

# A Freshly Pressed 'Zoot Suit'

After 30 years, Luis Valdez's classic gets a Mexican homecoming

BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

**IN 1978, LUIS VALDEZ'S ZOOT SUIT RAN FOR 11** months in Los Angeles, then hopped the continent for a brief Broadway run before being turned into a 1981 film. On April 29, 2010, the best known and most commercially successful play of Chicano theatre finally made its bow to Mexican stage audiences for the first time. What took so long?

"I think this is exactly the moment in which the maturity of Chicano culture demands an appropriation on the part of the Mexicans," declares Luis de Tavira, head of La Compañía Nacional de Teatro (CNT), *Zoot Suit's* Mexican producer. When *Zoot Suit* takes the stage this month at Mexico City's Teatro Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, as de Tavira sees it, two generations of theatremakers, Mexican and Chicano, will have come of age.

"How am I going to bring Chicano theatre to Mexico? How am I going to bring Luis Valdez and Luis de Tavira together?" Actor Alma Martinez says these questions rang in her mind for decades. Born in Mexico but raised in California, she met de Tavira when she studied under him in the '70s at Mexico City's Universidad Iberoamericana. Returning stateside, she landed a major role in *Zoot Suit*, that of the sister of Henry Reyna, the young man whose gang is falsely accused of murder. While Martinez worked with Valdez and his northern California-based El Teatro Campesino, de Tavira took the helm of various Mexican theatre institutions, most recently the CNT, which some years after its 1977 founding had withered into a poorly funded remnant of its former self. In short order, de Tavira jolted the venerable company back to life.

Early in the six-year term of President Felipe Calderón, de Tavira pulled together a budget of 18 million pesos, auditioned more than 500 actors for the company of 43, and in 2009 introduced the first works of a new national and international repertory. The size of the company demanded projects to keep its actors occupied, and one of de Tavira's first productions, August Strindberg's *Easter*, accomplished this by rehearsing with two casts. (Mexican theatre productions often lose actors to TV, but in the CNT this is contractually forbidden.) *Zoot Suit* calls for an acting company of 28, so pitching it to de Tavira "was the easiest sell I've ever done," said Martinez, who plays Henry Reyna's mother in the new production and is organizing a conference about the play's history and impact.

Getting the CNT gig and putting *Zoot Suit* over to a Mexican audience are very different things, as Valdez knows. As director of the original Los Angeles, New York and film productions, as well as the current one, he's looking for a kind of balance: The 1978 cast and audience,

Valdez points out, were closer to the historical source material—the Sleepy Lagoon murder case and the Zoot Suit riots of the early 1940s—and more involved in their own Chicano culture generally. On the other hand, "We were at the point where Chicano actors were just breaking into the profession," Valdez says of his original cast, which included Edward James Olmos in a star-making turn. "There weren't many with extensive training."

The cast for the Mexican production is better trained, but, the director notes, had to be taught the history of a culture their audience may disdain. "Mexicans have not understood the Chicano reality—they understand the immigrant problem, 'North for work,' but they resent the fact that people have gone up and not come back," says Valdez. (They may also resent how remittances are Mexico's leading source of foreign income, second only to oil.) Many Mexicans see Chicanos as a negative cultural space—neither/nor.

Translating Chicano slang into that of *chilangos* (Mexico City residents) is its own art: "*Ganga*, Chicano slang for 'gang,' means something else" in standard Spanish, Valdez points out. "I have had to slowly introduce *ganga*, so it makes sense in the play."

As he retranslates the play (and the jokes), paces the Mexican actors to reproduce the 1940s-movie clip of the dialogue, and incorporates the dancers specially added to the company for this production, Valdez hopes that what he calls a "final" version of the play will put over his original point: "Chicanos were Mexicans living in the U.S. and had dramas of their own." 📌

**Brooklyn-based playwright Aaron Mack Schloff writes frequently about theatre from Mexico and Argentina.**



Adrian Torres, left, and Mike Uribes in El Teatro Campesino's 2007 revival of *Zoot Suit*.

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