No doubt, what distinguishes Takarazuka from other revue companies is the lavish musical extravaganza by an all-female cast, the ‘student’ girl performers. Beneath the controlled discipline and lavish staging, however, the company exhibits a complex hybrid amalgamation of theatrical traditions, which in turn poses many questions, not least, how, if at all, does Takarazuka exemplify ‘Japanese-ness’? What are the artistic merits of exclusively showcasing young female performers? In English, is it correct to call their genre ‘operetta’, ‘revue’, ‘musical’, and by which definitions? What is the importance and relevance of such lavish extravagance? There are no easy answers to these questions, but it is essential to engage with some of them in order to understand Takarazuka – not as a commercial show genre that is a mere passing fashion, but as a lasting form of stagecraft which deserves a prominent place in Japanese and world theatre history.

This chapter examines Takarazuka from the point of view of the performing arts. Before offering various anthropological or socio-political considerations, however, Takarazuka should be understood primarily as a stage presentation which is meant to be enjoyed as an exhilarating fantasy. In the 1970s, it was Kobayashi Kōhei (1928–2010), a son-in-law of Kobayashi Ichizō, who introduced a new catchphrase to convey the essence of Takarazuka – ‘Fantasy Adventure’. Indeed, Takarazuka has promoted itself as a fantasy land by providing the audience with visual as well as auditory adventures.

The first section further develops what was discussed in Chapter One, by evaluating both domestic and foreign theatrical practices and trends adopted by Takarazuka. I will show how Takarazuka has applied these various elements to fit into their own style. The second section focuses on the art of male impersonators compared to Kabuki female impersonators, as well as foreign counterparts. The last section examines the dramatic ethos of Takarazuka, whose mannerisms continue to project ‘Takarazuka-ness’, and refer to some cases where symbolic representation functions in a broader public sphere outside the theatre or stage environment.
THE FORMULATION OF THE TAKARAZUKA HYBRID STYLE

As already noted above, Takarazuka developed as part of new theatre trends. When one goes to see Takarazuka today, the programme usually consists of two parts – a romantic musical play and a spectacular revue show. These are mostly original works written by the theatre’s own playwrights, as well as their own adaptations or rewrites of existing works ranging from traditional Kabuki plays to Broadway musicals. Indeed, Takarazuka has consistently presented a wide range of repertoire in Western styles, while also producing works in traditional Japanese styles. Accordingly, Takarazuka offers an enticing selection of genres, and wide-ranging subject-matter from all over the world and from various epochs, always endeavouring to reflect contemporary audience trends and tastes. From the beginning, Takarazuka has been basically about this mélange of diverse components. But in each piece there is always a distinctive Takarazuka style, and below I examine what characterizes this distinctiveness. Even by today’s international standards, Takarazuka is an outstandingly extravagant entertainment – indeed, the glittery, multi-cultural staging and the mixture of different cultural references could be considered as ‘bad taste’ or ‘kitsch’. On their London tour, a newspaper reported the show as ‘Cross-dressing Japanese style: Takarazuka is the apotheosis of kitsch’.

Kitsch is originally a German word meaning ‘trash’, but in the post-modern world ‘kitsch’ has also been regarded as a form of art. However, for the moment, let us leave aside subjective judgement, and examine what Takarazuka has taken from overseas to combine with what has been commonly practised in Japan. Their approach has been not simply to copy, nor to live within a specific tradition, but to adapt, to survive, to renew and eventually to make their own way. The mixture of different elements encourages the process of continuous renovation, with new dimensions opening up in Japanese theatre history. Only when one understands such a context for its synchronized style can Takarazuka be appreciated as a hybrid theatre born of diverse manifestations of world theatre heritage, yet remaining distinctively Japanese.

DOMESTICATING FOREIGN INSPIRATIONS

Takarazuka is hybrid theatre that fuses traditional Japanese performance and theatrical elements adapted from the West. This section examines the creation of hybrid ‘fantasy adventure’, focusing on three aspects of production: 1) music, 2) stage performance, and 3) stage sets and costumes. This also gives us the opportunity to consider the identity of the Takarazuka Revue Company by examining what essentially constitutes ‘revue’.

1) Music

The adaptation of Western music has been important in Takarazuka. As we saw in Chapter One, Italian-style opera had just been introduced to Japan when Kobayashi saw the possibility of popularizing the novel genre. Kobayashi Ichizō affirmed that the main purpose of his Girls’ Opera was to combine Japanese dance and Western music. He was determined to create Takarazuka as serious