

Essay

An Oscar for Wakamaru: Robots, Gender, and Performance

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Summary

Beginning with an introduction to the robot Wakamaru, followed by the origins and current definitions of the word “robot,” this essay interrogates the differences between sex and gender in humans and humanoids, with a focus on Japanese robots. I compare the gender technologies employed in the all-male Kabuki theatre, which emerged in the early 1600s, and in the all-female Takarazuka Revue, founded in 1913, and elucidate their influence on the attribution and “performance” of robot gender. I argue that human actors and humanoid robots alike simultaneously call attention to the mutable artifice of gendered identities and recuperate the binary construction of gender, reinforcing in the process heteronormative conventions of being in the world.

Keywords: robots, androids, gender, cross-dressing, theatre, Japan

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