

***Reclaiming Women's Expressive Rights:
Japanese Adaptation of Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour***

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Abstract

Lillian Hellman's controversial play, *The Children's Hour*, with its implicit reference to lesbianism, has invited multiple interpretations within the United States. However, curiously enough, very little attention has been paid to how the play has been adapted and reinterpreted outside the United States. In Japan, the playscript has been translated under the Japanese title *Uwasa no Futari* ("the couple people gossip about") in 1980, taking its title from the 1961 Hepburn film that was released as *Uwasa no Futari* and was a big office hit in its 1982 performance in Japan. What is interesting about this Japanese version of the play is the casting of the actresses who play the two heroines, Karen and Martha, who are accused of being lesbians. *Uwasa no Futari* premiered in 1980 featuring Ineko Arima and Yoko Minakaze, former couple stars of the all-female Takarazuka Revue. Arima was a female role player and Minakaze was a male role player in Takarazuka's romantic musical productions. This casting, I suggest, added a deeper layer of complexity to the theme and tone of the Japanese version of *The Children's Hour*. In this paper I argue that former Takarazuka actresses—who performatively unsettle the order of gender and sexuality—significantly changed *The Children's Hour* from a tragedy of two women into a drama to reclaim women's expressive rights. The Japanese adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, as I hope to show, can be read as a radical feminist play portraying women's empowerment in a Japanese oppressive patriarchal context.

Keywords: Feminism, American Literature, Drama, Adaptation, Takarazuka, Japanese Studies

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Introduction

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) differs from its counterparts for its explicit reference to homosexuality which was considered taboo in American society. In the play, love between women were depicted as "unspeakable" yet frequently implied using various expressions. When the play premiered on Broadway in 1934, it was an immediate success. It was so successful that two film adaptations were made by producer William Wyler: *These Three* (1936) and *The Children's Hour* (1961). However, because of its controversial treatment of the relationship between the two female protagonists, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, who run a girl's boarding school, the play was also banned in several cities such as Boston. The audience's reaction and attention to the play shows how the public treated or viewed same-sex relationships.

However, little light has been shed on how the play was received in Japan. The postwar US occupation resulted in a heavy American presence in Japan, culture, bringing a new flux of American arts. Literature and films were no exception. William Wyler's second film adaptation of *The Children's Hour* which starred actress Audrey Hepburn was so popular in Japan that it had a revival in 1985. Aside from the film, there were three translations of the script: first translated by Makoto Sugiyama in 1954, and two versions translated simultaneously in the year 1980 by Yuji Odajima and Misako Koike. The Odajima version was intended for a 1982 play by theatrical company Chijinkai, co-starring former Takarazuka couple actresses Ineko Arima and Yoko Minakaze. This stage adaptation had a revival in 1985, in the same year with the 1961 American film adaptation.

The original play in itself is controversial, for it presents love between women in a problematic way. However, the Japanese stage version is even more complicated, for it adds another layer by taking into account of the distinctive all-female Takarazuka Revue. The Japanese stage adaptation of the play, I will argue, expresses a strong radical protest for women's rights.

Takarazuka Revue and Same-Sex Relationships

Takarazuka Revue is an all-female theatre promoted as family-friendly in the beginning of the 20th century (Robertson, 1998). Every year, only dozens out of hundreds and thousands of aspiring girls pass the difficult exams to enter the *Takarazuka Ongaku Gakko* (Takarazuka Music School), and after training for a year, they are assigned their role at the Takarazuka Revue. One distinctive feature of Takarazuka is that the actresses play both gender roles, and that the assigned gender role is usually fixed. Actresses who play male roles are called *otokoyaku*. They cut their hair short, speak and move in a manly manner. The gender "opposite" of *otokoyaku* is the *musumeyaku* who display feminine characteristics and behaviours. The audience witnesses the romance between the leading *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* in the Takarazuka theatre, or, in the words of Deustch, "[homosexual] portrayals of heterosexual romance" (Deustch, 2016). The Takarazuka actresses, usually called *Takarasiennes*, somewhat resemble the stereotypical butch and femme in lesbian culture.

Although the Takarazuka Revue was initially intended for family entertainment, women fans were a prominent part of the audience. The BBC documentary *Dream Girls* (1993) shows, frantic fangirls flocking outside the revenue to catch a glimpse of the leading *otokoyaku*. The male role actresses were the most admired, especially by female fans. The female fans viewed these actresses as ideal masculinities inhabiting female bodies—hence objects of sexual attraction with whom they could also form a female bonding or sisterhood. Robertson argues that the male role actresses at the Takarazuka Revue possess a somewhat androgynous personality, which appeals to the audience and is what differentiates the Takarazuka Revue from other traditional homosocial theatre productions such as *Kabuki*. The structure of the Takarazuka Revue, which enables women to experiment with different genders and unconventional gender roles, while promoting the traditional heterosexuality approved by the public on a surface level, symbolized the liberation from traditional female gender stereotypes and ideals. In the post-war era during the late 40s and the early 50s, when both Arima and Minakaze were a star couple in Takarazuka, the female audience liberated and expressed themselves by watching, and identifying with, them. At a time when same-sex relationships were unthinkable, the Takarazuka Revue was a refuge for the suppressed women in the patriarchal society, who had to play a good wife and wise mother at home.

Interestingly, this same-sex romance structure rarely functions outside the Revue (Robertson, 1998). According to the Takarazuka Revue Website, founder of the Takarazuka Revue, Ichizo Kobayashi intended the performances at the Revue to be “popular theatrical entertainments the whole family is sure to enjoy,” and Takarasiennes were taught “to have etiquette and a good sense of proper manners, and not to forget their dignity as individual women and members of society.” The purpose of Takarazuka, as Kobayashi has put it, was to prepare women for marriage through experiencing and learning male behaviors. Although most actresses choose to keep their stage names and continue their acting careers after they leave the Revue, they often shed their roles as *otokoyaku* or *musumeyaku* and play traditional women roles which are supportive of a dominant male actor. Minakaze even said in her retirement speech that she decided to retire from Takarazuka because she wanted to act as a woman on the stage (1982 stage pamphlet). The liberation of the woman’s gender roles was possible only within the Revue.

Casting Takarazuka Couple Stars in *The Children’s Hour*

Arima and Minakaze were a star couple of the Takarazuka Flower Troupe, where Minakaze played the male role while Arima played the female. As with most former Takarazuka actresses, the two kept their stage names throughout their acting careers outside the Revue and both played female roles. They did not appear together in productions until they were called on to do so in the 1982 stage adaptation of *The Children’s Hour* (Arima, 1995; Minakaze, 2007)

This play is one of the rare cases where the same-sex relationship was enacted outside the Revue. The script used was the same script employed in the United States, yet the stage carried a deeper subtext in Japan’s cultural context. The two former Takarazuka actresses, in the words of Minakaze, were hitherto pressured by the society “to act as a woman.” They were forced to abandon their experimental gender roles that did not exist in society. Yet in the Japanese adaptation, by playing an alleged same-sex

relationship set in a girls' school, Arima and Minakaze were re-experiencing their former lives at the all-girl Takarazuka music school and the Takarazuka Revue theatre. On the stage, Minakaze (Martha), the former male role actress, confesses her love to Arima (Karen) the female actress as in the old days in Takarazuka, but she does so, not in a masculine fashion, but in a feminine attire and manner. Minakaze as Martha commits suicide, thereby highlighting that same-sex romance is not viable outside of the Takarazuka Revue and without the gender role of otokoyaku that does not exist in society.

The protagonists Karen and Martha, played by Arima and Minakaze, are faced with denial from the public because of their alleged same-sex relationship. The Japanese adaptation of *The Children's Hour* not only depicts the impossibility of lesbianism in the patriarchal society, but suggests that the hidden love between women could take place on the stage of Takarazuka.

Interestingly enough, the period when the Japanese version of *The Children's Hour* was staged was the period when the Takarazuka male role actresses became increasingly androgynous, a trend that began with the series *Berusaiyu no Bara* ("The Rose of Versailles") that swept through Japan. The Takarazuka Revue had its own successful stage adaptation, which is now considered one of the most successful and popular plays in Takarazuka history. In this famous comic-anime-Takarazuka play franchise, the protagonist is a cross-dressed androgynous woman. It can safely be said that the 1980s heralded an era of the female exploration of new gender roles and identity and expressive rights.

Conclusion

The Children's Hour is a drama of two women, Karen and Martha, who are falsely accused of having "sexual knowledge of each other." However, as I have discussed above, the casting of the two former Takarazuka actresses added a deeper layer of complexity to this theme. The hidden script of the Takarazuka Revue was a device through which both the actresses and female audience could liberate themselves, at least temporarily, from the socially imposed gender role of "good wife and mother." The death of the "lesbian," the woman who confessed her love for another woman, echoed the suffering of the women who had to yield to the patriarchal heterosexual or heterosexist society. In the end, the Japanese adaptation can be read as a radical feminist play in that it is a double-layered drama of women in pursuit of new gender roles and identities departing from traditional gender norms.

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