



New Dimensions of Entertainment



Japan's world of 2D manga comics, anime and video games is being adapted for the stage in 3D. Originating in Japan, "2.5 dimensional musicals" are proving popular in Japan and abroad.

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2.5 dimensional musicals ("2.5D musicals") are a form of stage entertainment originating in Japan that has generated popularity around the world. What makes them distinctive is that they are based on Japanese manga comics, anime or video games and seek to faithfully depict the worlds of these stories on the stage. 2.5D musicals rose to prominence with the *MUSICAL THE PRINCE OF TENNIS* which was first performed in 2003. Telling the story of a powerful junior high school tennis club on stage, the musical generated attention through word of mouth lauding the

reproduction of the characters who appear in the original manga comics and performances recreating tennis matches with the use of light and sound, charming large audiences made up primarily of young women who are also fans of the original comics. In 2014 the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association was formed to ensure that 2.5D musicals would be established as their own genre of theatrical performance instead of ending as a passing fad. Back in 2003, 17 such musicals appeared annually and attracted audiences numbering 120,000. By 2018, the market had grown to 197 musicals attracting some 2.78 million audience members.

Ever since the term "2.5 dimensional musical" was coined in Japan, stage productions of manga, anime and video games have been performed. In 1974, the first performance of *The Rose of Versailles* was given by Takarazuka Revue, a theater group with a history spanning more than a century. In the

- 1 Live Spectacle NARUTO -Song of the Akatsuki-
Photo: ©Masashi Kishimoto, Scott/SHUEISHA/Live Spectacle "NARUTO" Production Committee 2017
- 2 "DEATH NOTE THE MUSICAL"
Photo: ©大場つぐみ・小畑健/集英社
- 3 MUSICAL THE PRINCE OF TENNIS 3rd SEASON National Tournament SEIGAKU vs RIKKAI The First Half
Photo: ©2009 TAKESHI KONOMI ©2014 NAS, THE PRINCE OF TENNIS II PROJECT ©1999 TAKESHI KONOMI/2015 MUSICAL THE PRINCE OF TENNIS PROJECT
- 4 Sengoku BASARA
Photo: ©CAPCOM CO., LTD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
- 5 Stage [Yowamushi Pedal]
Photo: ©渡辺航(週刊少年チャンピオン)/弱虫ペダル04製作委員会©渡辺航(週刊少年チャンピオン)/マーベラス、東宝、アルテメイト

years since, many repeat performances of the musical have been put on as a perennial favorite. In 2015, the manga *One Piece* was adapted into a traditional kabuki play.

According to Naomi Toda, PR representative for the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association, "the term 2.5 dimensional musical refers to the practice of faithfully recreating the world depicted in two-dimensional source material on a three-dimensional stage, and it's a term that sprung up naturally among fans. They are popular because the characters and worlds of the source material people love are recreated on a three-dimensional stage in a non-destructive way."

In addition to the long-running *MUSICAL THE PRINCE OF TENNIS* mentioned above, which is still performed today, popular 2.5D musicals include *Sengoku BASARA*, featuring theatrical sword fighting based on the original video game that fictionalizes Japan's Sengoku period; *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon: The Musical*, based on the manga for girls in which young girls transform into warriors to battle evil; and *DEATH NOTE THE MUSICAL*, based on the manga depicting a battle of minds revolving around a notebook dropped by a death spirit into the human realm. Each adaptation is faithful to the world and the distinctive characters of the source work.

Performances unique to 2.5D are another draw of the genre. For *Stage [Yowamushi Pedal]*, based on a manga about high school students taking part in bicycle races, bicycles do not appear on stage; instead, the bicycle races are realistically enacted by the cast, who move around the stage with great physical intensity holding handlebars. Meanwhile in *Live Spectacle NARUTO*, adapted from the original manga that tells the story of friendship, betrayal and

revenge between ninjas along with the bonds that tie master, pupil and family, the art of ninjutsu is recreated using costumes embedded with LED lights. In *HYPER PROJECTION ENGEKI "HAIKYU!!"*, based on a manga about a high school volleyball club, projection mapping is used to express the mental states of the characters on stage and extend a sense of presence during the match scenes. In these ways, the 2.5D musical genre has continued to evolve through a range of performances that incorporate the latest technologies.

"It can be difficult to express the high freedom of expression found in the 2D source material on a stage that has to contend with physical limitations. Only by filling in the blanks in the minds of the audience members can the work achieve completion on the stage," explains Toda.

Recently, it has become increasingly common for an original manga work being adapted into an anime, video game, novel or live-action drama and film to be adapted for the stage at the same time. And while previously almost all the audience members enjoying a 2.5D musical would be fans of the original work, recently the fan base has expanded, with audiences who have seen the stage performance later becoming fans of the original material. As many of the original works are manga, anime or video games that are popular around the world, the Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association has also been focusing on extending its messaging by setting up websites that allow ticket purchases from overseas as well as other efforts. Overseas performances have mainly taken place in China and elsewhere in Asia, but performances last year in Paris, France and in March 2019 in Washington D.C. and Broadway, New York were also met with sell-out crowds.

Toda touched upon the future goals of their efforts. "The original Japanese manga comics these musicals are based on are really respected by the overseas fans, and by having Japanese take the stage for the performances, they get a sense that the 'real thing' has come to town. By further boosting recognition of 2.5D musicals moving forward, we hope that even more overseas fans visit Japan hoping to be moved by the performances on offer." 