CHAPTER ONE

THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF TAKARAZUKA

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In the small spa town of Takarazuka,
Once upon a time when it was born,
Then no-one knew the Girls’ Opera,
But today,
Everyone knows it, and the blue-green hakama,
Oh, Takarazuka T.A.K.A.R.A.Z.U.K.A
Oh, Takarazuka, my longed-for home of beauty
The sweet dream land of innocent childhood
Nostalgic memories of songs
Oh, Takarazuka T.A.K.A.R.A.Z.U.K.A

(Oh, Takarazuka! from Parisette, 1930)

This hit song, adapted from Constantinople by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, epitomises Takarazuka’s image. As the lyrics tell us, Takarazuka was a small spa town, located to the north-west of Osaka. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and by 1930, the Kansai region around Osaka and Kobe was developed by local, private companies. It resulted in the development of a stronger commercial culture than in the Kantō region centred on the new capital, Tokyo, where the national government had more control. Accordingly, Osaka was called minto (the people’s capital) as opposed to Tokyo which was teito (the imperial capital). It is important to take note of this regional distinction, for Takarazuka is a part of Kansai. Takarazuka theatre, therefore, can be seen as a product of Kansai culture. Since the name Takarazuka became famous all over the country as the name of the theatre, the fact that the theatre was an integral part of the development of the hot spring town and surrounding area is little known. Consequently, it is important to examine the unique local history of Takarazuka City in order to understand the development of the theatre. It will become clear that Takarazuka theatre is a product of Japan’s modernization – the process of acquiring new technologies and cultural ideas and was a leading representative of international modernity, a window to the outside world,
through which Japanese audiences could see trends from abroad, as observed in fashionable costumes and music.

It was the ‘theatre’ that added special appeal to the town at that time, when traditional Japanese theatre was being contested by overseas influences. The development of Takarazuka theatre was in tune with the current theatre reformation movements to ‘transform and refine’ the already existing theatres. For instance, Kabuki was criticized for becoming elitist while foreign plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen were translated and acted by both men and women. In this changing environment, the new women’s profession of actress was nourished. All-female Takarazuka was at that time a challenging yet promising new venture, in marked contrast to traditional theatre genres which had been the exclusive preserve of men. Takarazuka developed in concert with the emergence of women performing on stage. The socio-cultural context of Takarazuka, nearly its one-hundred-year history, is significant. Takarazuka theatre continues today, but neither its popularity nor negative reception can possibly be understood without looking back at its foundation.

**THE BIRTH OF TAKARAZUKA**

**Kobayashi Ichizō and the foundation of the Hankyū enterprise**

The history of Takarazuka is intertwined with the history of Hankyū Corporation, which is today one of the biggest and strongest railway-based enterprises in Japan, with more than three hundred subsidiary companies. Hankyū is an abbreviation of the Kei-han-shin Kyukō (Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe Express). First, it is the electric railway inaugurated in 1907, which expanded its business to other branches of modern industry: department stores, travel agents, hotels, and various leisure establishments, including a large chain of theatres and cinemas under the overall management of the Tōhō group since 1935. The all-female theatre known today as *Takarazuka Kageki* was started in 1914 as a supplementary project to the primary business activities of the Hankyū railway, but has since developed into a remarkable branch of Japanese show business.

As a basis for argument in the following chapters, it is important to provide a summary of the Hankyū projects directed by the railway tycoon, Kobayashi Ichizō (1873–1957). In order to understand Takarazuka Kageki, it is necessary to examine the Hankyū projects through the persona of Kobayashi Ichizō. Today, Kobayashi is known as a prolific entrepreneur of twentieth-century Japan, who pioneered exemplary strategies in the fields of both business and culture. His range of achievement is derived from the fact that he was not only business-minded in seeking profit, but also cared for literature and the arts. The Kansai environment, where the stimulus from abroad was wide-ranging on the one hand and the merchant spirit was strongly rooted on the other, might well have nurtured Kobayashi’s interest in challenging the status quo and promoting his own ideas.

Kobayashi was, however, not a Kansai region native. Born in 1873 to a wealthy silk and sake merchant in Yamanashi Prefecture, Kobayashi Ichizō