

ARTISTIC

*Ahead of her TAC Talk this month, **The Rose of Versailles** creator Riyoko Ikeda shares how twists of fate led her to become manga royalty.*

WORDS C BRYAN JONES

Outside the Takarazuka Grand Theater in Hyogo Prefecture stands a bronze statue of Oscar François de Jarjayes and André Grandier, the main characters from Riyoko Ikeda's world-famous manga *The Rose of Versailles*. So beloved is this story about the years leading up to the French Revolution that it is immortalized outside the home of Japan's renowned all-female musical theater troupe.

But it almost wasn't.

"I originally wanted to pursue a career in literature," says Ikeda. "I really wanted to be a writer, but I didn't have the talent. I once wrote and submitted an entry, but the best I could do was an honorable mention."

With dreams of becoming the next Murasaki Shikibu shattered, the young woman who would become one of Japan's most influential manga artists forged a new path.

"When I was 18, I ran away from home," she reveals. "I entered university at a time of upheaval and conflict. I felt that if I was going to rebel against my parents, society or whatever I wanted, I would be ashamed to do it on my parents' dime. I thought I had to become financially independent. So I worked various jobs, as a waitress at a coffee shop, as a factory worker."

That was 1966. The New Left political movement was taking shape in Japan, culminating two years later with student groups occupying dozens of universities in a heated conflict with the government. Witnessing this movement that was inspired, in part, by the French Revolution proved to be a formative period for the young student from Osaka.

Work also had an impact. "Doing those jobs, I realized that I was not good at interacting with people," she says. "I wondered what I could do alone, locked in my room. Then I thought, 'The only thing I can do is write a story or make comics.' I drew a manga and took it to a publisher. They said it wasn't good enough. But they told me that



Image: Riyoko Ikeda

TOMO FUJII

I had something to offer and that I should study. They introduced me to a publisher who had a rental bookstore, and I did my apprenticeship there. When I was 21, I got an offer from a magazine company."

Ikeda made her manga debut with *The Maiden of the Rose Mansion* in 1967. The first chapter of *The Rose of Versailles* was published five years later in *Margaret*, a biweekly magazine of *shojo* manga, or girls' comics.

"I continued to attend college while working part-time and, in my sixth year, I started to serialize *The Rose of Versailles*," she says. "Once the serialization started, I got too busy and dropped out after seven years."

No matter. Ikeda was doing what she had always wanted—storytelling—although the format was not the one she had envisioned.

But the influence she had on others was profound. *The Rose of Versailles* was wildly popular. In 1974, an adaptation was staged by the Takarazuka Revue. Performances continued through 2015, with Ikeda writing new stories and scenes. Many credit *The Rose of Versailles* for reinvigorating the Takarazuka Revue, which was formed in 1913.

The story has also been adapted for television and the big screen. A 41-episode anime series ran on Japanese TV from 1979 to 1980, and later in France, Germany, Italy and South Korea. A film version was released in 2008.

After 50 years, *The Rose of Versailles* has sold more than 23 million copies worldwide (the Club Library stocks the

English translation). Its golden anniversary was marked last year with an exhibition at Roppongi Hills' indoor observation deck.

"I think the story holds up because it is not only enjoyable but has been an inspiration to many, created cultural connections and is a statement on political inequality and popular uprisings," says Ikeda.

In 2009, the French government awarded her the National Order of the Legion of Honor, the country's highest order of merit, in recognition of her work's promotion of French history and culture in Japan.

At a TAC Talk this month, Ikeda will discuss her unexpected career as a manga artist (she has written more than 38 books or short stories) and

the social phenomenon sparked by *The Rose of Versailles*, as well as her love of music.

The success of *The Rose of Versailles* enabled Ikeda to pursue a second career of sorts. At the age of 47, she enrolled at the Tokyo College of Music to study as a soprano. Now 75, she is combining storytelling and music to write scripts for operas and musicals.

"This year, we performed an opera I wrote called *Queen Himiko*, and last year my play *The Sleeping Man*, starring my husband, [baritone] Yoshitaka Murata, was performed in Finland," Ikeda says.

"I have known my husband for 15 years, and it has been the happiest 15 years of my life," she adds. "I will be 76 in December. My body gets weaker every year and I wonder how long I can keep singing. But I will continue as long as I get offers.

"And as my husband's activities expand, I will be stepping down from the front line to support him as much as possible. From now on, I guess I will be creating more and more rather than singing."

Additional interviews by Yuko Takahashi.

TAC Talk: Riyoko Ikeda

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