

# Fighting Against the Pandemic

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Hagio Hitomi

In 2022, the confusion of the COVID-19 pandemic had already entered the third year. Nevertheless, the number of performances in the musical world increased as though the pent-up energy and gloomy mood was released all at once. Still, there were a number of cases in which the performances had to be cancelled or suspended due to the pandemic. On the other hand, several original musicals were produced one after another and they proved the underlying strength of the Japanese musical world.

## International Companies Were Back Again and Some Large-Scale Musicals Were Cancelled

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During 2022, the musical world was brave to take risks and worked toward presenting shows while cautiously checking on the situation. International companies visiting Japan were the productions that were the most severely impacted by the pandemic. However, they got going, starting with *Singin' in the Rain* that toured to Japan in February. It was a UK production and when you saw the scene in which the lead Adam Cooper was singing and dancing in the pouring rain, it felt as if a ray of hope was shining through the clouds. The production was full of the spirit not only to revive performances in Japan but also to protect theatre culture by getting through the pandemic.

American companies such as *RENT* and *A Chorus Line* as well as *Chicago*, *Broadway Christmas Wonderland* among others that were also from the US toured to Japan in 2022. Although the number of visiting companies had decreased compared to the peak period, they were coming back step by step and it was one of the signs that the musical world was trying to overcome the global pandemic.

Large-scale Japanese musical productions opened one after another as well. *Miss Saigon* and *Elisabeth* were revived at the Imperial Theatre after they were inevitably cancelled in 2020. Both musicals are very popular and the tickets were referred to as “Platinum Tickets” as they were very difficult to get hold of. However, in both productions, much to the dismay of the ticket holders, the performances frequently had to be cancelled when the cast got infected with coronavirus or when they were bound by quarantine rules.

It is true that the actors playing the main characters are a big draw for popular musicals. In the future, however, the productions should be steered in a direction that makes it possible to continue performances infallibly through a clearly defined system that makes more use of understudies (covering a certain role) and swings (covering several roles). Some people go to a musical because they want to see a box-office star but there are also many people who want to experience the work itself. Especially when it comes to musicals that tour to several cities around Japan, there must be many local audiences who are excited to see the show for the first time. There are, however, an increasing number of productions that are now covered by understudies and/or swings due to the prolonged pandemic.

The performances of many productions were cancelled a number of times due to the pandemic and it was most disappointing to the fans and the company of *Man of La Mancha* starring Matsumoto Hakuo that it played only seven times. Hakuo has been playing the title role since 1969 when his stage name was Ichikawa Somegoro. The production was known Hakuo’s “final appearance” in *Man of La Mancha* and it was originally planned to play for about a month. Thank goodness the producers made an exceptional decision to revive it in 2023 as there were so many people who were heartbroken because they missed the show.

### **The Premiere of High-Profile Musicals and Resuming Postponed Productions**

*Hairspray* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* were two epic musicals that premiered in Japan after two years. Although international

companies of both musicals had toured Japan in the past, it was the first time they were presented with Japanese casts.

The revival of *Hairspray* was a delightful surprise because the starring actress, Watanabe Naomi, now lives outside Japan and she returned to be in the show. She was just right for the heroine and it was difficult to imagine anyone else playing the role. The characters in the musical overcome and rise above all sorts of discrimination based on reasons such as gender, race and physical appearance, and it was striking that the Afro-American characters were played without putting on dark makeup. The decision on the makeup was made due to a request from the Broadway producers. How to express different races with a Japanese cast is probably going to be one of the next challenges for Japanese musicals.

*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* is one of Andrew Lloyd Webber's earlier works and Yabu Kota, who belongs to the talent agency Johnny & Associates, starred in the production. The musical opened at last two years after the originally-planned date. But, surprisingly, there was only a small audience. It was probably because there was a higher ratio of audience members that are Johnny's fans who are younger than the regular musical fans, and the situation during the pandemic must have made it difficult for them to "go on an expedition" to see Johnny's idols perform.

Japan premieres of foreign musicals were also produced consistently although smaller in number than they used to be. The Off-Broadway musical *The View Upstairs* depicting gender discrimination was interesting as it fits with the times. *Be More Chill* was the Japanese-cast version of the musical that was premiered on Broadway in 2019. It is a drama about high schoolers who are coping with life's problems and it seems that the worldwide hit of the musical numbers helped spur the Japan premiere.

I did not expect that *Flower Drum Song* and *Bye Bye Birdie* would be premiered in Japan. (*Flower Drum Song* was presented by the Takarazuka Revue Company at Bow Hall in 1992 and is therefore not strictly the Japan premiere.) Both musicals premiered on Broadway over fifty years ago and in Japan they were produced by small-and-medium size or emerging production companies

instead of major or long-established ones. The emerging production companies are the ones that are likely to discover and present more buried musicals in the future.

Incidentally, there was an interesting phenomenon of two productions of *The Fantasticks* “competing” with one another. The latest version is called *The Fantasticks–Boy Meets Boy*, which was rewritten by Tom Jones who wrote the original libretto and lyrics, and right after it was presented by a small production company, Toho Co., Ltd., presented *The Fantasticks* for the first time in fifty-five years. One was a gender-free version and the other was the original version. Both productions were impressive and the strong appeal of the musical got through.

The most fruitful musical produced in 2022 was probably *Guys and Dolls*. It is a popular musical that premiered on Broadway in 1950 and has been revived in Japan several times by Takarazuka Revue Company and Toho Co., Ltd. since its Japan premiere by Takarazuka in 1984. This time, the version produced by Toho was updated by Michael Arden, who is currently the hottest director on Broadway. The scenic designer Dane Laffrey made full use of the stage mechanisms of the Imperial Theatre and designed an effective set that helped to create a fun-filled production.

A certain number of Korean musicals are presented in Japan every year nowadays although they are small in number. *Ludwig: Beethoven The Piano* was the most memorable production among the Korean musicals that were premiered in Japan this year. It was a pity, however, that the libretto was not well written although the music was enticing as is often the case with Korean musicals.

### **A Wide Variety of Original Musical Produced One After Another**

One of the features of the Japanese musical world in 2022 was, in short, the drastic increase of original musicals. For many years, the Japanese musical world has aspired to and called for the need of original musicals. The Japanese have been cultivating their capacity for creativity and while the number of original musicals increased, the pandemic brought about pseudo isolation from other countries and spurred the increase of original works.

Shiki Theatre Company premiered the long-awaited *The Boy and the Beast*

(*Bakemono no ko*), which was due to run for about a year. Based on a popular animated film directed by Hosoda Mamoru, Takahashi Chikae wrote the play-script, Fuki Harumi wrote and adapted the music and it was directed by Aoki Go. Toby Olié, who had also worked on Shiki's *A Robot in the Garden*, designed and directed the puppets. It is easy to imagine how hard it must have been to work with international staff during the pandemic but the production overcame those difficulties and opened a new chapter for the theatre company.

*Le Petit Prince (The Little Prince)* was indeed a very appealing stage production. It is a musical adaptation of the popular novel by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It was originally made into a musical by Ongakuza Musical company in 1993 and has been revived several times. This time it was produced by Toho Co., Ltd. Doi Yuko, who played the prince when it was premiered in 1993, played the same part again in the Toho version and it was amazing to see her timeless performance.

Currently, over half of the musicals that are presented in Japan are original musicals including existing works like *Le Petit Prince*. They might not have reached the level of translated foreign musicals in terms of the size of audience and performances. However, if you count Takarazuka Revue Company's works, which are mostly original musicals, the original Japanese musicals probably exceed foreign musicals both in the size of audience and performances.

Out of the works by Takarazuka Revue Company, *Never Say Good Bye -The Footsteps of Lovers* and *The Great Gatsby*, which were updated and revived after a long interval, were the productions that shone out. Another production that left a strong impression was *The Pleiades in the Blue (Sokyu no Subaru)*. It is a musical adaptation of Asada Jiro's novel and had eighty-seven cast members in total, which is only possible with a big theatre company like Takarazuka.

As there were so many original musicals and many of them ran for only a short period of time, it is quite difficult to cover them all. I have, nevertheless, basically covered the main works and those that received attention, and will now mention a few works that had a strong impact. First of all, *Women of the Night (Yoru no onna tachi)* was Nagatsuka Keishi's first musical. Nagatsuka wrote the playscript and directed the musical, which is based on Mizoguchi Kenji's film with the same title (released in 1948), and it was performed with a unique cast.

*Before the Flood* (*Kozui no mae*) produced by The Musical Company It's Follies was a remarkable production. The musical, which is considered to be Izumi Taku's major work and is included in the company's repertoire, was newly directed by Uyama Hitoshi and presented for the first time in twenty-five years. It is based on John Van Druten's play *I am a Camera*, which was adapted from Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (just like *Cabaret*, which was also based on Druten and Isherwood's works) and it was adapted into a story about Japanese people living in Dalian in China just before the Second World War. I was struck with wonder because both the music and the drama withstood the test of time.

As with the movie with the same title, the musical *Slumdog Millionaire* is based on the novel *Q&A. Your Lie in April* (*Shigatsu wa kimi no uso*) is a musical adaptation of a comic book that was made into a movie. The musical *Tokyo Love Story* somewhat took me by surprise. Although the comic-book TV drama series with the same title was popular during the bubble economy period, I could not help asking: why now? It may be part of HoriPro Inc.'s strategy to expand its activities in Asia along with *Fist of the North Star* (*Hokuto no ken*), which was premiered in 2021 and revived soon afterwards in 2022. This is merely speculation, though.

It was a bit shocking when I heard that the Imperial Theatre, which is regarded as the musical hall of fame, will be closed for a while from 2025 to be rebuilt. The passing away of the actor Takarada Akira, who played a pioneering role in the world of Japanese musicals, was also sad news. As I recall, El Gallo in *The Fantasticks* was one of the successful roles he played in musicals. Although there were all sorts of sad news and incidents during the year, the Japanese musical world had entered a new phase and it was one thing that gave me hope in 2022.

## Hagio, Hitomi

Hagio Hitomi is a film and theatre critic. She became a critic after working as a newspaper journalist. Besides writing a column series on musicals in The Asahi Shimbun, she writes reviews on films and theatre for other newspapers. She is the author of *Take Me Out to the Musical! (Myujikaru ni tsuretette!)* (Seikyusha, 1992) and *Your First Musical Film Selected by a Professional: Hagio Hitomi's Top 50 (Puro ga eranda hajimete no myujikaru eiga: Hagio Hitomi besuto serekushon 50)*. She is also on the selection committee of awards such as the Yomiuri Theater Awards, the Kikuta Kazuo Theatre Awards and the Matsuo Performing Arts Award.

(Translation: Sumida Michiyo)