

Acting for a Universal Language: The Role of the Performing Arts in the Development of the Esperanto Movement



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Introduction

Countless theatre theorists, practitioners, and playwrights have used the performing arts as a vehicle for activism. Augusto Boal used his Theatre of the Oppressed and “Legislative Theatre” to devise alternative solutions to the problems of the disenfranchised.¹ Play texts from some of the greatest thespians – Arthur Miller, Bertolt Brecht, Caryl Churchill, Tony Kushner – are all either overtly political or have significant political subtext. Even puppet theatre has an activist history, such as the renowned Bread and Puppet Theatre.² The performing arts have long served to communicate various political ideologies and ideas. Similarly, the most successful planned language in history, Esperanto, has been used to promote comparable millenarian ideals. Its creator, Ludwik Zamenhof, had his own ideological objectives with the language – objectives not wildly different than those of performing artists. Zamenhof believed Esperanto could foster greater intercultural understanding in an increasingly globalized world and would make multilingualism more accessible.³ Both the performing arts and Esperanto have functioned as intentional and innovative vehicles for activism.

This project investigates the history of how these two mediums of communication – that frequently pursue the same millenarian ideals – have historically intersected. More specifically, it focuses on how the performing arts in Esperanto have contributed to and mirrored the movement's development. Thus, it inherently seeks to rebut the critique that planned languages lack culture by demonstrating the rich history of the performing arts culture throughout *Esperantujo* (the movement and community of Esperanto).

Three primary periods of the performing arts in Esperanto may be identified, aligned with the movement's broader developmental stages. The first phase of the Esperanto movement, from its inception in the late 19th century until World War I, used the performing arts to enhance the movement's cultural quality and test linguistic theory. In the period following World War II, the Universal Esperanto Association developed a concrete policy targeting the performing arts to recover from the global decline in Esperanto. This policy resulted in both the increased prominence of the performing arts within the movement and the expansion of performing arts mediums. Finally, post-Cold War, the performing arts has fed into a movement-wide ideological shift towards internationalist cosmopolitanism. The survival of the performing arts in Esperanto epitomizes the continued enthusiasm for the

¹ Paul Heritage, ‘The Courage to be Happy: Augusto Boal, Legislative Theatre, and the 7th International Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed’, *TDR (1988-)*, 38: 3 (1994), p. 25-26.

² Françoise Kourlisky, ‘Dada and Circus: ‘Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre’’, *The Drama Review: TDR*, 18: 1 (1974), pp. 104-109.

³ Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, ‘What Is Esperanto?’, *The North American Review*, 184: 606 (1907), p. 16.

movement. Overall, the performing arts continues to be an effective testament to the cultural quality of Esperanto and a tool for *Esperantujo* to evolve.

In researching for this project, I consulted a diversity of texts. Some of the sources I used most extensively include Geoffrey Sutton's *Concise Encyclopaedia of the Literature of Esperanto* and Pierre Janton's *Esperanto: Language, Literature, and Community* – all modern accounts of the movement and its literature. My access to original primary sources in Esperanto was predominantly through the Austrian National Library's online catalogue for the Department of Planned Languages (DPL). A key part of my method was using contemporary histories to track the movement's historical development, and subsequently using sources obtained from the DPL or from Janton's *Encyclopaedia* to configure how individual artists and their work fit into the broader evolution of *Esperantujo*. This also included consulting accounts from the movement's beginning to see how Esperantists of that time envisioned *Esperantujo*'s future. However, this project was limited by a lack of access to source documents. The history of Esperanto is already relatively undocumented – focusing solely on the performing arts narrowed my access to potential sources even further. Many of the pieces mentioned in the sources I consulted are currently unpublished or inaccessible. Despite this challenge, the many texts I could access provided productive insights from which I could formulate this work.

1887-1914: Inception of the Language Movement

After the inception of *Esperantujo* in 1887, leading Esperantists soon recognized the value of the performing arts to accomplish their goals. The performing arts would be important for linguistic experimentation, and such experiments were key in demonstrating the comparable quality of Esperanto to national languages. This emphasis on developing the broader cultural depth of the language was particularly important to fend off criticisms that Esperanto was inadequate for more sophisticated forms of literature and expression.

Esperantists assessed the language and their own linguistic theories through the performing arts. Ludwik Zamenhof strongly backed the growth of the literary and performing arts in Esperanto, intending for his language to become a cultural authority.⁴ He believed that literature and the performing arts were crucial for the survival and flourishing of the movement.⁵ Esperantists beyond Zamenhof also used the performing arts to promote their

⁴ Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague, 1982), p. 69.

Bernard Long, *Esperanto: Its Aims and Claims: a discussion of the language problem and its solution*, (London, 1930), p. 55

⁵ Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 69.

own linguistic theories. For instance, it was in this period that Esperantist Jeanne Flourens wrote various comedic sketches to defend her belief that Esperantist writers should only use the words contained in the *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Zamenhof's 1905 manual on Esperanto's grammar and vocabulary).⁶ While Esperantists such as Roksano used the performing arts to assess the language on paper, on-stage performances in Esperanto also put the pragmatism and quality of the language to the test. As early as the first Universal Congress in 1905, Molière's musical *Le Mariage Forcé* was performed in Esperanto by a company of amateur actors from nine different countries, speaking seven national languages.⁷ Theatrical performances like this were to be included at all subsequent Universal Congresses. Esperantist Bernard Long argued in his book *Esperanto: Its Aims and Claims* that the performances at the Congresses – from both national and international companies – demonstrated the compatibility of the language with all forms of dramatic art.⁸ He emphasized that the 'absolute internationality' of the language was highlighted at these performances, particularly given that international companies often met the week of the Congress with few rehearsals – an impossible feat without a common international language.⁹ Evidently, the performing arts was a successful source that Esperantists could draw upon to both experiment with and validate Esperanto.

However, it must be noted that pieces produced by Esperantists in this period were relatively derivative, primarily intended to demonstrate strength of Esperanto as opposed to prioritizing self-expression.¹⁰ This is not to say that the Esperantist playwrights of this era lacked talent, but the anthology of works from this time mostly consisted of translated texts. For instance, the list of recommendations on Esperanto theatre published in *Internacia Revuo por la Belo* often only included translated works.¹¹ Similarly, the most popular and noted performances in Esperanto during this period were also translations, including the Ukrainian opera *Mazeppa*, *Hamlet*, and the Polish opera "Halka".¹² Although the prominence of such translations over works devised originally in Esperanto may point to a lack of innovation, it is logical that Esperantists would resort to established works to substantiate the literary and theatrical success of the language and fend off critics.

⁶ Pierre Janton, *Esperanto: Language, Literature, and Community* (New York, 2008), p. 97

⁷ Long, *Esperanto*, p. 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Janton, *Esperanto*, p. 95.

¹¹ For instance: Vienna, Austrian National Library, *Universo: Internacia Revuo por la Belo*, II: no XII (1911), p. 386.

¹² Vienna, Austrian National Library, *Pola Esperantisto*, VII: no. 8 (August 1912), p. 144.

Long, *Esperanto*, p. 58.

Austrian National Library, *Universo: Internacia Revuo por la Belo*, II: no. XII (1911), p. 370.

In essence, the performing arts initially served as a vehicle to develop the cultural aspect of the language movement and simultaneously fend off criticism. Furthermore, it provided Esperantists with the opportunity to experiment with their own linguistic theories.

1945-1980: Recovery in the Post-War Period

The performing arts became a more concrete part of *Esperantujo*'s policy focus post-1945. Despite growing momentum for the movement, two world wars and rampant totalitarianism decreased the number of speakers and overall enthusiasm for the language.¹³ Speakers of Esperanto, being internationalists at heart, were brutally persecuted under Nazi and Soviet authorities.¹⁴ The performing arts in Esperanto continued throughout both wars, but they certainly faltered, as did *Esperantujo* in its entirety. In the aftermath of WWII, the performing arts in Esperanto regained significance. Ivo Lapenna, President of the World Esperanto Association (UEA) in the post-war period, emphasized the importance of improving the cultural level of Esperanto to recover the movement. It was the subject of his inaugural address at the 1954 Haarlem World Congress, where he proposed the 'Prestige Policy', or blending the cultural heritages of various national languages to bolster Esperanto's prominence as a literary language.¹⁵ Although many scorned the centralization of Esperanto under Lapenna's UEA, there was widespread support for the Prestige Policy. This concerted effort to increase *Esperantujo*'s intellectual and cultural engagement grew Esperanto membership from 17,707 in 1948 to 32,202 in 1964.¹⁶ Lapenna developed various competitions promoting the increase of literary and performance work in Esperanto, including the Fine Art Competition with sections in prose, drama, and poetry, as well as the 'Oratory Competition for Youth'.¹⁷ Even though theatrical presentations were alive and well in the movement, Lapenna made a concentrated effort to increase the standards of performance.

Lapenna's policy to improve literature and culture in Esperanto also allowed an artistic innovativeness to emerge among Esperantists – a creativity absent in the pre-war period. Many Esperantists typically involved in the 'traditional' literary arts dabbled in

¹³ Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 28.

¹⁴ See Ulrich Lins, *Dangeous Language – Esperanto under Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2017).

¹⁵ Ivo Lapenna, *Elektitaj paroladoj kaj prelegoj* (Rotterdam, 2009), p. 62, quoted in Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 238.

¹⁶ Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 237.

¹⁷ *Statuto kaj regularoj de Universala Esperanto-Asocio*, pp. 35-37, 1968., quoted in Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, p. 238.

'Fundamenta principato de informado pri la Internacia Lingvo', *Statuto kaj regularoj de Universala Esperanto-Asocio*, pp. 58-62, 1968., quoted in Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, p. 241.

playwrighting. Marjorie Boulton, a renowned English Esperantist, produced significant theatrical works in this post-war period in addition to her short stories, poetry, biographies, and literary criticism.¹⁸ Her 1959 collection of one-act plays, *Virino ĉe la Landlimo*, was widely praised.¹⁹ Even William Auld, one of the most prolific Esperantist writers, penned a few dramas in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰ Almost all the Esperanto literary greats had at least a couple play texts to their name in this period. But far beyond play texts, *Esperantujo* witnessed the creative expansion of the performing arts towards alternative mediums. Spomenka Štimec – a Croatian Esperantist working for the international cultural service – organized the ‘highly successful’ International Festival of Puppet Theatre (Pupeara Internacia Festivalo) between the years of 1968 and 1988, in addition to her ‘widely read and appreciated’ literary works in Esperanto.²¹ In the interwar period, cabarets in Esperanto were something primarily pursued only by the Frenchman Raymond Schwartz with his Parisian show ‘La Verda Kato’.²² But in the postwar period, this cabaret was supplanted by Schwartz’s more experimental ‘La Tri Koboldoj’, lauded for its witty use of irony and satire, as well as works from writers Bukar and Lorjak.²³ The ‘Prestige Policy’ encouraged a range of Esperantist writers to explore a diversity of performing arts mediums, contributing to the movement’s greater cultural development and increased membership.

This post-war period also witnessed the first developments of film in Esperanto. The first Esperanto film, *Incubus*, was released in 1966 – it is still the only film to have ever been shot entirely in Esperanto.²⁴ A ‘black-magic type’ allegory, the film certainly fed into any existing impressions of Esperanto as a utopian and cultic movement.²⁵ Unfortunately, although the film tried to make its unique Esperanto background a key part of its marketing, the language made the film less successful, only screening at a few French cinemas.²⁶ *Incubus* ultimately demonstrates the growing diversity of the performing and literary arts in *Esperantujo* in the

¹⁸ Geoffrey Sutton, *Concise Encyclopaedia of the Literature of Esperanto 1887-2007* (New York, 2008), p. 289-290.

¹⁹ Sutton, *Concise*, p. 95.

²⁰ Sutton, *Concise*, p. 263.

²¹ Sutton, *Concise*, p. 481.

²² Sutton, *Concise*, p. 130.

²³ Sutton, *Concise*, p. 130.

Janton, *Esperanto*, p. 104

²⁴ Gavin Smith, ‘VIDI VIDI VIDI: The latest video and DVD releases’, *Film Comment*, 37: 3 (May/June 2001), p. 79.

Steven G. Kellman, *Nimble Tongues: Studies in Literary Translingualism* (West Lafayette, 2020), p. 89-99.

²⁵ Smith, ‘VIDI VIDI VIDI’, p. 79.

Conrad Hall, Interview by Michael Shedlin, *Film Quarterly*,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1210088.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A568ef319becb87a6e103ef7501a01e60&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1> [accessed 6 June 2024].

²⁶ Kellman, *Nimble Tongues*, p. 96-98.

post-war period. However, it also exemplifies the failure of Esperanto to take hold in mainstream cinema – a metonym for Esperanto’s inability to truly become a ‘universal’ language but embodying its continued development by its select enthusiasts.

In contrast to the early twentieth century, Esperantists in the post-war era were more willing to experiment with artistic form, encouraged by Ivo Lapenna’s ‘Prestige’ policy. The performing arts in this period enhanced and aided the cultural development of *Esperantujo*, resulting in increased membership and recovery.

1980-Present: Survival in the Modern Age

From 1980 onwards, there is little evidence of Esperanto and the performing arts growing any further. Works and groups of performing artists received limited mainstream acclaim, despite some scholars predicting that Esperanto would become more popular after the Cold War.²⁷ Nevertheless, performance in Esperanto remains a potent symbol of a resilient movement and enduring interest in the language. Kim Herniksen – considered a rock star in the Esperanto community – created two rock bands in this period.²⁸ While *Amplifiki* played at international youth congresses across Europe throughout the 1980s, Herniksen’s second band, *Esperanto Desperado*, became famous in the Esperanto community as recently as the early 2000s. Herniksen, a rare native of the language, was so popular that he presented on the importance of rock music in Esperanto culture at the 2003 Annual Congress of the Esperanto League of North America.²⁹ Herniksen’s lasting ‘fame’ in *Esperantujo* for over two decades is a testament to the strength of the performing arts within the community, keeping Esperantists engaged and excited about the language. Mentions of such festivals – such as the Kino-Teatro-Festivalo – still populate Esperanto forums and blogs online.³⁰ The youth branch of the Universal Esperanto Association (TEJO) has conducted social events for young Esperantists to dance to recordings by Esperanto musical artists.³¹ Whilst none of these events or groups have become popular in mainstream popular culture, their sheer presence demonstrates that the performing arts remain a strong source of engagement for Esperantists.

²⁷ See Sara Su Jones, ‘The Power of Babel: The Struggle to Balance Linguistic Unity and Diversity’, *Harvard International Review*, 15: 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 46-47, 72, 74-75

²⁸ Arika Orkent, ‘A Visit to Esperantoland: The Natives Want You to Learn Their Invented Language as a Step Toward World Harmony. Who Are These People?’, *The American Scholar*, 75: 1 (2006), pp. 93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93, 95.

³⁰ Jennifer Bondelid, Interview by Chuck Smith, *Esperanto Language Blog*, March 25 2014, <<https://blogs.transparent.com/esperanto/interactive-esperanto-theater-and-film/>> [accessed 4 August 2024].

³¹ Srikanth Reddy, ‘Fundamentals of Esperanto’, *The American Poetry Review*, 32: 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 12-13.

The performing arts have also been important in a movement-wide shift towards internationalist cosmopolitanism. Over time, the Esperanto movement has transitioned away from the humanist cosmopolitanism that started the movement, de-emphasizing the concept of a ‘universal language’, and towards internationalist cosmopolitanism, characterizing Esperanto as a ‘constructed’, ‘artificial’, or ‘international auxiliary’ language.³² The performing arts have played a new role in this regard by celebrating the diversity of nationalities within the movement. At Universal Congresses, national anthologies of theatre play texts fill pop-up Esperanto bookshops while national dances, music, and performances occur onstage.³³ Contemporary Esperantists maintain the idea that while nationalities can be used to divide people, internationality can be used to unite a people. By highlighting national diversity through the performing arts, Esperantists can emphasize the significance of the language as a bridge to national divisions.

Beyond contributing to this shift and continuing to appeal to the remaining Esperantists, it is difficult to assign a newfound role for the performing arts today. It is unlikely that Esperanto will ever truly supplant English and become the *lingua franca* that many Esperantists initially imagined. This does not mean the performing arts and the language movement lack value. If anything, the surviving intersection of Esperanto and the performing arts exemplifies the continued importance of the arts in fostering international community and maintaining linguistic diversity.

Conclusion

The performing arts has been a pertinent – but often unacknowledged – contributor to the development of *Esperantujo* in each of the movement’s crucial eras. In the early twentieth century, the performing arts helped bolster the cultural calibre of the movement, attempting to fulfil Zamenhof’s objective of making the planned language a sociocultural authority. Moreover, Esperantists could use the performing arts to test the limits of the language: on paper and on stage. In the post-war era, promoting the arts became a cornerstone of Ivo Lapenna’s ‘Prestige Policy’, encouraging Esperantists to experiment in performing art forms ranging from film to puppetry. Today, the performing arts have become significant in the movement’s transition towards internationalist cosmopolitanism. Additionally, the surviving prominence of the performing arts in Esperanto is indicative of continued engagement within the movement from long-term and budding Esperantists.

³² Guilherme Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media, and the Making of an International Community* (Cham, 2021), p. 231-232.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95, 240.

The 109th World Esperanto Congress took place in Arusha, Tanzania from August 4th-10th, 2024: less than a month before the completion of this project.³⁴ The convention's theme, 'Language, man and environment for a better world', is a testament to the prevailing advocacy that Zamenhof founded the movement upon.³⁵ It also parallels much of the political work composed in the performing arts world today. The commonality between Esperanto and the performing arts that I find to be most salient continues to be substantiated: both are mediums of expression underestimated in their potential for change.

³⁴ Marija Beloševic, 'Tanzania hosts 109th edition of the World Esperanto Congress', *Vatican News*, August 14 2024, <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-08/109th-edition-world-esperanto-congress-held-at-arusha-tanzania.html#:~:text=From%20August%203%2D10%2C%202024,66%20countries%20and%20five%20continents.>>, [accessed 26 August 2024].

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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