



## Overview: *Zoot Suit*

*Drama for Students*

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Play, 1981

American Playwright ( 1940 - )

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### Introduction

**Zoot Suit** brings to life a racially-charged trial of the 1940s, in which a group of *pachucos*, Mexican-American gang members, are charged and sentenced with the murder of another Mexican American. Playwright Luis Valdez depicts the trial of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder and the related Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 in a combination of docudrama, myth, and musical. **Zoot Suit** was designed to reach a larger audience than those targeted by the improvisational skits, or *actos*, he had produced for *El Teatro Campesino*, a theater troupe he founded to support Hispanic labor leader Cesar Chavez's efforts to unionize California farm workers during the Delano Grape Strike of 1965. Although he reached back into history for a specific Mexican-American incident, Valdez's play concerns the problems of all ethnic minorities in America.

Opening in 1978, **Zoot Suit** sold out every time it played in Los Angeles, though it met with less enthusiasm from critics in New York when it debuted on Broadway. In the play, the mythical character El Pachuco cajoles Henry Reyna to resist the social injustices of an unfair trial and fight for his community; he does so, but the play ends without resolving his future. With its Brechtian-style protest against social injustice and defamiliarization techniques, such that the action is controlled and re-directed by one of the characters, **Zoot Suit** set a new standard for Chicano theater and

Valdez was recognized as a leader in American drama. A film version produced in 1981 starring Edward James Olmos and Daniel Valdez (the playwright's brother, who had played Henry in the stage production as well) brought this vivid portrayal of social injustice to movie theaters.

## **Plot**

### **Prologue**

A backdrop of a giant newspaper headlines announces an invasion of “zoot-suiters,” or *pachucos*, young Mexican-American men who wear slicked-down hair and suits with long, exaggerated coattails; armed forces are called in to handle the problem.

A switchblade rips through the newspaper to reveal El Pachuco, the epitome of a zoot-suiter, assuming the usual posture of defiant coolness. He begins speaking in Spanish, then switches to perfect English. In a cocky beat, he describes the Pachuco style. He exits, swinging a long watch chain.

### **Act I, scene i**

The scene is a dance floor in the barrio, or Spanish-speaking neighborhood, in the 1940s. Couples from the 38th Street Gang dance, led by Henry Reyna with his girlfriend, Della Barrios. A few Anglo sailors dance nearby, as El Pachuco sings. The rival Downey gang enters and the dance turns violent when the rival gang leader, Rafas, shoves Henry's brother Rudy.

### **Act II, scene ii**

The dance/brawl is interrupted by sirens, detectives with drawn guns, and a reporter snapping pictures. Sergeant Smith and Lieutenant Edwards make arrests, but they let the Anglos go. The scene dissolves into a lineup.

### **Act II, scene iii**

El Pachuco comes forward to the pacing Henry and gives him a dose of reality: innocent or not, he will go to jail. He also tells Henry that his plans to join the Navy will not come to fruition. Henry's war is in the barrio, not overseas.

### **Act II, scene iv**

The ever-present Press continues to update the headlines: twenty-two members of the 38th Street Gang held on “various charges,” including the murder of Jose Williams. The policeman Smith beats Henry, trying to get him to talk. The stubborn Henry only passes out. As Dolores, Henry's mother, enters, time slips back to the Saturday before the gang fight. Dolores and husband Enrique quibble with Henry over his tachuche, his zoot suit, or “drapes,” but they let him wear the outfit because he is a man (“es hombre”), whereas they refuse to let Henry's sister, Lupe, wear a short skirt to the dance. Enrique announces a Navy send-off party for Henry next weekend. The family bids a respectful and affectionate adieu as the young people leave for the dance.

The scene shifts to the dance floor, where El Pachuco sings and the 38th Street Gang members dance.

### **Act I, scene v**

Back in the present, the public reads newspapers and litter the streets with them. All exit, except for one figure, a street sweeper. It is Enrique. When he has finished cleaning up, he pauses to read the news.

### **Act I, scene vi**

The gang nervously awaits the outcome of their arrest. Joey has been beaten but hasn't told anything, and Smiley

realizes, too late, that he is too old for all of this: he'd rather be with his wife and child. A “People's lawyer,” George Shearer, meets his new clients and wins their trust.

### **Act I, scene vii: “The Saturday Night Dance”**

As the boys recount the story of the dance/brawl to George, the events are portrayed on stage. Henry takes Della to Sleepy Lagoon to tell her “something.” The Downey Gang is there, but the groups co-exist peacefully until Rafas, the Downey leader, pushes Rudy to the floor. Henry and Rafas are instantly in a knife fight, which El Pachuco magically interrupts, saying to the audience, “That's exactly what the play needs right now. Two more Mexicans killing each other.” Henry lets Rafas go. The Downey gang leaves and the dance continues.

### **Act I, scene viii: “El Dia de la Raza” (The Day of the Knife)**

The Press enters, building a jail of newspaper piles, while the couples recite headlines of the War and the zoot suit “crime wave.” A friend of George's, Alice Bloomfield, surprises Henry with her interest in his case. George discovers that the boys have been denied the right to change their clothes or wash, an infraction of their civil rights. El Pachuco refuses to let Henry be as optimistic as his two Anglo defenders, but Henry insists he is not the “classic social victim” and will be freed.

### **Act I, scene ix**

The “largest mass trial in the history of Los Angeles County” opens “to put an end to Mexican baby gangsterism.” George raises his objection against the clothing restriction, but the Judge overrules him, saying it is a useful way to identify the witnesses. Furthermore, each time a defendant's name is mentioned, he is required to stand up. El Pachuco encourages the boys at least to sit up straight. Della takes the stand.

### **Act I, scene x**

The lights change to create a reflection like a lagoon on the floor. Henry and Della enact their walk along the reservoir listening to the music of a party at the Williams ranch in the distance; Della narrates. Henry is promising Della a big Pachuco wedding upon his return from the War when the Downey gang suddenly appears and proceeds to smash up Henry's car. Della cannot prevent Henry from confronting them and getting beaten senseless. When he comes to, Henry's organizes eight cars of his gang members to retaliate, but finding no Downey boys, they crash the Williams Ranch party. They don't know that Rafas and his gang have already terrorized the party. The party members react violently when they perceive a fresh attack. As Henry's gang retreats, Della vaguely sees someone brutally hitting a man on the ground with a stick. The victim is presumably Jose Williams, who will die from the attack.

### **Act I, scene xi**

In an unfair trial, the whole gang is committed to life imprisonment at San Quentin. George vows to appeal the decision.

### **Act II, scenes i through v**

The gang members are in prison, where they receive letters from loved ones. Alice visits Henry and they form a tense relationship that is veering toward romance. George's announcement that he has been drafted devastates the boys, even though he assures them that other competent lawyers are handling their case. Henry's temper lands him in solitary confinement. When El Pachuco tries to console him, Henry lashes out at his alter ego, sending him away.

### **Act II, scene vi**

In Los Angeles, the Zoot Suit Riots take place between marines and zoot suiters. Rudy is being terrorized by a gang of marines when El Pachuco takes his place. Swabbie accuses him of trying to “outdo the white man” with his clothes,

and then El Pachuco is overpowered and stripped down to a loincloth. Henry watches in shock as El Pachuco exits humbled but maintaining his dignity.

### **Act II, scene vii**

Alice and Henry's attraction intensifies, but Alice recognizes it as a culmination of cultural forces as well as chemistry. She intends to get the court decision overturned, although Henry has given up hope.

### **Act II, scene viii**

Rudy enlists, and then the Press announces a turning point in World War II, as the Pachuco boys gain their freedom.

### **Act II, scene ix**

The boys and Rudy return to the barrio, amidst much celebration. The lights dim and the play seems to end on this happy note, but El Pachuco flicks his wrist and the lights come back up. The barrio still has its problems, and Henry must decide between Alice and Della. Surrounded by a cacophany of voices and demands, he chooses Della. Rudy and Joey get into a fight, then Rudy emotionally relates the horrors of being stripped in the zoot suit riots. In the meantime, the police are busy arresting Joey for stealing a car that actually belongs to George. Enrique restrains Henry from protecting Joey, and the entire family embraces. The Press, Rudy, Alice, and others narrate various possible futures for Henry, finishing with El Pachuco's announcement that the myth of Henry Reyna—El Pachuco—lives on.

## **Characters**

**Della Barrios variant: Adella:** Henry's twenty-year-old current girlfriend, who sports a mini-skirt and fingertip-length coat, is prettier than Henry's last girlfriend. At Sleepy Lagoon, he proposes to marry her after he returns from his Naval duty. Although Della does not write to Henry while he is in prison, she herself serves a jail term for her involvement in the gang fight and would have had time to write. When her parents ask her to choose between home and Henry, she chooses to move into Henry's place and wait for him. Even so, she does not pressure Henry into the marriage the gang expects but lets him make his own choice.

**Alice Bloomfield :** A reporter for the *Daily People's World* newspaper, Alice heads the campaign for the gang's release. As a Jew, she insists that she understands their predicament, and that she fights for them because of the oppression of her people. Her temporary passion for Henry emanates as much from the intensity of their shared political goals as it does from the chemistry between them.

**F. W. Charles, Judge :** Judge Charles conducts a biased case, overruling justified objections by the gang's lawyer and imposing unfair restrictions, such as not allowing the boys to cut their hair or change clothing and seating them apart from their attorney.

**Cholo :** Cholo, a younger member of the gang, gets left behind after the arrests. He and Rudy get into their own brawls with the Anglos one night, in which Rudy does the fighting while Cholo escorts the women out of harm's way.

**Edwards, Lieutenant :** Lt. Edwards is the tough cop who tells the press he refuses to "mollycoddle these youngsters anymore" as he puts the gang under arrest. He tries--and fails--to bribe Henry into squealing on the other gang members. He does so by offering to let Henry off in time to report for Navy service.

**Guard :** The Guard at San Quentin calls the gang "greaseballs" and puts Henry in solitary confinement for calling him a "bastard." He pantomimes reading the letters the boys receive while the writers narrate them. He is not so much an individual character as a part of the system that oppresses the pachucos.

**Newsboy :** The newsboy hawks the papers whose headlines move the plot along. He provides the voice of the media.

**Pachuco, El** : El Pachuco (pah-choo-ko) presides over the entire play, acting as Henry's alter ego. In the plays Brechtian moments, Pachuco interrupts the action or speaks to the audience directly, and he also sings accompaniment to the action. El Pachuco is the consummate Mexican-American *pachuco* figure, a zoot-suiter who is tough, cool, slick, and defiant. He tells it like it is and is meticulous and vain about his appearance.

In a 1988 interview with David Savran, Valdez explained the role of El Pachuco: "The Pachuco is the Jungian self-image, the superego if you will, the power inside every individual that's greater than any human institution.... I dressed the Pachuco in the colors of Testatipoka, the Aztec god of education, the dean of the school of hard knocks." El Pachuco achieves mythic proportions when he is stripped of his zoot suit by the Anglo rioters. Dressed only in a loincloth, he adopts a regal majesty as he exits, walking backward, from the stage. When he returns, he is not content to accept the Press's damning prediction that Henry will return to prison. At his prompting, the other characters recite alternative futures for Henry. He controls the action of the play and embroiders the events of Henry's life.

**Press** : The Press plays the role of an antagonist in the play, as it is the headlines that inflame the Anglos to riot and biases the public's perception of the gang's innocence. When the sailors taunt Rudy and the gang members left after the arrest, the Press eggs them on, calling the zoot suiters, "gamin' dandies." The Press also plays the unprecedented role of prosecutor in the trial, further emphasizing the damaging effect of the media.

**Rafas** : The leader of the Downey gang, Rafas pushes Rudy down at the dance and gets into a knife fight with Henry. Henry gets the upper hand, but El Pachuco prevents him from killing Rafas. Humiliated, Rafas takes his Downey Gang to the Williams Ranch and terrorizes the people holding a party there.

**Dolores Reyna** : Henry's mother is a traditional Mexican mother who lovingly teases Henry about his zoot suit but allows him wear it. She refuses, however, to let her daughter leave the house in a short skirt because it makes her look like a *puta* (whore). The trial is devastating to her, and she is elated when her two boys return home, one from prison and one from the war. She thinks the solution to Henry's problems is to marry Della and throw away his zoot suit.

**Enrique Reyna** : Henry's father, Enrique is a first-generation Mexican American. He represents traditional values of family, honesty, hard work, infinite patience, and personal integrity. He wants his son to stay home and avoid the inevitable conflict with the police that will get Henry re-arrested, but he wisely knows that he cannot protect his son from the fate that circumstances and his son's character hold in store.

**Henry Reyna** : The play's protagonist, Henry is described as "twenty-one, dark, Indian-looking." He becomes the primary suspect for the murder of Jose Williams because he is the leader of the 38th-street gang. The arrest spoils Henry's plan to join the Navy, and he is forced to face the problems of the barrio. His stoical resistance to interrogation only gets him beaten up, and he discovers that, guilty or not, he will pay a tremendous price for his ethnic heritage and pachuco style. At first standoffish with Alice, he succumbs to a kind of infatuation, then reasserts his vow to Della at the play's end. The historical Henry was re-arrested and imprisoned. According to Valdez, "Henry Reyna ... El Pachuco ... the man ... the myth ... still lives."

**Lupe Reyna** : Henry's younger sister, Lupe, at sixteen, wants to adopt the pachuca style, with a short skirt and fingertip coat, but her parents forbid it.

**Rudy Reyna** : Rudy is Henry's nineteen-year-old younger brother. He wants so much to follow in his brother's footsteps that he fashions a make-shift zoot suit out of his father's old suit. He drinks too much at the dance and gets into a fight with Rafas. After the mass arrests, he endures attacks by the Anglo sailors, who strip him of his zoot suit. He enlists in the War and returns a hero.

**Downey Gang** : A rival gang who go to the dance, start fights, and later join Rafas in terrorizing the party at the Williams Ranch.

**George Shearer** : George is a middle-aged public defender assigned to the pachucos by the courts. He is athletic,

strong, competent, and dedicated to his clients. He refuses to give up on Henry and the gang and finally his associates wins their release, although he himself is drafted and sent off to war at a critical moment in the trial.

**Smith, Sargeant** : Sgt. Smith is even more brutal than his partner, Lt. Edwards. Smith tells Edwards "you can't treat these animals like people," and beats Henry senseless, trying to get details about the Sleepy Lagoon murder out of the young man. Smith represents the oppressive members of the anglo majority who malign the Hispanics.

**Swabbie** : Swabbie is an Anglo sailor who frequents the dance hall that the pachucos frequent. It is he who strips El Pachuco of his zoot suit.

**Smiley Torres variant: Ismael**: One of the members of the 38th street gang, aged twenty-three. He had started the 38th street gang with Henry, but now he has a wife and child. After getting arrested, he regrets having joined the pachucas: he feels too old for parties and jail.

**Bertha Villareal** : Henry's former girlfriend, who sports a tattoo and is not as pretty as Della. Rudy dates her after Henry is imprisoned.

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