre, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* took the primary character and narrative line – that of a confrontation between the iconic British spy and master-terrorist Le Chiffre during a high-stakes gambling show-off at Casino Royale – and modified it in accordance with Takarazuka Revue's own conventions, mostly encapsulated in its intrinsic set of conventions named "the Violet Code" (すみれコード, *sumire-kōdo*; Kobayashi, 1955) which prohibits any non-stylized display of ugliness such as violent death, open sexuality, bloody encounters as well as allusions to mundane events such as medical procedures (to which biological birth and death count) on Takarazuka Revue's stage, unless the dramaturgic logic explicitly requires it.

The story of Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* is set in 1968 with the world in the grip of the Cold War, tacitly carried since the End of WWII between the West, with its capitalist societies and nations led by the United States of America, and the East, a communist conglomerate led and controlled by the Soviet Union. The two blocs have been confronting each other, struggling for supremacy, without directly engaging in warfare while intelligence agents from each country ("spies"), keep fighting covertly on the front lines. In Paris, anti-establishment protests known as a general strike "May 1968" break out, mainly among students and workers calling for social change; their rage being directed against capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and traditional institutions, but after they are suppressed, the radicals merge into an underground organization calling itself "The Red Army League." At MI6, the pinnacle of the elite British Secret Intelligence Service, outstanding secret agent James Bond, code name 007, who had already been through fierce battles, receives an order to neutralize a Soviet agent known as Le Chiffre, who has been regarded as the commander of KGB operations in France – and who is suspected of fueling the ongoing unrests in Paris and countrywide. As a front-business, Le Chiffre seems to run a nightclub in Paris, but he has been embezzling its proceeds, in fact funds sent by the Soviet organization to The Red Army League, and is consequently in such a tight spot that he secretly has been searching for a buyer for the nightclub while also planning to recover a quick fortune at a casino. Bond's mission is to use his gambling abilities to beat him and cut off his source of funds, and then to take him alive and force him to divulge any information he possesses. Bond, disguised as a Jamaican millionaire, heads firstly to Paris to scout the nightclub, where he encounters and saves Delphine, a female student participating in a demonstration and being chased by the police. He becomes captivated by Delphine, a graduate student at the Sorbonne and the girlfriend of Michel, a radical student who escaped to The Red Army League and who pursues passionately the ideal to change the current world plagued by inequalities into a better one. Later on, James Bond arrives at Casino Royale in a hotel at the Royale-les-Eaux on the Atlantic coast of France, to play against Le Chiffre. There, he runs once again into Delphine, who turns out to be the heiress of a vast fortune as the successor of the late Grand Duchess Natalia, according to her last-will: coincidentally, the mourning Romanov family have gathered at the same hotel and are fighting over who will become the next patriarch, the head of the family. The glamorous casino's biggest annual event "Night of Baccarat" has just started. Bond, still undercover as a Jamaican millionaire, joins the baccarat table Le Chiffre is at. But once Le Chiffre finds out his true identity, the game turns into an intense confrontation between the two of them. When Le Chiffre loses to Bond at the gambling table, he decides to target Delphine's inheritance, just as she is about to begin a relationship with Bond who cannot stop thinking about her. With CIA agents, French intelligence officers, and Soviet spies joining the scene as well, Bond faces a series

of crises in his pathway, but eventually does what he does best: risks his life for the success of the mission while countering various conspiracies and dangers.

The third performance of the calendar year 2023 and last performance of the Japanese fiscal year 2022-2023, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* was also the final performance (さよなら公演 *sayonara-kōen*) for topstar-*otokoyaku* Makaze Suzuho and topstar-*musumeyaku* Jun Hana among several other performers, and the first Takarazuka Revue production to receive an international livestream for the Tokyo final performance (千秋楽 *senshūraku*, literally "joy of thousand autumns") on 11. June 2023 via the Beyond LIVE platform, with subtitles in eight different language options (English, Korean, simplified and traditional Chinese, Indonesian, Spanish, Vietnamese, Thai). In addition to the unexpectedly controversial narrative focus – the Cold War –, approximately one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24. February 2022 and the ongoing war, and an unique allusion to current realities in Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII history (perhaps apart from the notable – and symbolical – exception of 2003's star troupe's performance *A Song for Kingdoms* 『王家に捧ぐ歌』 and its alignment with peacekeeping campaigns at the time in Japan, but translocated in ancient Egypt with its warring dreams of grandeur), *Casino Royale* marks the end of an era and launches at the same time the beginning of a new chapter. This happens both narratively and meta-narratively, as to be detailed further below.

To start with, the two previous performances of the calendar year 2023 staunchly validated the continuation of tradition in Takarazuka Revue's performance strategy and business vision: both flower troupe's *Mayerling* 『うたかたの恋』 (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 1. January 2023 until 9. January 2023 and from 19. January 2023 until 30. January 2023 due to coronavirus-caused interruptions and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 18. February 2023 until 19. March 2023) and moon troupe's *Ohten no Mon: The Tale of Young Sugawara no Michizane* 『応天の門：若き日の菅原道真の事』 (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 4. February 2023 until 6. March 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 25. March 2023 until 30. April 2023) delve into stories of passion and grandeur, reviving two of Takarazuka Revue's most beloved themes: on the one hand, the tragical love-story between partners in the highest echelons of the Western society, as revealed in Yuzuka Rei's 柚香 光 portrayal of Rudolf, the Crown Prince of Austria and the son of the cult-empress Elisabeth "Sissi" of Austria and of Emperor Franz Joseph, and Hoshikaze Madoka's 星風 まどか representation of Marie Vetsera, a baron's daughter at the imperial court and Rudolf's lover despite all odds, in the first performance; on the other hand, in the second performance, the breathtaking orchestration of (early) Heian period (794-1185), indisputably the "golden age" of Japanese classical history and the climax of cultural refinement, with Tsukishiro Kanato 月城 かなと as Sugawara no Michizane and Umino Mitsuki 海乃 美月 as Shōki delivering credible on-stage recreations of the eponymous, equally popular historical *manga* (Japanese comics) series, literally translated as "The Southern Gate", written and illustrated by Yak Haibara, which had begun serialization in Shinchōsha's 新潮社 *seinen* manga magazine targeted at young male readers *Monthly Comic Bunch* in October 2013, reaching 19 volumes as of time of this writing (December 2024).

Apart from the narrative contents, the symbolical connotation of both troupes delivers these performance substantial significance: flower troupe, grounded in 1921, is largely perceived as the most treasured of the five ensembles, with larger budgets and more lavish stage and costume designs as well as more powerful and impactful performances; similarly set-up in 1921, moon troupe was the one to push forward the performance strategy when

it staged the world-premieres of *Mon Paris* (『モン・パリ：我が巴里よ！』, 1927), *The Rose of Versailles* (『ベルサイユのばら』, 1974) and *Gone with the Wind* (『風と共に去りぬ』, 1977), with meticulous attention to group performances and in particular to powerful expression in chorus singing as well as numerous adaptations from Western dramas. Thus, flower troupe and moon troupe are not only the most longevive ensembles in Takarazuka Revue Company's organigram, but they also carry particular weight in integrating Takarazuka Revue within the universal circuit of cultural institutions and in mediating Western contents, ideologies, aesthetics to Japanese consumers.

When cosmos troupe subsequently staged *Casino Royale*, it came as a natural conclusion and, simultaneously, as an optimist spring-board due to its progressive reputation, despite *Casino Royale*'s superficially aristocratic appearance. Furthermore, combined with star troupe's re-staging a few weeks later of *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* (『1789：バスティーユの恋人たち』, at Takarazuka Grand Theater on 2. June 2023 and until 18. June 2023 until 2. July 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 22. July 2023 until 15. August 2023 and from 19. August 2023 until 27. August 2023, due to coronavirus-caused interruptions), the Japanese version of the French musical *1789: Les Amants de la Bastille*, with music by Dove Attia, Laurent Delort, Louis Delort, Rod Janois, Jean-Pierre Pilot, Benoit Poher, William Rousseau and Olivier Schultheis as well as lyrics by Attia and Vincent Baguian and a book by Attia and François Chouquet, which had its world-premiere 10. October 2012 at Palais des Sports de Paris, *Casino Royale* continues, symbolically and realistically, Takarazuka Revue Company's relentless pursuit of the appropriation of modernity since at least 1927 by means of the *parimono* genre[7] and its intense focus on Paris due to its crucial role during the French Revolution in triggering, defining and structuring modernity – Western modernity, initially, and the global modernity, eventually.

Compared with the previous moon troupe's version from 2015, star troupe's *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* brings into the foreground the importance of vibrant, decisive male personalities, able to change the course of history and to and to re-direct it into the right tracks: Rei Makoto's 礼 真琴 Ronan Mazurier (a young man whose father was shot dead by the authorities) and Maisora Hitomi's 舞空 瞳 Olympe du Puget (the governess of the Crown Prince and who becomes Ronan's girlfriend) are far more than individual characters on their own journeys through life in times of turmoil; they are symbols of the French Revolution and they are actively employed in the redefinition ("Japanisation") of modernity through performative appropriation (see Barnes, 2001; Bennett and *Woollacott*, 1987; Black, 2005). *Casino Royale* touches only briefly France's capital, but it is there, in the middle of the riots, that he encounters Delphine – incidentally, a descendent of the former Russian imperial family, itself a "hot topic" in two recent Takarazuka Revue performances, both assigned to cosmos troupe, and its representation of 1917's Bolshevik Revolution.

On the one hand, in 2017, 100 years after the Bolshevik Revolution put an end to the century-old Russian Empire and changed the history of the world, the performance *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs* (『神々の土地：ロマノフたちの黄昏』, at

[7] The *parimono* genre refers in Takarazuka Revue's nomenclature to performances centered on Paris as the inception space of ideological modernity due to the French Revolution of 1789, and celebrated as such since 1927's *Mon Paris*, Japan's first performance patterned upon Western, specifically French, models while proclaiming, at the same time, Japan's supremacy and world leadership, with repeated reiterations ever since in ca. one third of the performances; with the remaining two thirds being equally divided between Asian/Japanese and Western plots (Watanabe, 1999, 65-67).

Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 18. August 2017 until 25. September 2017, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 13. October 2017 until 19. November 2017) with Asaka Manato 朝夏 まなと and Reimi Urara 伶美 うらら in the lead-roles, displayed in nostalgic tones of remembrance and pain the tableau of a wintery Russian aristocracy, entangled in its own twisted sense of importance and unable to sense the upcoming upheavals. Cosmos troupe delivered touching reverberations of times long past, but lacking the atemporal tension from earlier performances based on Leo Tolstoy's monumental novel *War and Peace* from 1869 (star troupe 1988-1989, a subtle pretext to explore Napoleon Bonaparte's life and work) or his complex novel *Anna Karenina* from 1878 (snow troupe 2001, star troupe 2008, moon troupe 2019), which, like *Gone with the Wind*, allowed Takarazuka Revue's administrators to orchestrate once again modern visions on masculinity based on the main female character's flaws and lack of existential direction and by focusing on Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky (Alyosha) who turns into the main character. In contrast, *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs* investigates a symbolical return to the sacredness of rural life which could transcend history's violence and past suffering in the light of a new beginning (see Anderson, 1988, 95; Stickland, 2008, 142). Like Marie Antoinette, the Austrian queen of France who was guillotined due to her inability to see the reality metamorphosing in front of her own eyes and who is one of the most celebrated and mourned characters in the popular culture of Japanese media, the Romanovs are seen as ill-fated figures swallowed by the waves of history, inevitably intertwined with the dramatic shifts triggered by mechanisms of popularity, and completely cut-off from their intrinsic significance – or lack of hereof.

On the other hand, three years later, in late 2020, *Anastasia* 『アナスタシア』 breaks away with the tradition of hesitant performance strategy and public display of educational conformity by eviscerating the *parimono* パリ物 subgenre with naturalist insertions *à* la Émile Zola and reframing it in dimensions reminiscent of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In Takarazuka Revue's *Anastasia*, a huge parable on the protective power of amnesia and the benefits resulting from not always remembering the past – at least, not too accurately – is being told, with the main male character Dimitri (without family name, admirably portrayed by Makaze Suzuho), a man of questionable morality, turning to the right pathway in contact with genuine aristocracy which transcends poverty and betrayal, as represented by Anya/Anastasia and her gracious enactment by Hoshikaze Madoka. Staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 7. November 2020 until 14. December 2020, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 8. January 2021 until 21. February 2021, cosmos troupe's version of *Anastasia* was based on *Anastasia The Musical* with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens on a book by Terrence McNally, which premiered on Broadway at Broadhurst Theater in April 2017 after its initial world-premiere in 2016 in Hartford, which in turn originated in Don Bluth's and Gary Goldman's animated musical movie *Anastasia* from 1997. The female main character's absence of a clearly outlined past hinders her emergence as a full-fledged citizen; simultaneously, it allows for an infinity of potential futures to take shape, initially blurry, on the horizon of historical manifestations, counterpointing Anya's silhouette and her shy waltz among the many shadows haunting the derelict imperial palace and its symbolical ramifications in interwar France. Takarazuka Revue's *Anastasia* reiterates prewar *Mon Paris*' imperialist ethos and its overtly paternalist message from 1927, embedded within a thick emotional fabric of *otokoyaku*'s cool reticence and *musumeyaku*'s cute submission, which reverse the cliché of the disempowered human being into a hero of longing and, paradoxically, belonging (see Iwahori, 1972, 12; Takaoka, 1943, 54). As in *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs*, generosity and spiritual enlightenment underscore, according to the axiological ideal promoted by Takarazuka

Revue, the re-evaluation of humanity from a competitive undertaking towards a playful togetherness. The desire to situate Japan in its symbolical representation by Takarazuka Revue Company as a credible successor to the world's last two great empires, the Russian Empire before it became the Soviet Union and the United States of America, transpires from deep within and inoculates itself into audiences' subconscious.

In this train of thoughts, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* not only brings on-stage one of the most iconic symbols of masculinity – James Bond – which transcends US-American induced hegemony and sways France's territory on a mission both treacherous and divisive, which requires him to overcome his own natural instincts and to obey to his sense of patriotism, commitment to his duty and professional integrity. Conversely, his encounter with Delphine is a symbolical display of the two world they belong to and their incongruent values: within the dramaturgic logic of Takarazuka Revue's approach to history, Delphine's participation in the protests accentuates the distance from the cruel realities of Imperial Russia with its blatant inequalities and simultaneously reflects the post-WWII pro-Communism ideologies held by French intellectuals. While each of them can – and eventually does indeed – move beyond individual and national limitations, there is no simple, unified, unequivocal solution to the world's problems: despite light-hearted interventions like the comical – and not distinctively politically correct – character Zweistein, Einstein's rival to the Nobel prize and his nefarious counterpart in the scientific community, the overall atmosphere of the performance is unexpectedly bleak.

Performed at a key-moment in Takarazuka Revue's recent history, *Casino Royale* opens the way for subsequent performances to address less typical issues, such as technology and its both positive and negative side (in snow troupe's *A Dream in Lilac: The Pride of the Droysen Family*『ライラックの夢路：ドロイゼン家の誇り』, at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 22. April 2023 until 28. May 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 17. June 2023 until 16. July 2023; and in moon troupe's *Flügel: The Wings You Gave Me*『フリューゲル：君がくれた翼』, at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 18. August 2023 until 24. September 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre on 14. October 2023 and from 18. October 2023 until 19. November 2023) and the continued deconstruction of Japanese premodernity (in *Singing Lovebirds*『鴛鴦歌合戦』, based on the 1939 eponymous musical comedy movie directed by Makino Masahiro マキノ 雅弘 [1908-1993] starring Kataoka Chiezō 片岡 千恵蔵 [real name Ueki Masayoshi 植木 正義, 1903-1983] and Shimura Takashi 志村 喬 [1905-1982]) and staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 7. July 2023 until 13. August 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 2. September 2023 until 2. October 2023 and from 6. October 2023 until 8. October 2023), while exploring new directions for the future in two truly revolutionary performances: cosmos troupe's *Pagad: Cagliostro, The Mysterious Magician of the Century*『PAGAD（パガド）：世紀の奇術師カリオストロ』 (based on the 1949 film *Black Magic* directed by Gregory Ratoff which in turn extracted its narrative line from the novel *Joseph Balsamo* by Alexandre Dumas-Père published in 1853, and planned at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 29. September 2023 until 15. November 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 25. November 2023 until 24. December 2023) and snow troupe's *Boiled Doyle on the Toil Trail*『ボイルド・ドイル・オンザ・トイル・トレイル』 (based on the life of Arthur Conan Doyle, and planned at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 10. November 2023 until 13. December 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 3. January 2024 until 11. February 2024). Tragically, the death by suicide of one of the cosmos troupe's members in late September 2023 and the subsequently emerged allegations/accusations of harassment,

over-work, improper labor practices and rehearsal conditions led to the cancellation of all cosmos troupe's scheduled performances both at Takarazuka Grand Theater and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater for 2023 and 2024 and to the partial cancellation of snow troupe's scheduled performances at Takarazuka Grand Theater for 2023. The regular performance schedule was reprised with the beginning of the New Year 2024, while investigative and administrative efforts carried on in the background with the goal of normalization and improvement of work conditions for performers.

5. Conclusion: Embracing Theatrokratic Mastery

In Takarazuka Revue's staging of some of Hollywood's most spectacular movies in recent decades, their questionable morality is re-calculated within the formulation, amplification and propagation of certain ideas and ideologies which might function as peaceful counter-hegemonic strategies to USA's claims of historical and geographical supremacy. These strategies are not meant to directly challenge the post-WWII world order; they function, at least in theory, as measures to envision the future and eventually to lead to its benevolent (co-)creation in the name of sustainability and inclusion, mutual respect and a life in dignity for all humans.

Firstly, in Takarazuka Revue's multiple versions of *Ocean's Eleven* staged by three different troupes, the focus moves from the comradeship and the masculine sense of self-assertiveness in the initial live-action feature to the importance of marriage, family and mutual commitment between the two members of the marital union, despite challenges, hardships, betrayals, broken promises and even outright abuse of various sorts. This idealization of abuse as love and its inherent consequence – the sublimation of marriage and family as the ultimate goal regardless of its dysfunctionality – appears as a desperate attempt to salvage the concept of "nuclear family" as the core and fundamental cell of the modern society while blatantly ignoring both its characteristics of being a sociopolitical construction on the background of specific economic realities and necessities brought forth by modernity's rapid urbanization and industrialization, and not a "natural phenomenon" of the human species.

Secondly, Takarazuka Revue's version of *Once Upon a Time in America* unequivocally humanizes its main character Noodles and delivers justice unlike its US-American source of inspiration: the employment of the snow troupe itself with its reputation of staunch traditionalism draws attention to the necessity of punishing the villains and forgiving the lost persons who express sincere regret and genuinely put in the effort to integrate themselves into and to contribute to the community they belong to. In this interpretation, *Once Upon a Time in America* metamorphoses from the twisted representation of the American Dream with its inner contradictions, cruelties and sacrifices, into its cathartic counterpart and delivers the solution to a life of repentance possible after mistakes and wrong-doings: a very hopeful message of love and compassion in a world composed of societies moving gradually farther away from the principles which ensured their functionality, development and survival.

Thirdly, in Takarazuka Revue's version of *Casino Royale*, one of the most iconic representations of Western masculinity and professional prowess is transformed into a symbolical pillar of the current world order while questioning that very world order by softly delving into the mechanisms of history which had led to it – the two major revolutions alluded in the performance – and showcasing, at the same time, the vulnerable elements which would result, if left unchecked, into its decline and eventual collapse. Once

again, the spotlight glides from the individual citizen living in the midst of turmoil and upheaval towards the collective composed of people who do their best to survive and thrive during difficult times. Then again, *Casino Royale* addresses burning questions of the post-pandemic global world with its concurrent tendencies towards increasing interdependence and gradual deglobalization, on the one hand, and pluricentrism as the temporary solution for a more equitable distribution of resources – primarily, natural, human, financial resources – and the overcoming of the brutal inequalities between geographic areas, on the other hand. To be sure, there are no simple answers to such challenges; but facing them straightforward instead of waiting for some sort of miracle to happen seems as the better attitude, *Casino Royale*'s message emerges from one of Takarazuka Revue's most outspoken performances in its more-than-centennial history.

While highly idealist, such performances draw on the millennial tradition of live theater as a tectonic force, capable to shifting history towards the future through the creative manifestation of the discreet yet palpable fluctuations occurring underneath the surface of the present. The courage to embrace this creative manifestation and to deliver it to large audiences – in the way creators and institutions have been doing since time immemorial – is what makes or breaks the validity of the performing event. Takarazuka Revue (Company) has been pursuing this fine balance between ideological freedom and careful soothing of the establishment for more than 110 years – successfully, so far –, thus proving that theatrokratic mastery *is* an authoritative way of observing the present, learning from the past and ultimately shaping the future as a co-creative adventure.

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