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# Between Modernism and Japonism: *The Mousmé* and the cultural mobility of musical comedy

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*Edwardian musical comedy had been sidelined in music and theatre histories due to its conservative design and frivolous narratives, but it is now being critically reassessed for the role it played in the creation of a first globalised network of theatre. The Mousmé is a work that exemplifies the process of performative re-contextualisation that accompanied musical comedies as they travelled from London's West End across the world, as far as Yokohama and Tokyo. The work appealed to British audiences because it was held to be a realistic reconstruction of Japanese culture and society, but it was also enjoyed by Japanese audiences, despite its stereotypical portrayal of their people. This apparent dichotomy is explored in this essay, which presents little-known documents surrounding the production and its travels. It sheds light on how musical theatre became culturally mobile during the first age of globalisation. Henry Balme is a full-time Ph.D. candidate in Music History at the Department of Music of Yale University. He completed his M.St. at the University of Oxford (2015) and his B.Mus. at City, University of London.*

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Culture is rarely stable or fixed.<sup>1</sup> This claim is corroborated by the global transmission and reception of Edwardian musical comedy. For a long time the genre had been considered an obscure part of musical theatre history and thus demoted to the sidelines of musicology and theatre studies.<sup>2</sup> It is now being critically re-assessed for the importance it played in the globalisation of theatre during the first fifteen years of the twentieth century: musical comedy became a medium of extraordinary mobility, transmitted via the transnational travel and communication networks that had been put into place during the nineteenth century. Its shows, which originated in London, were dispersed to all four corners of the earth by itinerant theatrical troupes, which utilised the enhanced travel infrastructures to move from one urban centre to the next. The mobility of musical

comedy can be elucidated by tracing the itinerary of one of its shows, *The Mousmé*. Initially written for the West End stage by Robert Courtneidge and Alexander Thompson (story), Percy Greenback and Arthur Wimperis (lyrics), Howard Talbot and Lionel Monckton (music), the work travelled from London to theatres around the world, as far as Yokohama and Tokyo. The constant state of unsettlement that accompanies such mobility raises important questions about what happens when a work originally conceived for a specific place and audience is uprooted, transported and introduced to a new cultural context.

The question of performative re-contextualisation through mobility is addressed in this article by arguing that Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical framework of cultural mobility can help us to understand the dynamics at work when *The Mousmé*, a musical comedy set in contemporary Japan, returns to its original setting. When the work, unanimously celebrated for its elaborate and realistic staging techniques, impressive scenic effects and fastidiously detailed costumes, was premièred at London's Shaftesbury Theatre in 1911, it was generally held by English audiences to be an accurate representation of Japanese culture and society. One year later the same work was performed for Japanese audiences in Yokohama, Osaka and Tokyo. Perhaps counter to expectation the work was well received, despite its overt exoticism. This article tries to provide a possible explanation for this phenomenon: if the work's constituent elements (sets, costumes, music, libretto) remained essentially the same as it travelled from one location to another, it must have been the respective performance contexts that imbued it with different meanings. Exploring this change in meaning lies at the core of the present investigation.

The article begins by discussing the genre of Edwardian musical comedy as an example of global theatre that extended as far as Japan thanks to extensive theatrical circuits such as that operated by the impresario Maurice E. Bandmann. The second section examines the emergence of Western theatres in Meiji Japan and their interaction with travelling European theatre companies as an example of cultural mobility using three ideas from Greenblatt's manifesto: contact zones, mobilisers and rootedness. The third section discusses the costuming and staging of the work against the background of European fascination with Japan ("Japonism") by drawing on little-known documents surrounding the production and reception of the work, including contemporary newspaper reviews, production photographs and promotional materials. The final section looks at the work's music and its reception in Japan in a production by the Bandmann Opera Company within the historical context of Japanese modernisation.

### ***Musical comedy: A global phenomenon***

*The Mousmé* is an example of musical comedy, a genre of musical theatre whose artifacts are no longer performed today. A genre of entertainment that emerged in London's West End during the early 1890s, musical comedy remained popular in London until the early years of the First World War. This period is conventionally labelled as the age of Edwardian musical comedy. The figure who is unequivocally credited with having invented musical comedy is theatre manager and producer George Edwardes (1855–1915).<sup>3</sup> Over a career spanning thirty years, the tycoon established an entertainment empire in London's West End, where he owned and ran multiple theatres, including the then famous Gaiety Theatre, and oversaw the production of over sixty works of musical comedy.<sup>4</sup> Musical comedy left

a multifaceted legacy: British actor, screenwriter and producer Seymour Hicks helped popularise musical comedy on Broadway together with Charles Frohman; impresario Charles B. Cochran was tremendously successful in London with his musical revues and plays; Ivor Novello appeared in British Silent films whilst also writing West End musicals. All these artists were steeped in the tradition of Edwardian musical comedy and so it is evident that musical comedy lived on in the films, musicals, vaudevilles and other forms of popular entertainment after World War I.<sup>5</sup>

Central to the present investigation is Edwardes' ambition to promote his shows on a global scale. His international project began as early as 1894, when he entered into an agreement with Charles Frohman, allowing the latter to stage *A Gaiety Girl* on Broadway. The contract between the two impresarios established a transatlantic trading relationship in musical theatre. George Edwardes quickly realised the commercial potential of selling the performance rights of his popular London shows to impresarios abroad and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Edwardes' Gaiety plays were touring around the world. J. C. Williamson, an American who settled in Melbourne, had acquired the sole performance rights for Edwardes' Gaiety plays in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> Henry Savage, based in Boston, owned the performance rights in the United States, where he toured West End productions with his Savage Opera Company.<sup>7</sup> Maurice E. Bandmann, who operated a theatrical circuit stretching from Gibraltar to Yokohama, had obtained the sole rights for the Gaiety plays in the British colonies as well as East Asia.<sup>8</sup> These managers thereby extended Edwardes' entertainment empire across the globe, from New York, San Francisco to Sydney, Singapore, Calcutta and Cairo. They not only built, owned, managed or leased numerous Gaiety theatres in these metropolitan centres but also managed multiple touring theatre companies simultaneously and had commercial control over virtually all aspects of theatre production and reception. To keep their elaborate touring circuits in place, Bandmann, Williamson and Savage were heavily dependent on the enhanced travel and communication technologies that emerged during the nineteenth century and transformed the world into a global network.<sup>9</sup> Steamship and railway networks provided the possibility of faster, further and more reliable travel with improved timetables and punctuality. The laying of telegraph lines and establishment of innumerable local newspapers and various news agencies created a sophisticated communications infrastructure which allowed touring companies and their managers to reach their audiences. These factors helped Bandmann to implement a highly developed rotation system, in which one company would remain at a theatre for a week or ten days and then move on for the next company to take its place. In this way, Bandmann wanted his companies to maintain a state of 'structured circulation', providing entertainment at urban centres around the world, all year round.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Cultural mobility***

It is from the perspective of this transnational network of theatres and itinerant troupes that we can approach the dissemination and reception of musical comedy in early twentieth-century Japan. There, the arrival of musical comedy was facilitated by the opening of various Western-style theatres in urban centres such as Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka and Kyoto. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*'s book *Cultural*

*Mobility: A Manifesto* (2009) provides a theoretical framework that helps elucidate their interactions. In a series of 'microhistories' of displaced things and people, the authors argue that cultures, even traditional ones, are rarely ever stable or fixed. The book concludes with a 'Mobility Studies Manifesto', in which Greenblatt lays down five principles under whose guidance the author believes mobility studies should proceed. Central to the present analysis are the third and fifth pillars of the manifesto, the former concerns 'contact zones' and 'mobilisers', while the latter addresses the sensation of 'rootedness'.

'Contact zones' are places, locales or relay stations where cultural goods are exchanged.<sup>11</sup> They constitute interfaces where groups of people with different religious, ethnic and social backgrounds meet and interact. Yokohama, as one of the first Japanese trading ports to open to the rest of the world in the 1850s, represents a primary example of a contact zone: a melting-pot that put a native Japanese population into contact with European and American merchants, diplomats and travellers. More specifically, the Gaiety Theatre, which was established in Yokohama in 1870, may be understood as a contact zone on a smaller scale.<sup>12</sup> Although it was set up in an affluent quarter of Yokohama by the international community to provide entertainment for the mainly British, French, German, Dutch audiences, it was later also frequented by a small number of Japanese spectators and by the early 1900s the Gaiety had attained a culturally heterogeneous audience profile.<sup>13</sup> Greenblatt argues that contact zones often encounter a variety of responses from those who engage with them: whereas some regard them as opportunities for fruitful intercultural exchange, others fear them as a threat to established traditions, rituals and beliefs. The most telling example of intercultural tensions at the Gaiety Theatre was the attempt to stage Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in April of 1887. Salinger's English Opera Bouffe Company had arrived with the comic opera in its repertoire, but the performance was prevented by the British consul of Yokohama, who, under pressure from the local Japanese authorities, feared that the depiction of the emperor on stage would offend Japanese residents. It was performed nonetheless, albeit under a different title and heavily cut, but the incident prompted a performance ban of *The Mikado* in Japan until after the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> The non-performance of *The Mikado* in Yokohama provides an example of frictions that can arise in contact zones.

Vital to the sustainability of contact zones are so-called 'mobilisers' that frequent them. These are agents and intermediaries who facilitate contact and catalyse the exchange of cultural goods.<sup>15</sup> Diplomats provide one example of mobilisers; merchants, who profit from contact zones economically, are another. Bandmann's itinerant troupes with their entourage of actors, musicians, make-up artists, technicians as well as the local Japanese theatre owners, agents and journalists all fulfilled such 'mobilising' functions. In order to implement successfully his circuit of travelling troupes in Japan, Bandmann had to form partnerships with local theatres and entrepreneurs. What is distinct about these partnerships is that they were intended to be not temporary but permanent: only through long-term collaborations with local partners could Bandmann's seamless system of 'structured circulation' in fact be implemented.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Greenblatt argues that mobilisers should be understood in relationship to the institutions they serve. In the case of Bandmann's companies, they were undoubtedly complicit in the

colonialist agendas of the British Empire, which meant exporting European-style theatre practices to Japan.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth pillar of Greenblatt's mobility manifesto stresses the importance of 'rootedness'. Greenblatt argues that mobility studies are subject to a paradox: "it is impossible to understand mobility without also understanding the glacial weight of what appears bounded and static." Moreover, culturally mobile platforms often, in a somewhat contradictory manner, "produce results that are strikingly enmeshed in particular times and places and local cultures".<sup>18</sup> The dialectic relationship between mobility and stasis that underpins the concept of cultural mobility is also central to the genre at the heart of this investigation. Edwardian musical comedy as a *genre* was a cosmopolitan and transnational medium, transmitted via a highly sophisticated network of theatres, contractors and travelling troupes and this qualifies it as one of the first forms of global theatrical entertainment. At the same time, its *products* (the settings and narratives) that were presented by these companies were steeped in a very particular time and place. Many Edwardian musical comedies, for example, employed contemporary subject matter: chic department stores, seaside resorts and film studios provide the settings for musical comedies.<sup>19</sup> The concept of 'rootedness' becomes especially pertinent in those musical comedies with exotic subject matter, where the portrayal of distant cultures on the West End stage came to function as a vehicle for imaginary travel for British audiences. This is arguably the most important concept by which we can understand the popular appeal of *The Mousmé* after it received its première at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London on September 9, 1911.

### ***Japan in The Mousmé***

The various documents—contemporary newspaper reviews, theatre programmes, production photographs and promotional texts—that surrounded the production and reception of *The Mousmé* are all united by a common theme: the question to what extent the work can be held as a realistic presentation of Japanese culture and society. This apparent concern for authenticity is not unique to *The Mousmé*. Previous productions of musical comedies that depicted foreign cultures shared a similar emphasis on getting it 'right' when attempting to stage Ceylon (*The Cingalee*), India (*The Blue Moon*), China (*San Toy* and *A Chinese Honeymoon*) or Japan (*The Geisha*). These experiments were all also celebrated for what Becker, Linton and Platt call their "anthropological accuracy."<sup>20</sup> *The Mousmé* therefore represents another example in a rich tradition of musical comedies that were engrossed in 'doing' foreign cultures. Its fixation with fidelity to Japanese culture becomes more comprehensible when set against the background of the wider intellectual, "quasi-scientific" discourse of Japonism.<sup>21</sup>

Japonism (or its French equivalent 'Japonisme') describes the European fascination with Japanese culture. Japan, under the pressure of Western powers, ended its isolationist policy and gradually opened its borders to the rest of the world in the 1850s and 60s. The strict foreign policy during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) had sealed Japan off from the rest of the world for more than two hundred years. Consequently, when Japan opened its borders, Europeans were able to visit and travel the country, purchasing and subsequently bringing back an abundance of art and artefacts to their home countries. Amongst them were Japanese paintings,

porcelain, ceramics, enamels, lacquerware, lanterns, silks, bamboo, woodcraft and picture books. Artefacts like these formed the basis of the Japanese display at the 1862 International Exhibition in London, which featured more than six hundred objects and caused a great stir in Victorian Britain.<sup>22</sup> Another example would be the 1885 'Living Display' of Japanese culture in Knightsbridge, London, which employed around one hundred Japanese women and men in surroundings built to resemble a traditional Japanese Village. Such displays came to function like virtual tours of Japan: British audiences would attend these exhibitions in order to experience such "feasts in colour" without having the inconvenience of needing to leave their home-country.<sup>23</sup> In this sense the collections of art and artefacts and their exhibitions came to serve something that John Urry calls the "tourist gaze": Japanese culture became fetishised by the British, who used the various displays as vehicles for imaginary travel.<sup>24</sup> This form of escapism was inextricably linked to a romanticising idea of Japanese society as unspoilt. William Burges, an architect, designer and medievalist, clearly gave credence to this idea when he visited the 1862 exhibition: "if [...] the visitor wishes to see the real Middle Ages, he must visit the Japanese Court, for, at the present day, the arts of the Middle Ages have deserted Europe and are only to be found in the East."<sup>25</sup> This European perception of Japan as a pre-modern, pre-industrialised mirror of itself constitutes a form of Orientalism, as Checkland has argued, always implying a form of British and European hegemony.<sup>26</sup> Like the 'Living Displays' of Japanese culture and society, *The Mousmé* catered to the very same desire for virtual travel that underpinned Japonism. This desire led in turn to the creation of its anthropological 'realism.' Set during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), *The Mousmé* follows two parallel love stories: on the one hand there is the story of the female protagonist, O Hana San (the Mousmé),<sup>27</sup> who sells herself to a Geisha house so that she can pay off the gambling debts of her lover, Captain Fujiwara. The other story follows Miyo Ko San, the daughter of a Japanese general and an English mother, who has affections for Lieutenant Makei but is prevented from consummating her love by her betrothal to the cunning officer Yamaki, who actually has designs on O Hana San (Figure 1). The narrative of the work is convoluted and ends with Yamaki being killed in an earthquake, allowing both couples to live happily ever after. Although the plot was considered to be "distinctly Japanese," it was also regarded as being of the very slightest importance and only a "mere thread on which to hang the pretty scenes."<sup>28</sup> Indeed it was the spectacular visual elements of *The Mousmé*, the costumes, sets and scenic effects, which really caught the attention of audiences and secured its popularity.



Figure 1. Cicely Courtneidge as Miyo Ko San and Florence Smithson as O Hana San. Photo *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated*, London.

The work's production team went to considerable lengths in order to achieve a realistic image of Japan: the programme for the London première as well as a promotional text in the *Playgoer and Society Illustrated* both remark upon the fact that the show's producer, Robert Courtneidge, undertook a trip to Japan in order to study the mannerisms and customs of the Japanese.<sup>29</sup> He also sent one of the show's two composers, Howard Talbot, to Japan to work into the musical score the "occasional, genuine Japanese phrase."<sup>30</sup> To certify the work's apparent authenticity, the producers interviewed Itō Hirokuni, the son of the Japanese prime minister Itō Hirobumi and a resident in London at the time. He provided the requisite seal of approval:

I feel bound to say that *The Mousmé* shows the best picture of Japan I have seen on your English stage, and although I understand that Mr. Courtneidge sacrificed considerable time in visiting Japan to get the real spirit of my country for his new play, the result justifies the trouble he has taken. He is giving much pleasure to my compatriots and myself.<sup>31</sup>

The discursive strategy is clear: if a Japanese official would validate that the representation of Japan in *The Mousmé* as accurate, then its purpose as a vehicle for imaginary travel would be more effective. Remarks about the work's 'anthropological accuracy' can also be found in the various journalistic reactions to the narrative, costumes and sets of the work. The costuming of the show

immediately makes evident that getting the local colour ‘right’ was of central importance to the producers of the show (Figure 1). If we examine the costume worn by Florence Smithson, the female lead, we find that the show’s costume designer, William Wilhelm, paid careful attention to detail (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Florence Smithson as O Hana San. Photo National Portrait Gallery, London.

The photograph shows her sitting cross-legged in front of a painted folding screen, holding a tea-cup in her right hand. The Japanese folding screen is one of the most distinctive forms of Japanese art: known as *byōbu* (literally “protection from the wind”), the free-standing partition served many purposes, such as creating an intimate space for serving tea, sleeping or reading. The costume Smithson is wearing is a white *kimono* with ornaments, which is secured by a sash, called *obi*. The hair ornaments (*kanzashi*) are applied in traditional Japanese female hairstyles. These elements indicate that the costume designer had studied Japanese garments in great detail. There are two inaccuracies with regards to the representation of a Japanese tea ceremony, however: the tea-cup Smithson is holding in her right has a handle and there is a spoon balancing on the saucer. Tea-cups in Japan do normally not have handles and the use of a spoon is typical of British tea-drinking habits. Furthermore, the depiction of a woman sitting cross-legged in this context would have been quite disconcerting to Japanese audiences. During a tea-ceremony one usually sits in *seiza*-style, a formal way of kneeling on the floor by folding both legs under one’s thighs, and sitting on one’s heels. Although the recreation of Japanese customs in the photograph are inaccurate, the costumes worn by the cast show a choice of expensive fabrics and attention to detail. *The Playgoer* remarked that “the costumes are correct in detail and richness,”<sup>32</sup> and the son of the Japanese prime minister certified that the female dresses were “very true to life, their colouring and style quite reminding [him] of the dresses of the people at home.”<sup>33</sup>

The realistic sets and spectacular scenic effects also helped to firmly anchor the drama in Japan and secure the work's success.<sup>34</sup> The second act, for example, makes use of visual imagery that was strikingly similar to that employed at the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge: tea-houses with curved eaves are surrounded by cherry blossom, hanging wisteria and decorated with paper lanterns, called *akachōchin* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Staging for the second act. 'The Garden of Sweet Content, a Tea-house in Tokyo'. Photo The Playgoer and Society Illustrated, 1912, 48.

Assembled in front and around the houses are women and men wearing *kimonos* and in the foreground we see geishas seated, playing *samisen*.<sup>35</sup> As expected, the issue of doing Japanese culture 'right' continues in discussions and reviews of the work: *The Playgoer*, for example, noted that the set design "not only depicts the true colours of that beautiful land of the East, but seems to introduce the Japanese atmosphere: [...] we feel, during these three hours at the Shaftesbury Theatre [that] we are actually living in the land of *The Mousmé*."<sup>36</sup> Itō Hirokuni confirms Wightman's suggestion that the scenery is apparently authentic by declaring it as "typically Japanese" and that the stage designer, had "succeeded in representing the form and colour of [...] Japan[ese] houses and landscapes in a wonderfully faithful manner."<sup>37</sup> The theme of fidelity to this foreign culture suggests that the sets' appeal lay in their function as vehicles for imaginary travel. It is clear, then, that the visual design of the work made virtual travel possible. The staging and costumes fulfilled similar functions as the 'Living Displays' of Japan that were constructed at the 1862 London exhibition or the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge. The various accounts remarking on the work's apparent fidelity to Japanese culture make evident that *The Mousmé* was, as many other Orientalist musical comedies, perceived as an exercise in fashioning an image of a foreign culture. The more interesting question is, however, how this work, with its stereotyped portrayal of Japanese society, was received when it was premièred in Japan the next year.

### **The Mousmé in Japan**

In the summer of 1912, the Bandmann Opera Company brought *The Mousmé* to Tokyo's Imperial Theatre, which had opened just one year previously.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the unanimous praise the work received in Britain, the responses towards *The Mousmé* were more equivocal in Japan. Zoë Kincaid, a European theatre

critic and columnist of 'The Stage' in the Osaka newspaper *The Far East*, harshly criticised the work's production in Tokyo for being superficial and inappropriate:

The piece was not only a threadbare version of its ancestor, the Mikado, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, but a superficial acquaintance with real Japan would enable one to see how hopeless was the interpretation of local colour. [...] no attempt is made to make a thorough study of details. When such a piece will please Western audiences it shows how low their tastes are, how easily they are satisfied, and that for the most part Japan is regarded as a place at the ends of the earth and looked at through a veil of mysticism.<sup>39</sup>

In like manner to her commentators on the other side of the globe, Kincaid echoes the discourse concerning the fidelity of the production. But unlike the London reviewers, she felt that the work had failed in its ambition to successfully represent the 'real Japan.' One such example of a 'hopeless' interpretation of local colour were the costumes worn by the Bandmann Opera Company, which she denounced as being inaccurate and cheap. Kincaid complained that the costuming was "ludicrous": the *obi* was tied in a strange manner, and the cast were wearing large English kitchen aprons instead of the that the music is "characteristic and tuneful without however being very convincingly Japanese"<sup>40</sup> and Kincaid, reviewing the production in Tokyo, bemoaned that there "was not a genuine Japanese strain in the score."<sup>41</sup>

Although most of the music is in a Western idiom, there are some exceptions. One example of an allusion to the Orient is the opening melody of Song No. 12 ('My Samisen'), sung by O Hana San ('Many songs a little maiden sings / To her samisen,' bars 5-8) and composed by Howard Talbot. O Hana San's melody hovers around b' over a drone-like accompaniment in the piano, characterised by the static open fifths played by the left hand. But it is the melodic use of the E harmonic minor scale that is arguably the most conspicuous musical signifier of the Orient (Figure 4).

The image shows a musical score for the song 'My Samisen'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line for 'Hana.' and a piano accompaniment for 'Piano.'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The vocal line begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and features a melody in the E harmonic minor scale. The lyrics under the vocal line are: 'Ma-ny songs a lit-tle maid-en sings To her sa-mi-sen,\_\_\_\_\_'. The piano accompaniment features a static drone of open fifths in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

Figure 4. Song No. 12. 'My Samisen' sung by O Hana San, bars 5-8.

After the melody is repeated once in bars 9-12 ('While her heart is throbbing like the strings / Of her samisen'), the melodic writing for the rest of the song is entirely diatonic and thus remains firmly anchored in a Western idiom (Figure 5).

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two staves: a vocal line for 'Hana' and a piano accompaniment. Both are marked 'poco cresc.'. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are: 'Glad-ly I sang when Love was near, Mur-mur-ing soft-ly in my ear,'. The melody is pentatonic.

Figure 5. Song No. 12 ('My Samisen') sung by O Hana San, bars 13-16.

There are some sporadic examples of musical allusions to the Orient, such as the pentatonic melodic figures that open the first act, or the occasional melismatic flourish in the vocal writing, but these remain sparse, and can be usually found only in the opening bars, as in the example above. Yet the question remains, to what extent Japanese native audiences would have recognised pentatonicisms or particular vocal ornamentation as allusions to their local music traditions.

It is striking that there exists such a marked discrepancy between the visual and the musical elements of this work. But perhaps it was exactly this incongruent combination that made a simultaneous appeal to Western and Japanese audiences possible. While the local colour in the visual design of the work enabled virtual travel for British audiences, the Western popular music seemed to be the point of focus for Japanese audiences. An explanation could be that for the Japanese, listening to Western music meant asserting oneself as a global citizen and this resonated with ideas of Modernism, a sensibility which became increasingly pertinent during the Meiji era and was inextricably bound up with Western values and culture.<sup>42</sup>

By the time Bandmann's companies arrived in Japan in 1906, the country had undergone a period of radical modernisation. During the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan had become completely transformed from a feudal, 'pre-modern' society into a fully industrialised nation with imperial ambitions. By the early 1880s the Meiji government had begun to put into place the infrastructure of a Western capitalist industrial economy. The Japanese economy was booming between 1895 and 1915 and even outpaced that of the United States.<sup>43</sup> A key factor in this transformation was the importation of Western technologies: Japanese engineering students travelled to Europe (especially Britain and Germany) in order to bring state-of-the-art technologies back to their home country. One of the outcomes of this project was the railway network, which was started in 1870 with a railway line connecting Yokohama and Tokyo.<sup>44</sup> By the late 1880s, Japan's railway tracks covered more than one thousand miles and by 1900 its size had more than tripled.<sup>45</sup> These railway networks were a vital asset for the foreign theatre companies, allowing them to travel quickly to and from urban centres.

Engineers also brought back knowledge about Western architecture.<sup>46</sup> This enabled the establishment of Western-style theatres in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Yokohama. The most impressive example of these was the Teikoku Gekijō ('Imperial Theatre'), which opened in 1911 and where performances of *The Mousmé* took place in 1912. The 1,700 seat theatre was modelled on the Comédie-Française and boasted the latest technological innovations of European theatres, such as electrical

lighting. The Teikoku Gekijō became an institution that epitomised the idea of modernisation through westernisation.<sup>47</sup> It consciously promoted European theatre-going practices, for example, such as the European ticketing-system of buying and selling tickets, which were customs not native to Japan.<sup>48</sup> This conscious effort at modernising on the part of the Japanese provides an answer to the question why the Japanese embraced the genre of musical theatre.

The period of industrialisation and modernisation during the Meiji Restoration provides a historical explanation as to why *The Mousmé* and other Edwardian musical comedies were popular in Japan. The concept that musical comedy can be perceived as something quintessentially modern, or even modernist, has been made by Len Platt and Peter Bailey, who have argued that Edwardian musical comedy resonates with *fin-de-siècle* modernist values. This requires expanding our notion of modernism beyond a narrow aesthetic understanding and exploring its relationship to modernisation. Until quite recently, musical comedy had been regarded as a form of mass-produced entertainment, promoting decadent consumerist and capitalist values.<sup>49</sup> Bailey and Platt have put forward the suggestion, however, that it is precisely its commercialised nature that qualifies the genre as modernist.<sup>50</sup> They argue that the genre resonated with many key *fin-de-siècle* concepts such as the industrialisation of culture and the decay of high culture. It also deployed the “most modern forms of technology, distribution and marketing available, and was intensely consumerist in its design, execution and general orientation.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the genre was topical: it emphasised the ‘now’ rather than the ‘then’ by employing contemporary settings and narratives in place of historical romanticism (characteristic of opera and operetta). In this way, the modern world became the essential source of inspiration for musical comedies: their stories were set in department stores, horse-racing venues, seaside resorts and other recreational spaces and this kept the genre in step with the dreams and ideologies of modern middle-class life. Set against the background of the modernisation projects in Japan and the adoption of Western customs and fashions, the modernist values perpetuated in Edwardian musical comedy shed light on the question of why the genre became so popular in late Meiji Japan. Watching musical comedy in Japan with its emphasis on scenographic realism (sometimes only shortly after their première in London) and Western popular tunes meant being up-to-date with the most recent trends in European entertainment and therefore asserting oneself as open-minded, cosmopolitan and an essentially modern citizen of the world.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that Edwardian musical comedy can be understood as culturally mobile. The reception of the work in Japan was made possible by the opening of ‘contact zones,’ as is exemplified by the establishment of Western-style theatres in Japan, such as the Tokyo’s Imperial Theatre or Yokohama’s Gaiety Theatre. If theatres are to be understood as functioning as contact zones, then Bandmann’s travelling theatre companies and the local theatre owners, journalists and agents fulfil ‘mobilising’ functions, catalysing cross-cultural exchange between people of different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds and facilitating the exchange of cultural goods. The success-story of Edwardian musical comedy lay in its ability to adapt to ever-changing performance contexts, which undoubtedly qualifies it as a culturally mobile platform. This becomes most evident when we

trace the journey of *The Mousmé* from London's West End to Tokyo's Imperial Theatre: although the work's components stayed practically the same, its meaning changed. If such a transformation was possible even though the narrative, costumes, sets, libretto and music of the work remained almost unchanged, then the different performance contexts must offer an explanation for this change in meaning. British audiences were drawn to the work because of its impressive and apparently realistic sets and costumes, which made a 'virtual tour' of Japan possible and facilitated imaginary travel. Japanese audiences, on the other hand, appropriated Edwardian musical comedy because of its music and because it resonated with broader ideas about modernisation. Attending a performance of European theatre became a way of asserting oneself as modern and cosmopolitan, even if that meant accepting somewhat inaccurate representations of one's own culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, introduction to *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), i.

<sup>2</sup> Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890–1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Bloom, *Curtain Call for the Guv'nor: A Biography of George Edwardes* (London: Hutchinson, 1954). Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*. Thomas Postlewait, "George Edwardes and Musical Comedy: The Transformation of London Theatre and Society, 1878-1914" in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> A complete catalogue of Edwardes' productions, including their exact names, theatres, opening dates, number of performances and genre types can be found in Postlewait, "George Edwardes and Musical Comedy," 84–6.

<sup>5</sup> Aspects of musical comedy can also be found in the Marx Brothers' works for Broadway and the cinema, the double-act slap-stick comedies of Laurel and Hardy as well as the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. An argument could be made that the legacy of musical comedy stretches well into the second half of the twentieth century.

<sup>6</sup> Ian G. Dicker, *J. C. W.: A Short Biography* (Sydney: Elizabeth Tudor Press, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Gänzl, *The Encyclopedia of The Musical Theatre*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 1274.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Balme, "The Bandmann Circuit: Theatrical Networks in the First Age of Globalization," *Theatre Research International* 40.1 (2015): 19–36, url: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0307883314000546>.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> The longest stay of a Bandmann company anywhere was a fourteen-week season in Calcutta, with a population of over one million inhabitants at that time, see Balme, "The Bandmann Circuit," 26.

<sup>11</sup> Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*, 251.

<sup>12</sup> The Gaiety Theatre is also known as Yokohama's Public Hall or under its Japanese name, Gête-za. The institution had two buildings at two different sites and the second, Yokohama's Public Hall, took on the name of Gaiety theatre in later years.

<sup>13</sup> Soichiro Itoda, *Berlin & Tokyo – Theater und Hauptstadt* (Munich: Iudicium, 2008), 91.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, *Kabuki at the Crossroads: Years of Crisis, 1952-1965* (Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Balme, "The Bandmann Circuit," 30.

<sup>17</sup> Nowhere was Maurice Bandmann's imperialist agenda more apparent than in his comments about his production of Shakespeare in Calcutta and Bombay. "We have educated the natives into playgoing," he writes. "They will pay anything for seats [...] and always bring their 'Shakespeare' along, so as to follow the play. [...] When Shakespeare is given at the native theatres – as he often is

now – he is always played entire.” Unknown Author, “His Enterprises in the East: Shakespeare in India,” *Weekly Sun*, 30 September 1911, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*, 252.

<sup>19</sup> Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Tobias Becker, David Linton and Len Platt, “Introduction” in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin*, eds. Tobias Becker, David Linton and Len Platt (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>21</sup> Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> This collection was called the Alcock Collection, named after Rutherford Alcock, who was appointed Britain’s first Consul General to Japan. He purchased a plethora of Japanese art and art objects and dispatched around six hundred pieces to London which were displayed at the International Exhibition in London. See Olive Checkland, *Japan and Britain after 1859 – Creating Cultural Bridges* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Yorimitsu Hashimoto, “Japanese Tea Party: Representations of Victorian Paradise and Playground in The Geisha (1896)” in *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*, ed. John K. Walton (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 104.

<sup>24</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*. 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Edward Cave and John Nichols, *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Review* (London: John Henry and James Parker, 1862), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Checkland, *Japan and Britain after 1859*, 112. Japonism is bound up with and should be understood as one particular form of the larger nineteenth-century discourse of Orientalism. Orientalism describes a Western ideological construct that espouses the political, social, economic and cultural domination over the lands and peoples of the Middle and Far East, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). For a discussion of Orientalism and how it relates to musical comedy, see William A. Everett, “Chu Chin Chow and Orientalist Musical Theatre in Britain during the First World War” in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s*, eds. Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a ‘Mousmé’ is a Japanese girl or young (especially unmarried) woman. The term was popularised by Pierre Loti in his novel *Madame Chrysanthème*. See Hashimoto, “Japanese Tea Party,” 106–7.

<sup>28</sup> Unknown author, “Bandmann Company: The Mousmé,” *The Times of India*, 12 November 1912, 8.

<sup>29</sup> John Wightman, “The Mousmé,” *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated: A Monthly Magazine of the Drama, Fashion, and Society*, vol. 5, no. 26, (1912): 39. “Untitled,” *The Mousmé* (program notes), 9 September 1911. Two significant promotional texts with pictures of *The Mousmé* production can be found in *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated*, 1912, 37–62, and in *The Play Pictorial*, vol. 19, no. 113, July 1911, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Kurt Gänzl, *The British Musical Theatre*, vol. 1 (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), 1068.

<sup>31</sup> Itō Hirokuni, “Untitled,” *The Mousmé* (program notes), 9 September 1911, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Wightman, *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Itō, *The Mousmé*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Responsible for the scenery and the mechanics of the show was Conrad Tritschler, who had manufactured them in his Scenic Studio at Vanbrugh Park, Blackheath. Unknown author, “Untitled,” *The Mousmé* (program notes), 9 September 1912, 2.

<sup>35</sup> A samisen or shamisen is a Japanese three-stringed musical instrument that is plucked using a plectrum.

<sup>36</sup> Wightman, *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Itō, *The Mousmé*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> I would like to extend my gratitude to Stanca Scholz-Cionca from the University of Trier for providing me with material regarding Bandmann’s productions at Tokyo, Osaka and Yokohama.

<sup>39</sup> Zoë Kincaid, “Amusements,” *The Far East*, 6 July 1912, 506.

<sup>40</sup> Unknown author, “Untitled,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 15 March 1912, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Kincaid, *The Far East*, 6 July 1912, 506.

<sup>42</sup> Yamomo, meLê, “Brokering Sonic Modernities: Migrant Manila Musicians in the Asia Pacific, 1881–1948,” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 6.2 (2015): 22–37, url:

<https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/view/157>.

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Cortazzi, *Victorians in Japan: In and around the Treaty ports* (London and Atlantic Highlands: The Athlone Press, 1987), 319.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 96.

<sup>46</sup> Checkland, *Japan and Britain after 1859*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> The Imperial Theatre (also known under its alternative Japanese name, Teigeki) was not the first Western-style theatre in Tokyo. The Kabuki-za, opened in 1889, was designed in a mixed European-Japanese style by the architect Kozo Takahra (who had been an exchange student in England) and hailed a new era in the history of Japanese Theatre. It was equipped with state-of-the-art European technology but housed primarily the native genre of Kabuki theatre. The Yūroku-za, opened in Tokyo in 1908, was another Western-style theatre and Bandmann's companies also performed there. See Itoda, *Berlin & Tokyo*, 112–4.

<sup>48</sup> Itoda, *Berlin & Tokyo*, 201.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment / Spaces of Modernity: Rethinking the British Popular Stage 1890–1914," *Nineteenth-Century Theatre* 26.1 (1998): 5–24, url: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1307960498>.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Bailey, "Theatres of Entertainment / Spaces of Modernity," 5–24. Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*, 26–58.

<sup>51</sup> Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*, 3–4.