The Essence of 2.5-Dimensional Musicals? Sakura Wars and Theater Adaptations of Anime

Shiro Yoshioka
School of Modern Languages, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK; shiro.yoshioka@ncl.ac.uk

Received: 7 June 2018; Accepted: 3 September 2018; Published: 21 September 2018

Abstract: This paper examines 2.5-Dimensional musicals, or theater adaptations of anime/manga/videogames. As the genre has been gaining popularity in Japan since around 2007, criticism on the genre began to appear. What they uncritically assume is that the pioneer of the genre was the theater adaptation of Prince of Tennis first produced in 2003, and the unique mise-en-scène that attempts to recreate the “world” of the original, including the characters, setting, and the characters’ extreme skills of tennis, is a hallmark of the genre. However, such a view fails to consider the fact that these are actually merely characteristics of a subgenre of 2.5-Dimensional musicals represented by Prince of Tennis and other similar shows. This paper argues that another show, namely the theater adaptation of the videogame Sakura Wars, first produced in 1997 and continuing to this day, actually presents a number of important questions and viewpoints that are useful and necessary to critically discuss the genre, such as how two-dimensional characters are materialized on stage, which role audiences play in that process, how 2.5-Dimensional musicals can be contextualized within conventional theater genres rather than a part of “media mix” strategies, and tension between the local and global in their production and consumption.

Keywords: 2.5-Dimensional musicals; Prince of Tennis; Sakura Wars; voice actors; characters; live performance; audience participation; export

1. Introduction

One notable characteristic of anime is that it is, more often than not, a part of a larger franchise involving other media formats such as manga, videogames, or novels (Condry 2013; Denison 2015; Kataoka 2011; Steinberg 2012). A recent addition to these “usual suspects” within the so-called “media mix” strategies is theater adaptations of anime, manga, and videogame dubbed as “2.5-Dimensional musicals.” Its popularity as a genre led to the establishment of the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association in 2014. According to the Association, between 2000 and 2007, 15 to 20 2.5-Dimensional musicals (defined by the association as “any theatrical representations based on Japanese manga, popular animation, and video games” and, despite the word “musical”, “straight plays, comedies, and dramas” are also included) were produced every year. After 2007, the number began to increase and, after 2011, 20 more new plays were produced every year, bringing the total number to 123, attracting a total audience of 1.32 million in 2015 (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association n.d.).

In this article, I will critically overview current discourses on 2.5-Dimensional musicals in Japan, comparing two shows, namely, Prince of Tennis and Sakura Wars. Currently, as detailed below in Chapter 2, critics as well as producers of 2.5-Dimensional musicals uncritically assume that the genre has its origin in the theater musical adaptation of Prince of Tennis, or Tenimyu, as it is often called by fans, first produced in 2003. They also give its “revolutionary” or “innovative” mise-en-scène that attempts to recreate the world as it is depicted in the original manga, as well as its anime adaptation, as the essence that constitute the genre. However, I argue that Sakura Wars, which is largely neglected
by critics and producers, adapts very different strategies in adapting a “two-dimensional” text into a stage play, and therefore deserves critical attention.

Despite its very long history (first performance in 1997 with annual or twice-annual productions up to the time of writing with some hiatuses), its popularity (spectators including such prominent figures as film director Yamada Yōji), and involvement of high-profile figures in theaters, including kabuki actor Ichikawa Shun’en, actor and director Mitsuya Yūji, who later played significant role in Tenimyu, and designer Yokoo Tdanori, who designed some of posters of the show, very little critical attention has been paid to the stage productions of Sakura Wars, based on videogames of the same title: Suzuki Kunio, a specialist of Japanese theater, makes a passing remark in his book chapter on 2.5-Dimensional musicals (see below for more details), and Fujiwara Mayuko, a specialist of American musicals, also refers to the show in a footnote of her article on theater adaptation of Black Butler, saying the show is significant in reflecting on the nature of 2.5-Dimensional musicals as musical-theater plays (Fujiwara 2015). However, neither of them analyzes the show in detail nor compares it with Tenimyu-esque shows. By comparing the theater adaptation of Sakura Wars with Tenimyu—especially the way the former recreated the characters on stage, not through mise-en-scène but recreating the world within the original texts through a complex narrative structure that enables the spectators to “enjoy the world” of the original text, as Azuma Sonoko puts it in her attempt to pinpoint differences between 2.5-Dimensional musicals and other conventional plays based on anime, manga, or videogames, as discussed below—I will demonstrate that, while some aspects of Tenimyu, such as production over a very long period of time with the same actors playing the same role for a prolonged period of time, it, and later shows similar to it from some other 2.5-Dimensional musicals as in its broadest sense (adaptation of anime/manga/videogames), mise-en-scène is not necessarily the only factor. Instead, it is actually more like a property of another subgenre of 2.5-Dimensional musicals established by Tenimyu. I will also discuss the prospect of exporting 2.5-Dimensional musicals, in relation to strength and weakness of Tenimyu-style shows vis-à-vis Sakura Wars, which stems from their different approaches to recreating the characters on stage.

As Rick Altman asserts in relation to films, genre is not a fixed and stable entity, but instead it is discursively constructed by different parties (Altman 1999). The current discourses that uncritically assume Tenimyu as the origin of 2.5-Dimensional musicals obscure actually how the genre came into existence before the word was coined, and also significant issues that could warrant further discussion within theater adaptations, as well as live performance in general based on anime/manga/videogames. In addition, such discourses significantly restrict critical discussion of the genre because they overlook the very simple fact that these shows are a part of cross-media adaptation strategies, but are at the same time theater plays that can be discussed as such, contextualized within appropriate theoretical and historical framework that is specific to the media. The aim of this paper is to critique current discourses, especially the rupture between the broad definition of 2.5-Dimensional musicals seen in the pamphlet of the Japan 2.5-Dimensional musicals Association and the very narrow view held by at least some critics as well as potentially the creators/producers themselves by presenting an alternative view/example of theater adaptation of 2D texts. By doing so, I will attempt to contextualize 2.5-Dimensional musicals as a subgenre within live performances, especially theater, rather than simply a variation within cross-media adaptations. This approach will enable us to investigate the genre focusing on its media specificity that separates it from its original “2D” texts, especially physicality represented by the tension between bodies of the actors and 2D characters, stage sets/space, and fictitious world/setting within the original 2D texts, shared experience bound to a specific time and place, and transnational, independent, and/or ad hoc consumption of media texts.
2. Is Tenimyu the Origin of 2.5-Dimensional Musicals?

2.1. Prince of Tennis and Sakura Wars

Before delving into detailed discussion, some overview of the two franchises is necessary. Tenimyu is based on Prince of Tennis, a manga by Konomi Takeshi serialized in weekly manga magazine *Shonen Jump* between 1998 and 2008. The story features a group of middle-school boys who belong to the tennis clubs of different schools competing over each other. They have extreme skills that are impossible to reproduce in the real world, and the story develops over arcs that cover matches between different characters/schools. It was first adapted into a TV anime series, which ran between 2001 and 2005. Tenimyu follows the original storyline, with the first season produced in 2003, featuring many young *ikemen* (good-looking) actors, and is targeted at female audience. In addition, there also are some shows called “Dream Live” and “The Great Sports Day (*Dai undō kai*)”, in which the actors sing or play sports outside the usual framework of structured production, but still as their characters. These “extra events,” as discussed later, are a very significant feature that Tenimyu and Sakura Wars have in common, and one of the factors that separate these shows from some other 2.5-Dimensional musicals.

Sakura Wars (Sakura hereafter) is videogame originally released in 1996. It is a fusion of a dating game and simulation game in which the player becomes the captain of a special team in the interwar period. The team consists of young girls with various different personal and ethnic backgrounds. Sequels were released in 1998, 2001, 2002, and 2005. The first two games are set in Tokyo, which in the game is called “Teito” or the Imperial capital, reflecting the prewar historical setting. In the third instalment, the locale moves to Paris, then returns to Tokyo to feature all characters who appeared in the first three stories, and the fifth instalment features all-new characters in New York. In April 2018, after a long hiatus, a new instalment was announced to be released in 2019, again set in Tokyo but 17 years after the original story. Theater plays a very significant role in the text: the special team disguises itself as a revue company modelled after the Takarazuka Revue Company (although it is in the Ginza area of Tokyo rather than western Japan), a Parisian cabaret in Montmartre, or a Broadway theater in New York, and the girls are actresses or dancers/singers at these venues when they are not fighting, while the avatar of the player is a ticket collector.1 As mentioned above, it was

---

1 The latest addition to the franchise so far is a manga and its theater adaptation, published and first produced in 2012. These are spin-offs of the original videogame featuring another team in the same theater in Teito, which has never appeared or been mentioned in any of the earlier texts (videogames, features, and TV anime, novels, manga, theater plays). Interestingly, all but one of the members of the team are young men who usually work as musicians playing for the productions featuring the actresses appearing in the videogame (but they never appear in this manga or musical), and the leader is the only female in the team, who is the conductor of the orchestra. Unlike their female counterparts, who are all skilled in combative activities such as sword-fighting, shooting, or karate and fight the enemies in robots, they play musical instruments that have the power to amplify a supernatural power called *reiryu* or spiritual power the men and the conductor (and also their female counterparts and their commander) have to sedate or attack the enemy. The manga was serialized in a monthly *shōjo* or girls’ manga magazine *Hana to yume* between 2012 and 2013. The limited collector’s edition of the first volume of the manga book (tankōbon) came with a DVD with a short anime (2.5 min), a slideshow using panels of the manga complete with voices dubbed by the voice actors, and a roundtable featuring them. It appears that this manga and musical were an attempt to catch up with the popularity of 2.5-Dimensional theater featuring young actors: unlike the “main” videogames and their theater adaptation, the target audience was clearly female, and the cast of the musical were not the voice actors who dubbed the anime. However, the manga was discontinued only after four volumes, and the show went into a hiatus after two seasons. There can be a number of possible reasons for the relative unpopularity of this new instalment. The biggest of them can simply be that the whole project was based on a manga that seems to be hastily created for the sake of creating a Tenimyu-style 2.5-Dimensional musical, with characters and settings sticking out of the rest of the “universe” of the franchise. However, another important and interesting aspect, which I cannot fully cover in this particular article, is the issue of audiences’ gender. Apart from the points I will discuss below, one significant difference between Tenimyu-style 2.5-Dimensional musicals and the theater adaptation of Sakura is the target audience. Some of the original texts of typical 2.5-Dimensional musicals, such as Prince of Tennis or Yowamushi Pedal are serialized in *shōnen*, or boys’ manga magazines (although with female fans, just like similar examples from the 1980s such as *Captain Tsubasa*), but, once adapted to theater, the target is predominantly female with its cast consisting of young male actors, and the audience, especially as was the case with early productions of Tenimyu as discussed later, seem to behave similar to fans of male *aidoru*. The original videogame of Sakura is categorized as *gyaru*, or dating game, also targeting male players, but in reality, there are a number of female fans as evidenced by existence of dojinshi or fan-created manga or novels featuring the homoerotic relationship between few male characters in the series. However, another “hook” of the franchise for the female fans is the existence of
adapted into a theater play in 1997, continuing up to the time of writing with hiatuses, while the characters featured as well as the title of the show changed over the period. As in Tenimyu, Sakura also has a number of productions in which the actresses sing or play games as their characters outside usual productions. More significantly, Hiroi Öji, the general producer of the franchise, had a theater adaptation in his mind when the project was launched, and one significant criterion of choosing the voice actresses for the first, second, and fifth videogame was whether they could sing and/or act on stage (Hiroi and Hamamura 2011). In other words, the stage adaptation was originally planned to be an integral part of the so-called “media mix” strategies, which is not the case with The Price of Tennis. In addition, unlike many other long-running 2.5-Dimensional musicals, the shows of Sakura are not simple a theater adaptation of the original videogame. Instead, they have a totally original storyline featuring some characters that only appeared in them or sometimes filled the gap within the setting or storyline of the original.

2.2. Discourses on 2.5-Dimensional musicals as A Genre

The sharp growth of the genre attracted popular and critical attention in Japan. Japanese prominent art magazines Yuriika (Eureka) and Bijutsu techō (The Art Handbook) covered it extensively in their April 2015 and July 2016 issues, respectively. The shared assumption evident in descriptions of the genre in these magazines, as well as others such as the pamphlet issued by the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association, is that the genre has its origin in Tenimyu. For example, the issue of Yuriika mentioned above had a commentary that overviewed the history of 2.5Dimensional musicals between the period of 1991 and 2015, when the issue was published, categorizing the genre historically and chronologically using some keywords.

However, the period before 2003, categorized as “Pre-Prince of Tennis”, has only four entries apart from the theater adaptation of Saint Seiya (1991), known for featuring male idol group SMAP, who at the time were still in the infancy of their career. All other keywords refer to plays, directors, and production companies after Prince of Tennis (Yamada and Ueda+PORCH 2015). The pamphlet issued by the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association has a list of representative 2.5-Dimensional musicals, in which Prince of Tennis (Tenimyu hereafter) is explained as having “spearheaded the rise of today’s 2.5-Dimensional musical boom” (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association n.d.). Mainstream media also make a similar claim, as is the case in an article on Asahi Shimbun that reported on the popularity of the genre (2.5 jigen myūjikaru seichō: Manga, anime butaika, gaikokujinkyaku nimo ninki 2017). Academics also attempted to define and describe the genre, using Tenimyu as the benchmark and watershed of the genre. Suzuki Kunio, for example, claims in his chapter at the end of an edited volume that overviews the history of musicals in Japan, that the “genuine origin” of the genre is Tenimyu (Suzuki 2018). However, if 2.5-Dimensional musicals are defined as theater adaptations of anime/manga/videogames, they existed, as Suzuki also points out, since the 1970s in the form of Rose of Versailles by the Takarazuka Revue Company first produced in 1974 (Suzuki 2018). What exactly, then, makes Tenimyu so special? Suzuki is somewhat vague in this respect. After overviewing theater adaptations of anime/manga/videogames in Japan since the 1970s, he, as mentioned above,
claims that Tenimyu is the “genuine origin” of 2.5-Dimensional musicals and acclaims its uniqueness as follows:

The exchange of rally [as it is represented in the play] is nothing but the very structure of [ancient] Greek tragedy that [involves interactions between] one [character] and another, or two; the way [the characters] play tennis or the skills they use represent their personalities, and the choreography that skillfully uses rackets even has aesthetics in reminiscence of no or kabuki theater. I believe that a production that is filled with so much originality has been long absent from Japanese theaters, and it would hardly be an overstatement to say that each players [of tennis in Tenimyu] are materializing an art form that is comparable with ukiyo-e woodblock printings (Suzuki 2018).

I will further examine his discussion of 2.5-Dimensional musicals in more detail later, but at least for Suzuki, a theater-studies specialist, what makes Tenimyu different is its mise-en-scène. However, one question that has to be asked is: Is the mise-en-scène of Tenimyu an essential part of 2.5-Dimensional musicals, or is it actually a property of the particular type of subgenre represented by Tenimyu, namely, a theater adaptation of manga that was later adapted into anime, which features a sport played by a group of young schoolboys and has an “over-the-top” depiction of the characters and their skills?

Suzuki’s idea that the mise-en-scène seen in Tenimyu is a hallmark of 2.5-Dimensional musicals is shared by other critics and also producers of these plays. For example, Hoshino Futoshi claims that 2.5-Dimensional musicals have three characteristics, namely: they are musicals based on existing manga or anime; the cast are mainly young male actors; and they do not rely on the convention of realism on which conventional musicals stand, and this third point called for a new genre title of 2.5-Dimensional musicals (Hoshino 2015). He then explains that 2.5-Dimensional musicals stand on an alternative convention of realism, namely: appearances of the characters played by actors clearly and closely resemble those of the original two-dimensional characters; stage sets often consist of highly simplified components; and the code of narrative in the original that is often un-naturalistic is prioritized over coherence of a theatrical narrative structure (Hoshino 2015). Sociologist Azuma Sonoko discusses the third point on the code using Ōtsuka Eiji’s concept of “manga/anime-esque realism (manga anime teki riarizumu),” namely, an idea that manga and anime have a different kind of convention about what is real/realistic within the world they depict, and that is not necessarily compatible with the idea of realism in the “real” world. Significantly, manga/anime-esque realism, unlike “naturalistic” realism, also focuses thoroughly on characters rather than people with flesh/a body. According to Azuma, 2.5-Dimensional musicals respect conventions within the original texts, however unrealistic they appear to be, while in conventional musicals based on manga or anime, such as those produced by the Takarazuka Revue Company, such unreality is adjusted or modified so that it is more acceptable for the audience. Therefore, 2.5-Dimensional musicals form a genre that is separate from conventional theater adaptations of manga, anime, or videogames. She also asserts that in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, “manga and other texts are not simply one of ingredients for theater production, but it is rather that theater performance is chosen and utilized as a means to allow the audience to enjoy the world depicted in those texts” (Azuma 2016).

None of these critics, however, clearly explain exactly what they mean by such unconventional mise-en-scène, or how unconventional a show should be to be recognized as a 2.5-Dimensional musicals. Suzuki simply quotes from the theater program of a recent production of Tenimyu, which claims that the show reproduced the tennis matches as they are depicted in the manga, which were said to be impossible to recreate, using a spotlight that signified the movement of the ball coupled with the sound of the ball being shot, which was also enhanced by a video image where necessary; it featured memorable music that directly represented the image of the world depicted in the original; and powerful dances that featured the forms of tennis (Suzuki 2018). Hoshino makes a point similar to Azuma without referring to Ōtsuka’s concept, stating that the performers/producers and the spectators share the understanding that 2.5-Dimensional musicals are adaptations of texts in a totally...
different media format that is impossible to be reproduced on stage. He points out that, in Tenimyu, speeches and events in the original that are often nonsensical are represented on stage as they are without any modification, keeping highly charged emotions in the original (Hoshino 2015). He also refers to the unrealistic tennis skills displayed by the characters in the original Prince of Tennis as specific examples, but he does not make any general definition or discussion on unreality as the essence of 2.5-Dimensional musicals (Hoshino 2015) Azuma simply gives the unrealistic color of the characters’ hair or their costumes as examples (Azuma 2016) Ueda Mayuko, in her discussion of another sport-themed 2.5-Dimensional musical Haikyū, lists mise-en-scène in these sports-themed 2.5-Dimensional musicals, which she calls “revolutionary,” namely “the Puzzle Ride System” in Yowamushi pedal, a choreography devised by the show’s director Nishida Shatonä, representing a bicycle race with actors only having the handles of bicycles moving on the stage in precisely choreographed formation, the aforementioned examples of representation of tennis match in Tenimyu, and also the tilted stage in Haikyū, which features volleyball matches (Ueda 2016).

A pitfall of this approach is that it significantly limits the critical and also creative scope of 2.5-Dimensional musicals because it is basically based on the idea that Tenimyu is the prototype of the genre, and mise-en-scène that attempts to recreate the “over-the-top” aspect of the original on stage as it is seen in Tenimyu is an, or even the essence of, 2.5-Dimensional musicals. It is true that Tenimyu is highly successful and popular. It, at the time of writing, has no less than 32 “arcs” over three seasons between 2003 and 2017 (Myūjikaru Tenisu No Ojisama Kōshiki Koremade No Kōen 2018). The show attracted an audience of no less than 2.1 million in total as of 2016, and some shows were produced outside Japan (South Korea and Taiwan) (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association 2016). Furthermore, other similar shows Ueda mentions also enjoy popularity. However, whether the mise-en-scène touted as unique or even “revolutionary” in Tenimyu and other similar shows is truly an essential aspect of 2.5-Dimensional musicals is questionable because there are numerous anime/manga/videogames that provide the original for these theater adaptations, and not all of them have the same level of “over-the-top-ness” found in Tenimyu and others. However, excessive emphasis on Tenimyu and especially its mise-en-scène as a specimen example of 2.5-Dimensional musicals leads to a potential risk that creators, critics, and spectators only recognize quasi-Tenimyu-esque shows as 2.5-Dimensional musicals, leaving all other shows slipping out of their fingers. This actually seems to be already happening in several areas: as already seen, critics tend to use Tenimyu as almost the only example of typical 2.5-Dimensional musicals, and so do the practitioners. Matsuda Makoto, the producer of Tenimyu, the CEO of Nelke Planning, a company producing a number of 2.5-Dimensional musicals and one of the organizers of the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association, was asked in an interview about texts that are suitable for adaptation into 2.5-Dimensional musicals. He replied:

To adapt manga and anime into a stage play, you would need some kind of idea. I believe that shows in which the idea enabled the original to be “converted” successfully [into a stage play] will be successful. For example, in Tenimyu we converted tennis matches into dances and songs. In Yowamushi pedal, we converted a bicycle race into highly choreographed human movements (pawā maimu). It is difficult to recreate the sense of being on the scene as you read it in the manga on stage, but if you read the manga and come up with the idea for the conversion, then there is a chance. I tell young producers that if you simply copy the original, that won’t work, and also you would lose out if you don’t have the device for conversion in your head. I feel that that is the most thrilling aspect of 2.5-Dimensional musicals (The Japan Foundation 2015).

Again, Matsuda equates the “idea” with coming up with a mise-en-scène that effectively reproduces manga/anime-esque characteristics of the original on stage. However, is this the formula of success for 2.5-Dimensional musicals, and its essence as a genre? I argue that that is not the case. Instead of focusing on mise-en-scène, we can approach some significant aspects of 2.5-Dimensional musicals by examining another show, namely, the theater adaptation of Sakura, which predates Tenimyu
but still has some similar aspects as well as significant differences in terms of its approach to theater adaptations of anime/manga/videogames or two-dimensional texts.

2.3. 2D “Characters” on Stage

Suzuki, in his overview of 2.5-Dimensional musicals, gives three significant aspects of the genre besides the mise-en-scène, which is predominantly associated with the post-\textit{Tenimyu} period, namely costumes, characters, and fans (Suzuki 2018). He asserts that one significant change in the early history of 2.5-Dimensional musicals is that productions such as \textit{Rose of Versailles} or \textit{Saint Seiya} attracted audiences because they came to the theaters, not necessarily because they were fans of the original texts, but because they often wanted to see the Takarazuka actresses/Johnny’s idols; after the theater adaptation of \textit{Sailor Moon} in 1991, which did not feature any famous actors, most of the spectators were fans of the original and they wanted to see the characters in costume on stage that looked exactly as in the original (Suzuki 2018). Both \textit{Tenimyu} and \textit{Sakura} are the same in this respect, at least to some extent. To be more precise, in both cases, the producers made attempts to “educate” the spectators so that they expected to come to the theater to see the characters and participate (or not participate) in the show as such, as discussed below. However, while \textit{Tenimyu} features young actors who physically very strongly resemble the characters they are playing, in \textit{Sakura}, it is the voice actresses who played the voices of the characters in the original videogame that play the same role on stage. This difference leads us to the first major issue on 2.5-Dimensional musicals: how would they recreate characters on stage? Behind this question is still another question: what is character?

The idea of character is a popular topic in discussion of Japanese popular culture, especially in relation to manga. In the case of 2.5-Dimensional musicals, discussion on characters often focus on the relationship between the 2D characters who lack physicality and their “3D” representation on stage by actors with a body, and especially on how the integrity between these two is secured. As is the case in many post-\textit{Tenimyu} 2.5-Dimensional musicals, one aspect, obviously, would be physical appearance. But that is not everything. Instead, in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, it is often argued that eventually the actors have to “be the character” by digesting all aspects beyond physical appearance. That, in turn, leads to an assumption that in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, the actors are always the characters, not the actors, and it is not acceptable for them to show, at any moment, their “real” self. As Hoshino aptly puts it, in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, the actors are “mediums” that facilitate the appearance of 2D characters in a 3D space. He compares 2.5-Dimensional musicals with a religious ritual because of their shared characteristics, in that both of these make the spectators/worshippers have an illusion that something that does not exist in reality is physically in front of them through the body of a person. In his view, as such, actors in 2.5-Dimensional musicals are a sacrifice in these rituals, whose bodies are dedicated to the imaginary figure for its materialization (Hoshino 2015). In other words, the actors are containers for the characters. Sugawa Akiko, one of Japanese pioneers in research on what she termed the “2.5-Dimensional Cultural Sphere (2.5 \textit{jigen bunka ken})” or a host of products/activities that lie in the liminal area between 2D texts and the 3D “real” world, such as 2.5-Dimensional musicals, cosplaying, and so-called “pilgrimage” or tourism to places that appeared or used as model of locales in 2D texts, makes a similar point in some more detail using, again, \textit{Tenimyu} as an example. She states that spectators of \textit{Tenimyu} “superimpose the image of anime on the actors on stage by appreciating their appearance that looks exactly the same as in the anime (and also their makeup, costume, and props that are a replica [of the anime and manga] and their voice (the actors imitate the voices and speech style of the characters they play as they are presented in anime as closely as possible)” (Sugawa 2015). As a result, these “3D” actors are required to completely suppress their “true self” to be the characters, and this “characters-first policy,” as she calls it, “pushes away personal characteristics of the individual actors to the background” (Sugawa 2015).
In 2.5-Dimensional musicals, the “myth” that the actors on stage are the characters, not actors playing the role of the characters, is crucial. These remarks on the relationship between the actors and characters tell us about one aspect of this myth. However, it is not only the actors who are involved in the creation and maintenance of this myth because it has to be shared by the producers, actors, and the spectators for 2.5-Dimensional musicals to exist, and for that, different techniques have been developed. I argue that *Sakura Wars* and *Tenimyu* share some of these in contrast to the assumption that these are unique to the latter, and at the same time, they take different approaches in securing integrity between 2D characters in the original text and 3D ones on stage. More specifically, they both incorporated a mechanism that reinforced the myth in the form of extra shows in which the actors performed outside usual theater productions, but still as the characters. However, in *Tenimyu*, as discussed later, this extra show is more like a way to enable the spectators to immerse themselves in the world of the text by allowing them to see the characters exist outside the play (i.e., not bound with prescribed speeches and actions in the original text and the script), even cheering at them by shouting the name of the characters, while in the regular shows they are supposed to “behave.” In *Sakura*, on the other hand, the aim and effect of the extra shows are the same, but the spectators are encouraged to actively participate in the reinforcement of the myth in the regular shows by interacting with the characters, and the mechanism to facilitate this process is integrated into the structure of the show, making it a fusion of a theater play and a live music performance. In addition, while *Sakura* elects to use the voice of the characters to secure the integrity between 2D and 3D characters, *Tenimyu* opts for physical appearance, although the actors are trained to imitate the voice and speech of the characters in the anime adaptation.

Another important issue about the physical representation of 2D characters on stage for long-running shows like *Sakura* and *Tenimyu* is how to cope with actual physical and emotional changes of the actors through passage of time. Again, the two shows have commonality in that the performers, unlike one-shot shows, are allowed to identify or “become” the character over a longer period of time. At the same time, the different method to secure the integrity between 2D and 3D characters in these two shows have their own strengths and weaknesses, which are related to the prospect of exporting these shows, or 2.5-Dimensional musicals in general, as discussed toward the end of this article. Now, I will discuss each of these points in turn, starting with some general discussion on the materialization of 2D characters in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, or what it exactly means for the actors to “become” the characters.

### 3. How Actors “Become” Characters

To consider what it means for actors to be the characters in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, it is necessary to reflect on what characters in this particular context are, and what the differences between the characters in the original 2D texts and their representation or “recreation” in “3D” world are. Anime critic Fujitsu Ryōta claims that anime characters can exist because their integrity is guaranteed by coherence of its iconographic characteristics (such as color of hair) and voice. Of these two aspects, the former are simply signs, while the voice, although it is attached to the body of the actor, the viewers hear it as the voice of the character, not that of the actor; therefore, it is actually separated from their body (Fujitsu 2015). He also asserts that in 2.5-Dimensional musicals or live film adaptations of 2D texts, on the other hand, the body of the actor exists first. It is when “the adaptation can offer proper reasons why the actor has to recreate the iconographic characteristics of the character using his/her body” that “the ‘body’ and ‘iconographic characteristics’ strike a balance and a ‘2.5-Dimensional character’ (that recreates a 2D character in 3D) is born” (Fujitsu 2015). If, in this process, excessive emphasis is placed on recreating iconographic characteristics with the body of the actor having a weak link with them, the result would simply be a person who looks like the character (Fujitsu 2015). What links these two (the body and the iconographic characteristics) is internal characteristics of the character that is formed within the mind of the actor, and superficial aspects of the character, such as hair, speech style, and costume, can only stand on top of it (Fujitsu 2015) According to Fujitsu, for the
actor to form the “internal characteristics of the character,” it is crucial that the adapted text has an ample amount of “information on setting and story” that facilitates the process (Fujitsu 2015).

The claim that information on the setting and story is necessary for an actor to “be” the character does not seem to be unusual in relation to the relationship between an actor and their role because that will facilitate a deeper understanding of the role, just like contextual information on conventional dramas and relevant methodologies for acting would also apply to 2.5-Dimensional musicals. However, there are some differences between 2.5-Dimensional musicals and many live-action adaptations, especially feature films or TV dramas. Live-action adaptations tend to feature established actors and the stories are often modified or abridged due to lack of time to recreate the entire story of a given anime/manga, thus requiring “reason for the actor to physically recreating the character” and the formation of the “internal characteristics.” At the same time, however, unlike 2.5-Dimensional musicals, where the spectators, as Suzuki pointed out above, come to the theater to see the characters, not the actors, audiences of these films or TV dramas may well want to see the actors as much as or more than the characters. In 2.5-Dimensional musicals, on the other hand, the actors are expected to fully recreate the character, even by suppressing their own self. In addition, the story tends to be exactly the same as the original, spanning a long time in terms of time both in and outside the text. This means that the actors on stage need extra information on the setting or context so that they can fully be the characters.

Tsutsui Haruka, in her discussion of *Tenimyu*, explains that this “extra” is two-folded: one is “temporal and spatial parts” that are supplemented to the original text when it was produced on stage, and the other is temporal continuity, in which one actor continues to play the same role over a prolonged period of time. The added temporal and spatial parts can be regarded as a version of the extra information Fujitsu mentioned. Tsutsui states that when two-dimensional visual texts are adapted to stage, the entire world of the original text as it is represented in it is “set up” on stage by the behavior of the characters and events that happen to them outside the frame of the anime or manga being inserted in a form appropriate to theater as a medium (Tsutsui 2015). On the actual stage, these inserted parts take the form of ad-libs, intentional variations between each production, and, in the case of *Tenimyu*, what is called “the bench work”, or pantomimes by characters on the background who are not playing in the match taking place at the center of the stage. These are not relevant to the main plot of the original or the play, but they are very important for the spectators because they can see these in front of them even though they are not depicted in the original 2D text, and so are for the actors (and also the characters as they are represented on stage) because these make it clear that the characters do not exist simply to recreate the original story, but they can “build up stories spontaneously” (Tsutsui 2015). She also points out that the longer an actor plays the same character, the stronger they will be associated with it (Tsutsui 2015). If we apply Fujitsu’s scheme, these “blank parts” that allow actors to develop the character beyond simple facsimile of the original will facilitate the actor’s deeper interpretation of the character that, in turn, leads to the formation of “internal characteristics.” Furthermore, by playing the same role, the actor can forge a deeper and stronger link with the character to further develop understanding of the “internal characteristics”.

It is not just actors who are involved in this process of formation of characters. As it is already observable in the example of the “bench work” above, the spectators also go through a process in which they accept the actors as the characters. In his article on *Tenimyu*, Iwashita Hōsei reaches a conclusion similar to Tsutsui’s point above that “continuously watching *Tenimyu* is to observe the actors grow and identify with the characters” and “consequently the image of the growing actors creates that of the character different from the original text on stage” (Iwashita 2015). Before reaching this conclusion, however, he, also referring to the “bench work” and such events as “Dream Live” and “The Great Sports Day (Dai undō kai), contends that, as the spectators follow this process of observation, they superimpose “actors with names of their characters” on “actors with names as actors (i.e., not necessarily their real name but the name with which they are known as actors)” (Iwashita 2015). These two concepts, in addition to another category, namely, “the actors with their real name” (i.e., the actors in their private life where they use their real name) were originally adapted by Azuma Sonoko in
her analysis of fans of Takarazuka: the former is an equivalent of an actress who is playing a particular role in a particular play produced by the revue company, and the latter refers to the same actress herself who plays different roles in different plays, again produced by the company, but still under the same stage name either as a male (otoko yaku) or female (on’na yaku). In the case of Takarazuka, the life of actresses as “actors with their real name” is hidden from the fans (Azuma 2009). According to Iwashita, the spectators of Tenimyu, by watching the behavior of the actors in the “bench work,” “Dream Live”, and “The Great Sports Day”, which are not relevant to the plot, they appreciate how “correctly” “actors with the names of their characters” understand and play the character they are playing, and, at the same time, they are also looking for “actors with names as actors” or the “true self” of the actor that can actually compromise accuracy (Iwashita 2015). He further points out that the fact that, once 2.5-Dimensional musicals are sold as DVD or Blu-ray, these discs have bonus features such as behind-the-scenes footage that provide the viewers with images of the actors outside the stage, further encouraging this type of viewing. Iwashita’s point seems to be contradictory to the claim made by Sugawa and Hoshino above that, in 2.5-Dimensional musicals, actors have to completely abandon their “true self.” However, his point, as well as that of Tsutsui, actually indicates that such a claim does not mean that in 2.5-Dimensional musicals the actor has to be totally transparent, but it rather means that even their personality should contribute to reinforce the existence of the 2D character they are playing on stage. Even under the “character-first” policy, the personality of the actors actually exists within the characters recreated on stage in a very subtle form, and it is this delicate balance between the two that the spectators enjoy when they see a 2.5-Dimensional musical production.3

The articles on Tenimyu I have mentioned above often refer to “Dream Live” and “The Great Sports Day” to contend that, in Tenimyu, the relationship between the actors and the characters they are playing is unique. These events, which started in 2004 and 2012, respectively, as already briefly mentioned, are different from regular productions in that they are totally irrelevant to the plot of the original text. In these “extra events”, the actors sing songs in the former or play various “real” sports in the latter, still as the characters they are playing. In other words, in these extra shows the characters exist outside the original text as it is represented on stage in regular productions, and their existence relies entirely on the actors. Thus, the borderline between “actors with the names of their characters” and “actors with names as actors” in Iwashita’s scheme is blurred. These shows, if we apply Tsutsui’s concept, consist solely of the supplementary temporal and spatial parts. In an interview, Ueshima Yukio, the director, choreographer, and writer of Tenimyu since its first production, asked about the difficulties the actors can face in Dream Live where they have to keep playing their characters outside the regular production, independent of the storyline, replied as follows:

In the regular productions [of Tenimyu] we make it a rule to make the actors stay in their characters all time. I tell them that they still have to be the characters even when they go down to the auditorium [during the show as a part of mise-en-scène]. In Dream Live, although these are live performances [rather than a stage play], they must be there as the characters. I tell them never stop doing that, and scold them if they are forgetting to be their characters. But unlike in the regular performances, the spectators can shout [the name of the characters] aloud like “Ryôma!” or “Tezuka buchô (the head of the club)!” From the very beginning [of these shows] we direct [the spectators] to call them by the name of the characters, not the actors (‘Tenimyu’ to iu mahô no kuni no tsukuri kata: Orijinaru enshutsu/furitsuke Ueshima Yukio 2016).

3 Although I cannot discuss this in full detail, the three types of personae are not specific to Takarazuka or 2.5-Dimensional musicals, but obviously can be applied to celebrities or stars in general: Richard Dyer (2004), for example, points out that a “star image consists both of what we normally refer to as his or her ‘image,’ made up of screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that ‘image’ and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it.” In the case of these genres, however, the tension between “image” and “real” can be further complicated because of the complex role of gender within the scheme.
This means that, in *Tenimyu*, the producers are making an active attempt to blur the boundary between the two kinds of actors in Iwashita’s concept.

This kind of relationship between actor and character, however, is not unique to or established by *Tenimyu*. In reality, *Sakura* has almost exactly the same mechanism, since before the first production of *Tenimyu’s* The Great Sports Day in 2004. More significantly, in *Sakura*, such a scheme is at work not only in the extra shows but also in regular ones. In addition, unlike *Tenimyu*, in *Sakura* the mechanism is built into the structure of the show itself in the form of complex narrative structure that enables the spectators to immerse themselves into the “world” of the original text. Between 2002 and 2006, the shows of *Sakura* were produced twice annually in summer and during the New Year holidays rather than just in summer. While the shows in summer were conventional musicals, the New Year shows, titled *Shinshun kayō shō* or The New Year Music Show, consisted of two parts: the first was a short musical that often supplemented the story of the show held in the summer before, and, in the second part, as in *Tenimyu’s* counterparts, the actresses, as their characters, sang, danced, played Japanese *taiko* drums, or engaged in various activities including games or quiz competitions. Particularly interesting and important among these is “various activities.” Apart from one exception (a form of quiz/comedy show called *ōgiri*), the actresses did not know the questions until they heard them on stage for the quizzes, and, as for the game, the whole event was improvised: they played *sugoroku*, a board game often played in Japan when friends and family come together to celebrate the New Year. On the board of *sugoroku* is a stretch of path that connects the origin and the goal. Just like in Monopoly, the players roll a die and move their game pieces. The one who reaches the goal first wins the game. Again like Monopoly, the path between the origin and the goal is divided into many grids, and the players have to follow the instructions written on the grid on which their piece landed. In the case of *Sakura’s* shows, these instructions asked the players to do various things, such as impersonating another character, singing a song that is usually sung by another character, or play a musical instrument of their choice (only for this, the actresses were informed in advance and practiced during the rehearsals, choosing an instrument ranging from the trumpet to the Japanese *shamisen* lute). These games continued over the period of the entire production (usually a week). In the case of quizzes and *ōgiri*, the points won by the actresses were accumulated and carried on to the next performance on the following day, or sometimes in the evening of the same day. *Sugoroku* was suspended when they ran out of time for the day, and was resumed in next performance from where they left it. So the spectators had to either attend all shows or buy the DVD that includes behind-the-scenes footage and all variations of the show, including ad-libs and changes to the setlist, to know the final result, making the show akin to a variety show and a live music performance rather than a theater performance.

In these extra shows, exactly as Iwashita and Tsutsui point out in relation to *Tenimyu*, the spectators enjoy observing how accurately the “actors with the names of their characters” understand the characters they are playing as well as “actors with the name as actors” that appear in the improvised conversations. In addition, they also often enjoy some deviation of the characters on stage from the original characters, for example, a character who is calm and does not show emotion in the original text making jokes. This sounds contrary to Ueshima’s remark above. However, in the case of *Sakura*, the actresses still stick to the way the characters speak to each other and also the general setting in the original text, including personal relationships between the characters. Therefore, the deviation does not necessarily appear as a contradiction, but often as parody. In *Sakura*, this is actually not limited to these extra shows but also observable in regular shows in the form of ad-libs and vignettes that change from one performance to another as in the “bench work” in *Tenimyu*. However, the second part of the New Year show of *Sakura*, as is the case with the extra shows of *Tenimyu*, stands

---

4 This is a game often performed by comedians in Japan where they come up with puns or improvise conversations based on themes set by the master of the ceremony who is also the judge. If the judge decides that the answer is witty, funny, or pleasing to them, the contestant will be awarded with a cushion on which they can sit. The judge can take it away if they do not like the answer. The contestant who first wins ten cushions, wins the game.
entirely on the subtle coexistence of the character and the actor within their body.\textsuperscript{5} This will not be possible unless the actors fully “become” the characters by playing them over a long period of time (seven years by the time these activities were introduced), as Tsutsui puts it referring to \textit{Tenimyu}. Such continuity can be used as a marker that distinguishes a certain type of shows from others within 2.5-Dimensional musicals.

In addition to these extra shows themselves, in \textit{Sakura} there are a number of other devices that blur the distinction between the two types of actors. For example, the spectators are regularly encouraged or even directed to share the understanding that those on stage are not the actresses but the characters, an idea crucial for a 2.5-Dimensional musical. All shows of \textit{Sakura} have a preliminary briefing to the spectators, where Hiroi, the producer, and another character appear on stage and give health and safety instructions as well as general remarks on behavior during the show. (Hiroi himself appears as a character that only appears in the stage shows). Besides these, they also give specific instructions as to when to applaud (not during the song but inbetween, they should stop when the actresses begin to deliver their lines), and they have to call those on stage by the name of the characters, not the actresses. In addition, at the end of each performance there are short self-introductions and speeches by the characters, but these are also given as the characters, not the actresses. The only occasion this convention was broken was when the show featuring characters from the first two videogames came to an end to be replaced by shows with those from later instalments in the franchise in 2006, reminding Hoshino’s remark that the actors on the stage in a 2.5-Dimensional musicals are dedicating their bodies to the characters. (In this very last show, the actresses stopped being the characters and finally spoke as themselves). As is the case with \textit{Tenimyu} and many recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals, shows of \textit{Sakura} were later sold on VHS, and later DVD and Blu-ray. Early examples of these featured very short interviews with the actresses and some other key members of the staff, such as Hiroi and composer Tanaka Kōhei, who has composed all musical pieces for the franchise including the original videogame, anime and the shows. Later, the DVD began to be sold as a boxed set including two, three, or four discs with the main show and extra features. In addition to those mentioned above, the extra features also had hours of footage shot by the actresses themselves as well as Hiroi throughout the period of the rehearsals and even during the show, enabling the viewers to see “actors with names as actors”\textsuperscript{6}.

In addition to these, another device that further complicates the relationship between “actors with names as actors” and “actors with names of their characters” is built into shows of \textit{Sakura}. All main characters who are the members of the special team in the original videogame are female, and disguise themselves as actresses of a revue company, one of which is clearly modeled on Takarazuka, or singers or dancers of a Parisian cabaret. In the original videogame, we hardly see their actual performance, but in the show, it is shown on stage, and for the adaptations of those set in venues other than Paris, they feature a play-within-the-play, which is a representation of shows produced by the revue company within the text. As is the case with the “real” Takarazuka, all roles are played by female actors, meaning some of the characters are playing female roles, and others male. At the same time, the shows also depict the daily life of the characters leading up to the production of the play-within-the-play; in the show in summer 2014, the characters behind the stage were struggling to keep the show (play-within-the-play) going when a guest star joined the company to attempt to destroy the show by killing those on stage. The spectators, especially those familiar with the setting of the characters, can develop expectations on what kind of role the characters will play in

\textsuperscript{5} Some 2.5-Dimensional musicals have a structure similar to “Great Sports Day”. For example, according to Sugawa, the theater version of \textit{Sengoku BASARA} (2014) consists of two parts. Act 1 is a “serious play” and Act 2 is composed of various different sections with a strong sense of parody, such as singing songs changing lyrics, a dance competition, as well as skits that are mostly ad-libbed and talks including episodes of mishaps featuring actors with names as actors. Sugawa comments that, in these, “rapid switching and coexistence between ‘neta’ (parody) and ‘beta’ (the ‘sober’ aspects outside the parody or even the setting of the texts)” were clearly observable (Sugawa 2015).

\textsuperscript{6} However, expectably, these footages are “sanitized” to some extent. We hardly see “heavy” moments such as the actors receiving feedback, or sometimes being yelled at.
the play-within-the-play, for example, whether that should be a male or female role as in Takarazuka, a hero or villain, or serious or comical character. Sometimes, they may feel that the casting within the play-within-the-play perfectly matches their image of the character (not the actresses playing them), or at other times, totally unexpected, in a positive or negative way. This means that both the characters themselves and the actresses who are playing their roles are subject to the relationship between the three kinds of actors in Iwashita/Azuma’s scheme: they, as “actors with names of their characters”, play the role of the characters who are also “actors with names of their characters” in the play-within-the-play. In Act 1 of the regular shows, which depicts the daily life of the characters, the actresses are still “actors with names of their characters”, but the characters are “actors with names as the actors” or also “actors with their real name”. On the other hand, in the New Year Show, when they are playing the games, the actresses are between “actors with names of their characters” and “actors with names as actors” while they are playing the characters who are “actors with names as actors” (as discussed in a moment, even in these extra shows, they are regarded as actresses belonging to the revue company both by the voice actresses playing them and the spectators because of the framework that defines the theatrical space). The spectators are watching the show going back and forth between these different relationships. From the actresses’ point of view, in playing their role, they have to have a very deep and “accurate” understanding of the characters because, in the play-within-the-play, they have to play the role as if the characters are playing it, although in terms of the storyline, the play has no direct link with Act 1 or the original texts. This process can lead to further reinforcement of the “internal characteristics” of the characters and strengthen the link between the character and the actresses because the relationship requires that both roles are played by the same actress, thus giving the character a physical body in the form of the actress. For the audience, the “setup” of the image of the character on stage that Iwashita mentions is accomplished more effectively and strongly because the process takes place simultaneously on two different levels that reinforce each other, so to speak.

The examples examined above at length, however, are not the only factors that enable the characters to be identified with the actresses, and the spectators accept that they are seeing the characters, not the actresses. Another very significant difference between Sakura and Tenimyu, as well as other similar recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals, is that, unlike in the latter, the physical appearance of the actresses hardly plays any role in making the spectators identify the actresses with the characters. In Sakura, the voice actresses who played the voice of the characters in the original videogame are playing the same role on stage. This naturally means what they have common is just the voice. (For example, in the case of the adaptation of the first two videogames, the tallest character is played by the shortest actress, and vice versa). Under Fujitsu’s scheme, we can say that in Sakura, the voice of the characters is prioritized over iconographic characteristics as a device to secure the integrity between the character and the actor with a physical body. As already mentioned above, Hiroi, the producer of the franchise, chose the actresses with a theater adaptation in view. Asked why he elected to have the voice actresses play the same role on stage, he replied that he once heard at another theater anime adaptation of a child among the spectators complaining that the voice was different from the anime, and he thought that “this is a betrayal to the spectators. Why shouldn’t the characters have exactly the same voice as in the original.” (Yamakawa shizuo kareinaru shōtaiseki 2007).

Hiroi, unlike in the case of recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals, believes that what secures the integrity between the character and the actor on stage is primarily voice rather than physical appearance. While relatively few 2.5-Dimensional musicals feature voice actors playing the same role they played in the anime, such a convention can be actually found outside the theater in the form of live performance by characters in anime or videogames featuring female idols such as Love Live! or The Idol M@ster.7

---

7 The exception includes Hunter x Hunter (2000, 2002, 2004), Ōketsu kyōshi Haine (2017), and Shōjo kageki rebyū sutāraito (2017). The third example is particularly interesting because it, as Sakura, features theater with an all-female cast as part of the setting. Furthermore, the project started primarily as a musical, and at the time of writing, the anime will be broadcast for more than a year after the project is launched, by when two theater performances will have been produced. These
Comparison between this type of live performance, which sociologist Kawamura Satofumi calls “voice actor-character live”, with Sakura is very useful because they share one important aspect, namely, the role of the audience, especially how they participate in the show, and that, in turn, is related to another significant point that enables Sakura to recreate the world of the original text on stage without relying on peculiar mise-en-scène: identification of the actual space of the theater and the spectators with the world within the original text.

4. Audience Participation in 2.5-Dimensional musical and Voice Actor-Character Live

In his article on the live performance of Love Live!, Kawamura, using Brian Massumi’s concept of affect, argues that in a voice actor-character live, the audience, through their spontaneous and active participation in the show, which he calls an affective relationship based on interaction on the spot—by clapping their hands, waving their glow sticks of different colors, each of which corresponds with different characters, or shouting set phrases sometimes spontaneously but collectively or occasionally in response to the song/speech by the actresses—rather than a reproduction of preconceived images, plays an active role in materializing the character in front of them, and such participation, in turn, has an influence on the voice actors on stage by making them feel as if they indeed are the characters they are playing (Kawamura 2016) These behaviors by fans are common in many conventional live performances by idols in Japan. What makes Sakura unique is that, despite being a theater play, it does also feature these activities by the spectators, and that is encouraged by the producers and those on stage. The spectators actually go through training as spectators on how to actively participate in the show. This is already seen in the aforementioned example of the briefing before the show where the characters brief the audience when to or not to clap their hands, applaud, and so forth. Such instructions may appear to be a version of “APPLAUD NOW” signs in a television studio that prompt the audience to applaud at any given moment. In reality, however, these instructions are intended to train spectators so that they can appropriately and fully participate in the show on two different levels: as theatergoers and also “accomplices” who build up the space where the actresses exist as the characters just like the audience of a voice actor-character live.

One point that Kawamura does not mention in his article is that, even in the case of a voice actor-character live, the type of behavior by the audiences that he calls affectionate relationship often requires audiences to have some previous knowledge on the “code of behavior” so that they can fully participate, because shows such as Love Live!, which are produced a number of times over a prolonged period of time, tend to have their own convention as to how the audiences should participate, for example, when and how to clap or when and what to shout during the performance, in response to the “call” by the performer or even without the cue, among others. To fully understand it and participate, audiences will have to either attend the show many times to observe and learn the code or “study” it in advance by watching a recording of the show or asking fellow “senior” fans who are already familiar with the code. Not all of these codes are set by the performer/producer. In a number of cases, they are developed gradually and spontaneously among the audiences as they attend the show multiple times.

I do not intend to entirely reject Kawamura’s claim that these interactions are based on affect. It is true that fans “perform” perfectly even when they hear a song that has never been performed before, which amazes the performers, and affect does seem to explain what actually happens in the auditorium when something like that happens. However, for those who missed that “magical moment,” it, at least to some extent, is a matter of learning the “correct” behavior.
If these are encouraged by the so-called "officials," namely, the performer and/or the producers, they are likely to make some announcement on it online and, if the performer hosts a radio program, in that. Still, a novice audience would need to learn the code in advance by accessing such announcements.

In the case of Sakura, as we have already seen, such learning takes place in theater, facilitated by the "officials." In 2008, the shows of Sakura came to an end, to return a year later. Up to 2008, the shows were clearly promoted as theater plays under the banner of Kayō shō (music show, 1997–2006), or Rebyū shō (revue show, 2006–2008). After 2008, however, the title was changed to Raibu (live) and the structure and content of the show became close to Dream Live in Tenimyū, where the characters simply sing with short conversations or skits in between. Since after this change to the title, use of glow sticks in the auditorium, which was prohibited up to that point, was allowed, again with instructions telling the spectators that they should break the tube so that the stick begins to glow before the show starts, not between songs during the show to avoid distraction due to the peculiar clicking noises. Other features found in live music performances in Japan, such as the spectators waving a small long rectangular towel over their head, were also introduced. In other words, the show became closer to a live musical performance rather than a musical play. Since 2012, the format of the show returned to musical play, but among the conventions introduced during the period between 2008 and 2012, use of glow sticks remained unchanged. Before 2006, however, the audience participated in the show by clapping hands and shouting. Some of these, which take place while the characters singing, were started simultaneously among the spectators, just like similar examples that Kawamura points out in relation to Love Live! and eventually the spectators came to learn the convention. In addition to these, however, besides during the songs, the spectators were encouraged to make such participations during the play. During the period up to 2006, strong influence of Japanese popular theater (taishū engeki) and kabuki was observable. For example, in shows between New Year 2004 and summer 2006, just before the climactic scene where the characters play a swordfight, they introduce themselves imitating a famous scene in kabuki play Shiranami goni otoko. In the original kabuki, it is a convention that, just after giving their name (as the characters) in turn, the actors pause for a moment, during which the spectators shout the name of the actor. In Sakura’s show, exactly the same thing happens, but the spectators shout the name of the characters, not the actresses, following the convention in 2.5-Dimensional musicals and also reflecting the structure and setting of the show discussed below. In the behind-the-scenes footage in the DVD of the show, we can see that when these scenes are rehearsed, the staff shout the name of the characters simulating the reaction of the spectators, meaning that it is an expectation that the audiences would do the same in the actual production (Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Hanagumi kamera 2006). For these scenes, there was no "official" instruction to the spectators but they, possibly imitating the kabuki convention, spontaneously gave the shout.

But, in other occasions, there was very explicit "training." Shows between summer 2002 and 2006 featured Kumimoto Takeharu, a rōkyoku (a genre of popular musical narrative accompanied by shamisen lute) performer, who was known due to his attempts to modernize the genre by fusing it with contemporary music genres such as rock. In Sakura’s shows, he appeared as a rōkyoku performer who is a fan of the characters as actresses. On stage, he performed rōkyoku on the characters. After singing once, he briefed the audience when and how to shout some set phrases such as “Mattemashita (We were waiting for you)!”, “Tappuri (We want to hear you playing as long as we can)!”, “Meichōshi (You are singing great)!”, and “Nippon ichi (You are the greatest performer in Japan)!” He then vacated the stage and appeared again, this time with the shouting from the spectators. He repeated this in every production, but those who attended the show regularly (possibly even all productions of the season) became familiar with the routine and they began to shout spontaneously. In addition, because these phrases can be used outside the rōkyoku context, the spectators learned when to use these phrases at scenes where Kumimoto was not on stage or at events on Sakura other than the shows.

This idea of educating the audience derived from the fact that in the early period of the shows’ history, the spectators did not understand the appropriate behavior as spectators. Hiroi recalls that the
spectators of the very first production of the show in 1997 behaved so badly (they chatted during the show, clapped hands to any trivial and short funny expressions and even when the characters were singing a song that was not appropriate for clapping hands such as a ballad, mobiles rang during the show) that the show overran by 40 min, leading to complaints from the staff and actresses. From the next day, Hiroi began the briefing (Hiroi 2004). What is interesting and unique about shows of *Sakura* is that instead of “educating” the spectators to follow the conventional “code of practice” for theatergoers, i.e., that they should “behave” during the show by watching in silence in principle, they were encouraged to participate actively by following appropriate principles “taught” by the “officials.” *Tenimyu*, on the other hand, took a totally opposite approach. According to Matsuda, in the early stage of the shows, he faced similar issues, such as the spectators calling the characters’ name when they appeared on stage, displaying placards with the names of the characters over their heads, or coming to the theater in cosplay. This led to complaints from other spectators saying the placards were obstructing the view of the stage, cosplaying was distracting, and that they should not shout because they were watching a musical. In response to these, rules on watching the show were displayed on the official website of the show: no cosplay; no calling of names; no boards; watch the show quietly. The spectators followed these, but Matsuda began to feel pity for them and that it was actually unhealthy to make them watch the show like that, and decided to set an occasion where they could participate in the construction of the atmosphere of the theatrical space. After taking such lessons, the audience learns how they can contribute in such an operation and take appropriate actions making their own discretions on when to applaud, clap hands, or call out.

Another significant point of training the spectators as such and encouraging them to participate is that when that is coupled with the narrative structure of the shows discussed above; that enables the space of the theater and the spectators in it to have the double structure similar to that between the voice actresses and the characters as actresses. In the show during Act 1, the spectators are watching a play depicting the daily life of the characters. Here, the spectators are sitting in the auditorium of the venue, still communicating with those on the stage. However, once the play-within-the-play starts, they are watching a production of the revue company, and they are now sitting in the auditorium of the theater where the revue company is based; thus, the theater as the venue of the “real” production is transformed into the place depicted in the videogame, enabling the spectators to be in “the world of the videogame”. In the show, the “real” venue is actually not called by its real name, but a composite of the actual name and that of the theater in the game, further enhancing the feeling of “being there”. Reinforcing awareness of the spectators that they are theatergoers and also they can participate in the show appropriately through the “training”, rather than a passive observer, can further enhance the sense of “immersion”, enabling the world of the original text to be “set up” on stage effectively.

Shows of *Sakura* fascinated a number of theater and film practitioners who found the relationship between the spectators and those on stage ideal. For example, Kayano Isamu, who directed the show from 2004 and was later involved in other theater adaptations of anime, such as *Macross F*, states:

> For me, as someone who has been working on theater, the greatest thing [about the shows of *Sakura*] is, after all, the spectators … They really play an important role in building up

---

9 These behaviors by the spectators are often observable at concerts of young Japanese male idols such as Johnny’s, suggesting that the fanbase for the two genres is overlapping. Interestingly, a Japanese fan who attended a production of *Black Butler* in Beijing, seeing the lively reaction of the Chinese audience, commented that the atmosphere in Japan could also possibly be livelier. (White150109 2016).

10 Hiroi, in an interview with Yamakawa Shizuo, quoted later, states that he tried to encourage such an interaction between the spectators and those on stage with Tokugawa-period kabuki theater in mind. Here, we can see the relationship between the show and conventional theater genres, including traditional ones, which I will discuss in more detail later.
the atmosphere on stage. So they give the very final touch to what we were making in the studio during the rehearsals when it is finally materialized on stage. They clap hands or shout exactly at the right time (Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Seiyōken kishakaiken 2006).

Film director Yamada Yōji, who frequented the show, recalls his experience as a spectator:

The strange sense of unity between those on stage and in the auditorium is not what I would find in conventional theater plays, concerts, or operas. It is as if [the spectators] are all familiar faces who know each other . . . At first, I felt a strange feeling as if I were a stranger in a foreign country, but as I attend the show many times, I found myself standing up or applauding alongside younger fans (Yamakawa shizuo kareinaru shōtaiseki 2007).

It is not only that these prominent figures were attracted to the shows because of the peculiar close relationship between the actors and the spectators, but the shows, as I have already mentioned above, have a strong link with conventional Japanese theater, and those involved in the show were consciously making efforts to establish the shows as a “proper” original musical within Japanese theater. Analyzing the historical context of the show will enable us to have an insight of the situation before “2.5-Dimensional musicals” came into existence as a term or genre, and also critique the idea that it is an essentially different and independent genre that came together with Tenimyu.

5. 2.5-Dimensional musicals and Conventional Theater Genres

The relationship between the theater version and the original is very different between shows of Sakura and Tenimyu, as well as other similar recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals. Many recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals, including Tenimyu, are a simple adaptation of the original text, and therefore the spectators know the storyline. (For a non-Japanese-speaking foreign audience, this apparently enables them to enjoy the show even without subtitles) (Sankeibiz 2017). As such, the spectators come to the theater not so much to follow the storyline within the play, but as Nishida Shatonā, the director and choreographer of Yowamushi pedal, asserts, to see “live events” including glitches that unfold on stage and also the actors (Nishida 2015). As for the shows of Sakura, on the other hand, it is true that the spectators come to the theater to see such “live events”, as is the case with parts that change on daily basis or ad-libs as well as the game in the New Year Shows. However, in terms of the storyline, the shows are completely different from the original, or even supplement them. For example, the show in summer 2012 depicted the relationship between characters belonging to the special teams in Tokyo and New York, which is not told in the original text.

Furthermore, the shows even have influence on the “original” text, namely, the videogame. After the summer show in 2001, Tomizawa Michie, playing Kanzaki Sumire, a member of the Tokyo team, gave a notice to Hiroi that she was stepping down from the role in the show, although she still would keep on playing the role in any future release of the videogame and other texts other than the plays. Hiroi approved this and, in the New Year show in the following year, Sumire/Tomizawa “retired.” That was followed by an OVA (Original Video Anime, anime to be distributed on VHS/DVD/BD rather than broadcast on TV) and an audio drama depicting Sumire’s retirement. Eventually, in the fourth videogame released in April 2002, Sumire left the team at the ending. In other 2.5-Dimensional musicals including Tenimyu that are adaptations of the original as a part of cross-media adaptations, actors regularly “graduate” to be replaced by new ones; it is unlikely that what happened on stage had any impact on the original text or more “central” text within the franchise such as anime because, even if such “central” media is not always an exact replica of the original in terms of the setting and storyline, they still are “subsidiary” to the original. In addition, we should also note that this string of events harks us back to the uniqueness of Sakura and any live performance in which the voice actors playing the characters they played: in these shows, it is very difficult, to say the least, to let anyone “graduate” to be replaced by someone else because
the integrity of the character between the original and on stage is secured by the voice rather than iconographic characteristics.

The significance of the show within the franchise of *Sakura* means that these are not simply a version of adaptation or supplementary “event (ibento)” for promotional purpose. Instead, it is a text on its own. And as such, the shows were intended to be a “proper” theater play and musical firmly contextualized and established within conventional theater in Japan at the time. The idea that even 2.5-Dimensional musicals are theater plays in spite of their seemingly “revolutionary” or “innovative” mise-en-scène is very simple and natural but tends to be overlooked by many commentators, as seen in the articles I have mentioned so far, which often uncritically analyze these plays from the perspective of a branch of cross-media adaptations.\(^{11}\) Examining the relationship between *Sakura’s* show and conventional theater will remind us of the significance of such a viewpoint.

Actually, the early shows of *Sakura* were not so much a proper theater production but an extension of an “event”, and those in the anime industry saw it as such. As Yokoyama Chisa, who played Shingūji Sakura, the lead character of the first two videogames, recalls, the first show in 1997 was more like an “Act 2 of a music show in Japanese popular theater” because microphones came out of all sorts of places, such as a basket the character was carrying or from behind a tree on stage when they were about to sing (*Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Seiyōken kishakaiken 2006*). According to Nishihara Kumiko, who played Iris, also in the first two videogames, the staff working for the show were not specialists of theater production and “it took them a really long time to move the sets around between the scenes and it was really noisy . . . so we [actors and actresses] would often ask them whether they want any help” (*Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Seiyōken kishakaiken 2006*). Hiroi states that those around him within the industry thought that the show, at the beginning, was a mere “event” or a “cosplay show” (*Hanagumi zadankai 2004*). Neither the cast nor the staff were happy about the quality of the show, and, according to Nishihara, during the first show, Hiroi and Takano Urara, who played Maria Tachibana, were talking to each other, saying, “we cannot finish the show like this.” “We’ve got to make a [proper] play, not something like an event” (*Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Seiyōken kishakaiken 2006*). From the second season, the show clearly moved away from being an “event” to a “proper play.” After the end of the first show, Hiroi researched on how long rehearsals should be to produce a decent play, what kind of place a studio for rehearsals was, and what equipment and facilities were needed. As a result, the period of rehearsal was extended from one week to a month and any request on the studio or rehearsals themselves began to be communicated to the staff (*Hanagumi zadankai 2004*). From the third show, specialists of theater productions joined the staff, and established stage and musical actors such as Sonooka Shintaro and Hotaru Yukijirō joined the cast, to be followed in the fourth season by Mitsuya Yūji, who is also known as a director and later involved in establishment of *Tenimyu* (*Hanagumi zadankai 2004*). The summer show in 2005 featured the cast “flying” over the stage. Hiroi, who had the musical *Peter Pan* in mind when he wrote the script, invited the staff of the musical who were involved in the stunt in the show to work for the show of *Sakuta* (*Hiroi 2006*). Furthermore, the show established a link with conventional musical plays in Japan. For the summer show in 2001, whose “play-within-the-play” was a musical adaptation of *The Sea God’s Villa (Kaijin bessō)*, a play written by playwright and novelist Izumi Kyōka in 1914, kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjirō coached the actresses on kabuki-style dance, and, in the show in which Tomiazawa/Sumire “retired”, another kabuki actor, Ichikawa Shun’en, appeared, playing a female role. In the summer show in 2005 and the New Year show in 2006, Kashima Noritoshi, an established actor in popular theater with a long

---

\(^{11}\) One notable exception is Saitō Mayuko, a specialist of Western musical theater, who analyzed *Kuroshitsuji* (Black Butler) focusing on the role of the songs to conclude that 2.5-Dimensional musicals are not so much musicals as revues because the songs do not play a central role in the development of the plot or themes, and are simply there to enable the characters to exist on stage. As mentioned in the introduction, she refers to shows of *Sakura* saying they are significant because of the existence of a simple storyline developed by songs.
acting career starting in his childhood played a monstrous figure who could take over the body and mind of anyone he chose. The summer show in 2004, whose “play-within-the-play” was based on the Chinese story *Journey to the West* (*Saiyuki*), even featured a group of traditional Chinese theater actors.12

The shift from an “event” to a “proper play” is absent from such shows as *Tenimyu* or *Yowamushi pedal* that are often mentioned as the pioneer or benchmark of 2.5-Dimensional musicals. Those who were involved in the establishment of these shows, such as Mitsuya, Nishida, and Ueshima, are established figures in theater. On the other hand, Hiroi, along with Tanaka Kohei, a composer of numerous anime theme songs and soundtrack scores, including all songs and music for the entire franchise of *Sakura*, ventured to create a musical based on a videogame as total strangers to theater. Hiroi says that he, as such, turned to established figures for advice on how to produce a play, and they accepted him (Yamakawa shizuo kareinaru shōtaiseki 2007). Furthermore, it will not be an overstatement to say that precisely because they did not see theater as just a version of adaptation and, instead, something completely different that has to be started from scratch, including writing new stories solely for the theater version, the show integrated various different genres in terms of form, technique, and actors, still retaining the setting and characters of the videogame instead of becoming a closed genre that is segregated from existing theatrical genres.

6. Transnational Consumption of 2.5-Dimensional musicals

Finally, let us contextualize the two different types of shows discussed so far within the prospect and reality of transnational consumption of 2.5-Dimensional musicals. Producers of 2.5-Dimensional musicals are very keen to export the genre outside Japan, and also use the genre to attract foreign visitors: the pamphlet of the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association, in which all texts are in Japanese and English, very clearly indicates that. For example, under a section titled “Global Viewpoint: The First Modern Japanese Theater that Appeals to the Global Market”, it states:

Knowing the enormous popularity of Japanese manga, anime, and videogames in the global market, we support not only the productions that target international audience members, but also those that aim to go into the global market, i.e., bringing Japanese productions to other countries, or licensing productions to local presenters (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association n.d.).

In the section, three main activities to achieve these goals are listed, namely, “Understanding Global market” by “sharing information of areas that have potential for your show”; “Access to experts”, which enables the members of the association to “be introduced to those who toured shows overseas, or those in your considered areas”; and “Inbound”, meaning “approaching the international communities in Japan”, which, it claims, is “probably the first step in your global approach” (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association n.d.). This section tells us different ways 2.5-Dimensional musicals can be consumed transnationally: touring the show itself, featuring the original Japanese cast/staff; licensing the show to be produced with local staff/cast; and bringing foreign visitors to theaters in Japan to see 2.5-Dimensional musicals.

Starting in the late 2000s, various attempts were made on all of these fronts. Some shows such as *Tenimyu*, *Kuroshitsuji* (Black Butler), *Live Spectacle Naruto*, and *Death Note: The Musical* were produced in various Asian countries, including China, South Korea, and Malaysia. Apart from *Death Note,

---

12 In August 2018 it was announced that OSK Nihon Kagekidan, one of three major all-female revue companies in Japan alongside Takarazuka and Shōchiku kagekidan, is producing *The Sea God’s Villa* based on *Sakura’s* show, in Minamiza, one of the most prestigious theaters in Kyoto in July 2019. This adaptation is quite interesting because it very clearly attests to the link between *Sakura* and conventional theater genres in Japan I have discussed. In addition, the flyer of the show clearly states that the show is based on that of *Sakura*, and also the official website states that show of *Sakura* is “legendary production” that continued for 10 years, referring to the first productions featuring characters from the first two videogames, and also it is “forerunner of 2.5-Dimensional musicals.” (OSK Nihon kagekidan 2018) This, to my best knowledge, is the very first “official” reference to *Sakura* as forerunner of 2.5-Dimensional musicals.
the shows featured a Japanese cast playing in Japanese with subtitles in local languages. *Death Note* took a different approach by licensing the production in South Korea to be performed by local actors in Korean, whereas in Taiwan the Japanese cast played in Japanese with Chinese subtitles. As for the “Inbound,” Aiia 2.5 Theater Tokyo, a venue managed by the Association and dedicated to the production of 2.5-Dimensional musicals throughout the year, was opened in 2015. The pamphlet emphasizes that “doors are always open for international audience members” with such services as global ticketing with which foreign patrons can purchase tickets online in English within and from outside Japan officially and an “eyeglass personal monitor, on which the translation of your preferred language appears on the lenses (out of a maximum of four preset languages)” (Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association n.d.).

All of these areas invite one question that can potentially separate 2.5-Dimensional musicals from other activities, events, and facilities in which fans consume anime not as texts but as experience within a “2.5-Dimensional culture.” Sugawa Akiko defines 2.5-Dimensional culture as “cultural practices that reproduce fictitious world of contemporary popular culture (such as anime, manga, and videogames) within the real world and [enable the fans to] appreciate the blurry boundary between fiction and reality” (Sugawa 2016). Among other examples, including cosplaying, visiting places depicted in or related to these texts, and voice actor-character live, she gives 2.5-Dimensional musicals (Sugawa 2016). 13 Although all of these examples do share the characteristics as she defines as 2.5-Dimensional culture, there are actually two further, different categories within it: those associated with a specific place/space, and those not. Rayna Denison discusses the growing significance of Japan as a geographic place/space where anime is consumed as an experience in the form of specialist shops, theme parks, galleries/museums, and locales in anime texts (Denison 2015). A 2.5-Dimensional musical, as it is envisaged in the pamphlet of the Association, seems to be placed in a strange and interesting position: while it is mobile, just like cosplaying, it can be (and the producers apparently want it to be, at least in some cases) bound to Japan as a geographic place as well as a cultural and linguistic space as examples analyzed by Denison.

2.5-Dimensional musicals, on the one hand, seem to have mobility, as evident in the fact that shows have been produced outside Japan and are at least recently becoming more and more popular. For example, Japanese fans who attended the production of *Kuroshitsuji* in Beijing and Shanghai in 2016 reported that at least on the particular days they attended the show the venue was almost or completely full (Shanghaiajie 2015; White150109 2016). The tour of *Live Spectacle Naruto* in China in 2016 was also very popular, with tickets for almost all performances sold out, according to the Association (Sankeibiz 2017).

At the same time, however, we should note that these shows often retain strong links with Japan; they, more often than not, are played in Japanese by Japanese actors. 14 In addition, the spectators often include Japanese fans who travel from Japan: the official websites of the shows have information on how to book tickets in Japan or through local agents (Chügoku Kōen ni Kansuru Oshirase 2015; Kaigai Kōen ni Kanshite 2016). In the case where the show is produced further afield, for example in Paris, there even is an “official” packaged tour to attend the show (Myūjikaru tōken ranbu atsukashiyama ibun pari kōen kettei 2018). This tendency remains the same from the early period of export, namely, the production of *Tenimyu* in Taiwan and South Korea in 2008. Japanese fans write that about 60 percent of the spectators seemed to be local, while 40 appeared to be from Japan (Kanna 2008; Petit Frame 2008). Matsuda, the producer of the show, also recalls that the

---

13 It is also worth mentioning that she, referring to Henry Jenkins’s concept of participatory culture and Erika Fischer-Lichte’s “performance,” emphasizes the significance of the active participation of the “players” or those who consume these events, reminding us of the role of the audience in the shows of *Sakura*. (pp. 98–99).

14 The prominence of productions featuring Japanese cast playing in Japanese could be associated with the desire of foreign fans to see the “authentic” original or Japanese version rather than an adaptation, comparable with their preference for subtitles than dubbing for anime.
ratio between local and Japanese fans in these productions seemed to be approximately the same (The Japan Foundation 2015). These seem to show that productions of these shows abroad are not simply consumed by fans in the country of production but also involve the “outbound” mobility of avid Japanese fans, and the producers actually target these fans to sell tickets and fill the venue. If so, for the Japanese fans, these productions may be basically an extension of a show in Japan because they feature the same cast as in Japan. It also could be said that the fact that these shows have been produced abroad is used to raise their profile, as observable in the excerpt from the theater program of Tenimyu quoted earlier that refers to productions abroad as a barometer of the show’s success.

One interesting example that contrasts with these shows is Death Note: The Musical. This, so far, is the only example of a licensed production of a 2.5-Dimensional musical outside Japan. The key for success seems to be that the show has a very strong link with conventional theater in Japan and the States: it was directed by Kuriyama Tamiya, a famed Japanese theater director and the art director of the Japanese National Theater; music was composed by Frank Wildhorn, who is known for such shows as Jekyll and Hyde, The Scarlet Pimpernel, and Dracula: the Musical, among others; the book was written by Ivan Menchell, an American TV producer and writer; the Japanese cast included established actors such as Kaga Takeshi, who appeared in many American and British musicals produced in Japan, such as Jesus Christ Superstar, West Side Story, Les Miserables, and also Jekyll and Hyde, reminding us of the link between shows of Sakura and conventional theater. In addition, it is also significant that, unlike many other 2.5-Dimensional musicals, Death Note: The Musical is not a direct adaptation of the original manga, but the storyline, which covers Part 1 or the first 59 episodes of the original manga, is edited and abridged. In terms of mise-en-scène, it is also closer to a straight play rather than a musical, and does not have any “innovative” features found in sets and choreography in “mainstream” 2.5-Dimensional musicals based on sports manga such as Tenimyu. In other words, while it still has clear 2.5-ness with manga as the original, and characters’ appearance and setting closely following the original, the theater version of Death Note, unlike Tenimyu and other similar recent 2.5-Dimensional musicals, is intended to be a version of a conventional play that is accessible to those who are not necessarily familiar with the original, rather than a faithful reproduction of the original on stage making use of unique mise-en-scène; more significantly, it actively seeks to present itself as being “cosmopolitan” or “international” rather than “Japanese.” The difference in approach can be due to the fact that one of the producers of the show is Hori-pro, a large Japanese company specializing in management of actors, singers, and comedians, as well as the production of films, plays, and TV commercials, while Tenimyu, Kurositsuji, and Live Spectacle Naruto are all produced by Matsuda’s Nelke Planning. The example of Death Note further complicates the issue of the association of 2.5-Dimensional musicals with Japan because one drive behind the eagerness among producers to export 2.5-Dimensional musicals is potentially nationalistic ambition to compete against Western musicals. The cover of the pamphlet of the Association, which reads “Nihon hatsu sekai hyōjun myūjikaru (Japanese musicals to be the global standard)”, shows that very clearly (Japan 2.5-Dimension Musical Association n.d.). Matsuda also states in an interview:

All musicals that were successful in Japan so far are all imported from Europe or the States. In other words, in Japan we are diligently producing those imported works, paying fees. That is wonderful in itself, but it would be great if we can create our own Japanese musicals. It is not easy to export Japanese straight plays, but Japanese manga and anime are accepted and loved so much around the world, so if we theatricalize these properly, we can beat [the European and American musicals] (The Japan Foundation 2015).

Asked about his future plans at the end of the same interview, he says:

Hori-pro is already doing this with Death Note the Musical, but I want to establish a system under which we sell the [production] rights of a theatricalized works [of 2.5-Dimensional musicals] to [producers in] other countries. Just like we are paying fees to produce Euro-American plays, we sell the rights to the world. [The theater version of] Lion King, as I
heard it, is being produced in seven countries around the world. That means the copyright holder will receive the fee every day. Similarly, [Japanese copyright holders will receive a fee if] Japanese 2.5-Dimensional musicals are produced around the world, for example *Death Note* in Korea or *Sailor Moon* in France. I can imagine that if they produce *Naruto* as a version of *Cirque du Soleil*, it will attract a huge number of spectators. . . . What often people from abroad tell me is “Japan has got such great treasures. Why don’t you use them?”, [or] “Japan is a great country with a lot of attractive media contents (kontentsu taikoku).” Despite there being so many interesting novels, films, and manga, they are all locked up in a box and never used. Manga and anime are now loved all around the world so they should be promoted more. Now, live performance is gaining popularity in all parts of the world, so if we couple that with powerful originals such as manga, anime, and videogames, there is no possibility that we will lose out. . . . We don’t have to feel inferiority about the problem of [using] Japanese [which is not a lingua franca] because more and more people are learning it through manga (*The Japan Foundation* 2015).

Interestingly, Hiroi makes almost exactly the same point from a slightly different angle eight years earlier in an interview with Yamakawa Shizuo, former broadcaster turned theater critic:

Hiroi: The audiences first get hold of the original anime or videogame as texts and thoroughly appreciate the world [in those texts]. Then, once they come to the theater, they can enjoy [the world they know from the texts] live: this is truly innovative and will stimulate the realm of theaters. It can become a catalyst to attract young spectators and those who haven’t come to theaters before to theater en masse.

Yamakawa: So you mean you are going to base the show on videogames created in Japan, is that correct?

Hiroi: Yes, Actually [conventional imported Western] musicals are performed in Japanese, aren’t they? Plays originally performed in English are produced in Japanese in Japan and probably in Korean in South Korea. If [we are to export theater plays from Japan and] the show were based on a videogame, [being produced in local language] would not be a problem, but kabuki does not work like that. Traditional Japanese plays would look unnatural if produced in English, maybe. Actually, [such transnational production] is possible because it is a musical. And shows based on a videogame would be even easier [to be produced like that]. I believe this is going to be popular.

Yamakawa: So, if you combine characters of videogames with techniques of kabuki or shinkokugeki (a subgenre of Japanese popular theater), you can create something rather interesting, can’t you?

Hiroi: Many videogames [including *Sakura*] feature Oda Nobunaga, so if we make a *Nobunaga: the Musical* based on one of them, his character can be a world-class King of Demons (as he is often depicted in such Japanese popular texts) (*Yamakawa Shizuo Kareinaru shōtaiseki* 2007).

The strong hegemonic undertone, as it is especially evident in Matsuda’s remarks, seems to indicate a desire to make Japan the “center” of the theatrical world rather than a periphery and the receiving end. When this desire is associated with Japan as a geographic place, that will lead us to the third milieu of transnational consumption of 2.5-Dimensional musical: the “inbound” aspect, or making 2.5-Dimensional musicals a tourist attraction for foreign visitors, thus firmly associating the genre with a specific geographical place and theater as a space, making the experience “authentic”, comparable with watching American or British musicals in Broadway or the West End.
There is another important aspect that “anchors” many 2.5-Dimensional musicals, especially Tenimyu-style ones, in which the members of the cast “graduate” after some time to be replaced by new ones to Japan. Besides exporting or touring the shows, the Association, as seen in its pamphlet, is very eager to make the shows an attraction for foreign visitors (and foreigners living in Japan). As we have seen at the beginning of this article, one significant aspect of the 2.5-Dimensional musicals, as Suzuki points out to draw a line between Tenimyu and conventional theater plays based on anime, manga, and videogames, is that, after Tenimyu, the spectators come to the theater to see the characters, not the actors. Hoshino also makes exactly the same point (Hoshino 2015). This is natural given that many of the actors in the 2.5 dimension are not established actors or idols like SMAP in Saint Seiya. However, recently some young actors are appearing in multiple shows. Suzuki Hiroki and Tamaki Hiroki, who appeared in a number of shows including Yowamushi pedal, Token ranbu, and Black Butler, among many others, are the best examples. The consumption of “actors with names as actors” in the form of behind-the-scenes footage in DVDs of the show and social media actually leads to a situation where they, although not to the same degree as their more established peers, are subject to consumption as actors. In addition, as we have already seen and as Tsutsui points out, in Tenimyu-style long-running musicals, temporal duration is significant because that enables the actors to “be the character”. Tsutsui also asserts that, because of the fact that these actors continued to play over different arcs of the show over a prolonged period of time, their life as characters was not “severed by reasons that exist outside the text” and spending plenty of time within the text (as the characters on stage) “brought a peculiar sense of existence to their life as characters” and that enabled “unconventional events like ‘The Great Sports Day’” to be held (Tsutsui 2015). Iwashita, although he specifically mentions Tenimyu as the example, also states that “to watch Tenimyu is to observe the actors grow in every arc and identify with the characters they are playing” (Iwashita 2015). If so, then watching Tenimyu or similar 2.5-Dimensional musicals actually has an aspect of watching the actors themselves, although it is to see them “grow up”. For fans who live outside Japan, and especially if they do not have access to the show itself and/or do not understand Japanese, such style of consumption is not easy to practice. If this type of show is licensed to be produced in an any given country in the same format as the original, meaning running over a several arcs spread across many seasons featuring local actors, what can happen is the same process of consuming the actors is also appropriated within the local context, as is the case in Asian “sister groups” of the idol group AKB48. If this happens, the show can be freed from being geographically bound to Japan. But this, in turn, can mean that there will be a two different tiers of authenticity: the local version and the “authentic” Japanese version as the “original”, which can be a catalyst to bringing spectators of the “local” version to see the “authentic” Japanese version, perfectly matching the third agenda set by the Association, “Inbound”.

So far, the focus was on Tenimyu-style shows, where young actors play the same character for a prolonged period of time before “graduation”. How does Sakura fit in the picture? Being conceived when broadband was unheard of, the franchise enjoyed very limited mobility outside Japan in the form of DVDs of anime and translated manga; however, the videogame itself and the shows are yet to be released outside Japan at the time of writing. However, the announcement that a new videogame of the franchise will be released in 2019 with a totally new setting, as is anticipated, may mean that the franchise will join the list of 2.5-Dimensional musicals to be exported. Yet, there seems to be one fundamental issue that makes it difficult for the franchise to enjoy the same outbound mobility enjoyed by some other shows, provided that the show based on the new videogame, if produced at all, takes the same format as before, namely, the voice actresses play the same characters on stage. This style of production, in the first place, is getting more difficult to adapt because of the availability of the voice actresses during the rehearsal period. The behind-the-scenes footage of Sakura’s shows

---

15 This can be partially solved by simultaneous live screening of the show, as is happening with some shows such as Naruto, which was shown in cinemas in six different countries.
reveal that there is a number of occasions where the actresses have to be absent from rehearsals due to other engagements and their roles are played by stand-ins. Holding established voice actors over a prolonged period of time free from any other engagements, as Hiroi’s remark on the reluctance of agents to allow their voice actors in *Sakura* shows indicates, is very difficult.\(^\text{16}\) Thus, it is highly unlikely, to say the least, for the show to have a tour outside Japan like *Tenimyu* and *Kuroshitsuji*, or even one-off performances such as *Tōken ranbu* and *Sailor Moon*, which are to be produced in Paris in July 2018 as a part of a string of events that promote and celebrate cultural exchange between Japan and France. However, such immobility can actually have a positive aspect unlike other 2.5-Dimensional musicals, which are “mass-produce-able” as John Auslander asserts about modern live events using shows for children featuring trademarked superheroes such as Batman at a theme park as an example; in the case of *Sakura*’s show, the body of the actresses and the characters are inseparably connected, so there will be no possibility of the “two-tier” structures applicable to other 2.5-Dimensional musicals that can be licensed to be produced in other countries (*Auslander 2008*). The shows will not be available on tour either, meaning the only way for any foreign fans to see the show would be to actually come to Japan, making it a truly “authentic” experience that is firmly linked to a geographical place and space.

7. Conclusions

One point that cannot be overemphasized in concluding this article is that there has to be a historical perspective in analyzing 2.5-Dimensional musicals. Currently, the view that *Tenimyu* is the pioneer and benchmark of the genre is so strong, as evident in examples of Japanese articles I quoted throughout this paper, that very little attention is paid to the historical background of the genre. Shows of *Sakura*, which predate *Tenimyu* and the phrase “2.5-Dimensional musicals”, provide us with a number of important, interesting, yet overlooked points of reference vis-à-vis more recent shows, especially *Tenimyu* and other similar shows that are often uncritically assumed to be the most significant and representative examples of 2.5-Dimensional musicals, that warrant discussion. Indeed, another important lesson that shows of *Sakura* present is that we need to approach the genre more critically, contextualizing it within conventional theater and also anime-related live performances rather than just a variation in “media-mix” strategies. Emphasizing the “revolutionary” or “innovative” aspect of *Tenimyu* excessively would obscure the simple fact that 2.5-Dimensional musicals are defined as theater plays based on Japanese anime, manga, or videogames in general, and, as such, the genre may well have links with existing genres of theater or other anime-related events. In addition, the shows may even provide a ground for a general discussion on the nature of a live event, especially a play, and how spectators participate in it, as seen in the comparison between suppression of audience participation in *Tenimyu*’s regular performances and *Sakura*’s encouragement for active participation coupled with “training.”

We are yet to know whether the new videogame of *Sakura* will be accompanied by shows, but whatever form they take, or if they are not produced at all, that, again will provide us with a lot of food for thought in reflecting on the genre because any change or lack thereof will show us how the franchise managed or failed to cope with the totally new world of 2.5-Dimensional musicals, which did not exist when the original show of *Sakura* was conceived, thus highlighting, again, what the genre currently is.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

\(^{16}\) See Note 7.
References


Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Hanagumi kamera. 2006. [DVD]

Sakura taisen kayōshō fainaru: Shin ai yueni: Tokuten disk 4: Seiyōken kishakaihen. 2006. [DVD]


Ueda, Mayuko. 2016. 2.5 jigen bokura no atarashii supōtsu haipā purojekushon engeki ‘haikyū!’! *Bijutsu Techō* 68: 92–93.


Yamakawa Shizuo. 2007. NHK BS2. [TV broadcast]

© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).