



Overview: *Zoot Suit*

Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them

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Born in 1940, Luis Valdez was three years old and lived in Los Angeles when the zoot suit riots erupted there. Valdez envisioned writing about them someday, then realized this dream by dealing with the incident in a drama. When *Zoot Suit* first appeared, Valdez had already established himself as the father of modern Chicano theater and a playwright who often dramatized the Latino's struggle against oppression in the United States. In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez dramatizes a portion of American history in which anti-Mexican prejudice affected the courts, the press, and the attitudes of the general public.

Events in History at the Time the Play Takes Place

The Zoot Suits

The term *pachuco* comes from the Mexican city Pachuca, a poor, overcrowded community with a reputation for being a tough and sometimes dangerous place. To many older Mexicans, the term originally meant the “poorest of the poor,” or “riff-raff.” But some Mexican American youth in 1940s America adopted the term as a symbol of pride in their

humble origins. They would play up their inclusion within the poor Mexican American community, proudly identifying themselves as “pachucos.”

In addition to their name, pachucos were identifiable by their clothes. The zoot suit style was a unique look that had been popularized by the patrons of Harlem's jazz clubs in the 1930s. The typical zoot suit consisted of colorful tailored shirts, dramatically tapered coats, baggy pants that narrowed at the ankle, shiny shoes, wide-brimmed porkpie hats, and ducktail haircuts. The zoot suiters intended to stand out, and they did. There were also practical reasons for the popularity of the zoot suit. Among other such reasons, the suit was comfortable for men who liked to dance. The tight cuffs around the ankles kept the dancer from becoming entangled in his pants while performing intricate dance floor moves; the wide shoulders and sleeves allowed freedom of arm movement; and the long, heavy shoes kept the dancer anchored to the floor as he spun his partner on the dance floor.

The Sleepy Lagoon Murder

The so-called zoot suit incidents can be traced back to a peaceful Los Angeles swimming hole called the Sleepy Lagoon. On August 2, 1942, a young man named José Diaz, who had been intoxicated, was found dead there. The exact cause of death was never determined. He may have been beaten, or run over by a car. On a warm evening soon after Diaz's body was discovered, a fleet of Los Angeles Police Department paddy wagons appeared on the streets of East Los Angeles. Its police officers seemed determined to arrest young Chicanos in an effort to find Diaz's killer. In a short time, they rounded up close to three hundred Mexican American youths on charges of “suspicion.” Young adults as well as teenagers—women included—were picked off the street and packed into the police wagons. The Mexican American group was led into a court building in downtown Los Angeles and held. The next morning's newspapers made an announcement to the general public that was repeated in Valdez's play:

A huge showup of nearly 300 boys and girls rounded up by the police and sheriff's deputies will be held tonight at eight o'clock in Central Jail at First and Hill streets. Victims of assault, robbery, purse snatching, and similar crimes are asked to be present for the identification of subjects.

(Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, pp. 28–9)

Among the three hundred arrested were an unfortunate group of twenty-two who belonged to the 38th Street gang. Police suspected this gang of being in the vicinity the night of the so-called murder. Despite little evidence, the twenty-two were soon indicted by the district attorney's office on murder charges.

During their trial, the twenty-two defendants were not allowed to shave, or to put on clean clothes, even after several months in jail. Most of the defense attorney's numerous objections were overruled. Seventeen of the twenty-two men were quickly found guilty and sentenced to lengthy prison terms or life sentences. Yet it was also a verdict that at least some people were unwilling to let stand—the 38th Street youths had their defenders. The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee began massive appeal efforts with the help of many Mexican Americans in the community.

Zoot Suit Riots

While the appeal process was in effect, the conservative Los Angeles press continued a long campaign of articles that stirred up antagonism among the general public against the zoot suiters. Law enforcement authorities also tightened their grip on Chicano youth. On the streets of Los Angeles, policemen would patrol Mexican areas with nightsticks that had razor blades on the end of them. With the razor blades, they would rip the suits of the young Chicanos. Members of the Mexican American community charged the police department with unfair treatment as tensions between Anglos and Chicanos escalated to a boiling point.

Finally, on the night of June 4, 1943, six carloads of Anglo military seamen cruised into East Los Angeles looking for the zoot suiters whom they had read about in the newspapers. After the sailors beat up scores of Mexican youths, including boys as young as thirteen, they often ripped their clothes off them.

For several nights, the sailors continued to attack young Mexican men in restaurants, bars, and movie houses. Following close behind the sailors were Los Angeles police cars. “The police came after them in mopping-up operations and arrested the boys who had been beaten up. In the morning, 44 severely beaten Mexican boys were under arrest” (Nava, p. 155).

During the next few days of violence, mobs of white sailors, at least two hundred strong, continued to riot in East Los Angeles. They would seek out and beat Mexican youths on the streets, even stopping trolley cars to pull the young men out. The Chicanos attempted to fight back but were often outnumbered. Finally on June 7, the military authorities declared Los Angeles out of bounds for all military personnel. After two more days, the beatings tapered off, then stopped.

The appeal on behalf of the twenty-two Chicanos convicted of murder proceeded through and beyond these days of violence. Finally, in October of 1944, the Sleepy Lagoon defendants were vindicated. A higher court overturned the boys' convictions because of a lack of evidence. After being in prison for more than two years, the young men were released. “For the first time in the history of Los Angeles, Mexicans had won an organized victory in the courts” (McWilliams, p. 231).

The Los Angeles Press

In *Zoot Suit*, the audience is often reminded of the press's crucial role in the zoot-suit trial and riots. At the beginning of the play, the Pachuco character rips through a huge facsimile of a newspaper that hangs as a prop on the stage. Henry Reyna's mother doesn't hang clothes out to dry on the clothesline—she hangs newspapers. In court, bundles of newspapers are the judge's bench, and in jail, Henry's cell has stacks of newspapers towering in its four corners. In fact, once the real-life murder trial began, newspapers intensified their propaganda campaign. Headlines referred to the 38th Street youths as “Pachuco Killers” and screamed warnings about dangerous “Mexican Goon Squads” (Mirandé, pp. 78–9).

After the conviction of the seventeen Chicano youths, the press stirred public opinion into a frenzy by warning that Mexican zoot suiters planned to retaliate en masse for the ruling. Much of the press's strategy involved the employment of fear: “[The press] warned that the Mexicans were about to riot with broken bottles as weapons and would beat sailors brains' out with hammers” (Nava, p. 155). Often, press accounts created an “us-versus-them” situation, playing into the World War II-era polarizations common then. For example, the front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* morning edition on June 7, 1943, proclaimed “Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen.”

Throughout the week of rioting in June of 1943, the intensity of the zoot suit beatings seemed closely connected to the morning's hate-filled headlines. One day, when the papers insinuated that the zoot suiters were on the attack looking for servicemen, passions flared. The *Daily News* printed the front-page headline “Zooters Planning to Attack More Servicemen” on June 5, 1943. That evening, the downtown streets of Los Angeles swarmed with hundreds of servicemen and civilians, the mobs literally stopping traffic. They halted streetcars, buses, and automobiles, and they stormed into bars, movie houses, restaurants, penny arcades, and stores in search of zoot suiters. Upon finding them, the servicemen hauled the zoot suiters into the streets and beat them.

The media's ability to help inspire such violence was equaled by its ability to shape lasting public opinion. Over time, and with continued press coverage, the term *zoot suiter* came simply to denote “Mexican” or “Mexican American.” Dress grew less important than race in the definition associated with the term. And during this emotion-charged wartime period, other patriotic Americans came to fear and even hate the zoot suiters, and by extension Mexicans in general.

World War II

The backdrop of a nation engaged in war is significant in understanding the events surrounding the zoot suit riots.

During World War II, Los Angeles served as a major embarkation point for servicemen from around the country. Sailors working in the Chavez Ravine Naval Armory near East Los Angeles often found themselves attracted to Mexican restaurants and Latina women, whom many considered exotic. These interests led to soldiers wandering into Chicano neighborhoods. The Latino men, feeling that the Anglos were infringing on their territory—not to mention their women—resented the intrusion of the sailors into their community. The Latinos often felt unwelcome in Anglo communities, and interpreted the sailors' presence in the barrio as a sign of arrogance. Resentment and anger developed, symptoms of a growing racial dissent between the two groups.

This dissent, which developed into violence, was easily cultivated during the tense atmosphere created by World War II. Throughout this period emotions ran high, and patriotic fervor intensified. In 1943 some lines in *Time* magazine tried to explain the lynch-mob mentality of the U.S. servicemen who attacked young Chicano males in the street: “California's zoot suit war was a shameful example of wartime emotions without wartime discipline” (*Time*, p. 18).

Ironically, while Mexican Americans came to be regarded by many as pachuco hoodlums in civilian life, they became bona fide heroes in the branches of the U.S. military during World War II. In fact, by the end of the war, Mexican Americans had won more Medals of Honor (seventeen) than any other racial or ethnic group that fought in World War II. “Measured by the number of Medal of Honor winners who were Mexican-American and the rate at which Mexican-Americans suffered casualties, no other racial or ethnic group served with greater courage” (Shorris, p. 97).

The Play in Focus

The Plot

Zoot Suit begins with a giant newspaper facsimile. The headline reads “ZOOT SUITER HORDES INVADE LOS ANGELES. U.S. NAVY AND MARINES ARE CALLED IN” (*Zoot Suit*, p. 24). Suddenly, a switchblade slits the newspaper down the middle. The character, El Pachuco, steps out sporting a classic zoot suit look—ducktail haircut, wide brimmed hat, long draped coat, and high-belted pants that flare out and taper close at the ankles. Seen only by the main character, Henry Reyna, and the audience, El Pachuco serves several purposes in the play. He is the play's narrator, Henry's alter ego, and the symbol of pachuco attitude and style.

El Pachuco welcomes the audience to the play by telling them that the play is a “construct of fact and fantasy” (*Zoot Suit*, p. 25). He sings, as Henry's friends—the 38th Street gang—dance in a barrio dance hall. The rival Downey gang enters and joins in the dance.

Police sirens are heard. The dance hall is raided by cops with drawn guns and by members of the press taking photos. One by one, the reporters read a series of headlines to the audience. The headlines tell about a tragedy at the Sleepy Lagoon—a young Chicano, José Williams, has been found dead. The headlines also tell of the mass arrest of three hundred suspicious Mexican American youths. A public address is read requesting that anyone who was robbed or attacked recently should come to the courthouse to identify the criminals from among these three hundred detainees.

Henry waits in a jailhouse to be questioned about the Sleepy Lagoon death, which authorities are investigating as a murder. He worries that he won't be released in time to serve in the navy, in which he has enlisted. El Pachuco tells him that serving in the military is wrong—because “the mayor of L.A. has declared all out war on Chicanos” (*Zoot Suit*, p. 30).

In the interrogation room, Henry refuses to cooperate with the police, who he feels are trying to frame him for the murder. When he makes sarcastic comments, the police beat him until he is unconscious. Knocked out, he imagines El Pachuco in his cell. El Pachuco is telling Henry to think of home and his family. Henry has a flashback that returns him to his family home on the night of the dance. Against his parents' wishes, he stubbornly wears his zoot suit. Henry goes to the dance, where everything seems fine until the music fades and El Pachuco escorts Henry's girlfriend, Della, off the stage.

The mood grows somber and the press begins reading headlines that tell about a police effort to round up and prosecute the zoot suiters. Henry and his friends are seen in jail. They meet their public defender lawyer, George Shearer. At first they are distrustful of him, but he soon gains their allegiance.

The setting moves back to the dance. The 38th Street and Downey gangs clash and are on the verge of fighting, whereupon Henry scares the Downey gang away by flashing a switchblade. At this point, the 38th Street youths resume dancing. When the music stops, the couples line up and grow serious. Each couple recites a headline, then places a bundle of newspapers in a square around Henry Reyna, symbolizing his imprisonment in a small square cell. The headlines remind the audience that the zoot suit murder trial will begin the next day.

Alice, a reporter for a liberal newspaper, is introduced to the 38th Street defendants. She intends to drum up support for them and their constitutional rights. In court, it becomes clear that the judge is biased toward the prosecution. He will not allow the zoot-suited defendants to have haircuts or put on clean clothes. Their attorney George Shearer makes repeated, legal objections, but they are ignored. Finally Della, Henry's girlfriend, is called to the stand. She tells of the night at Sleepy Lagoon when the death occurred.

The Downey gang, she says, were angry with Henry for chasing them away from the dance, and showed up at Sleepy Lagoon. They broke Henry's car windows and beat him up and fled. Next Henry and his friends, the 38th Street youths, heard music from a party at the Williams' ranch and decided to crash the party. The 38th Street gang didn't know that the Downey gang had already been there causing trouble. So when the Williams family attacked them with sticks, they were taken by surprise. Henry told his friends to get out of there, but everyone was fighting and using sticks to hit and defend themselves. It grew chaotic. Della says that it wasn't until the next day that she knew José Williams had died. Nobody knew exactly how it happened.

The trial ends. The prosecution closes by saying that “the specific details of this murder are irrelevant before the overwhelming danger of the pachucos in our midst” (*Zoot Suit*, p. 62). The young men are found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Act Two

In prison at San Quentin, the boys eagerly await letters from home and from Alice, who has formed the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. Alice visits regularly to keep the boys' spirits up and to inform them of the latest news on the appeal that she and their lawyer, George, are overseeing. One day George shows up and explains to the boys that he has been drafted but they should not worry. He will see to it that they are taken care of by a team of lawyers and the support of many. Their appeal, he promises, will be won. Despondent about the case, Henry clashes with a guard and is placed in solitary confinement. The setting changes to the streets of Los Angeles.

While in prison, Henry imagines he sees El Pachuco as he is attacked on the streets by a mob of white servicemen. El Pachuco's zoot suit is ripped off and he is beaten. He is left wearing only an Aztec-type loincloth. As El Pachuco rises and walks into the shadows, Henry hears the blare of an Aztec conch horn. Henry collapses in tears and is once again alone in solitary confinement.

Henry is released from solitary confinement and visits with Alice. In response to his admission that he might be in love with her, she discourages him from confusing the case with love. She just wants to see him get out of prison. She leaves, but he still hopes that they can be more than friends.

World War II comes to a close. In a series of sweeping headlines, the ending of the war is announced along with news about the Sleepy Lagoon appeal, which has been successful. After more than two years, they are released, and return to their families and friends amidst great cheering and celebration. At the celebration party, El Pachuco tells the audience that this would be a great ending for the play. However, he says, life isn't like that. He says that the Chicano is still hunted down and harassed by the police. Crime, unemployment, and poverty still overwhelm the community. In other words, Henry has traded the prison known as San Quentin for a prison called the barrio.

One by one, the cast members each offer the audience a possible ending to the play and their various scenarios of Henry's future.

- * Alice says that he married Della and had university-educated children who call themselves Chicano.
- * Henry's brother, Rudy, says that Henry fought and died in Korea in 1950.
- * And the press says that Henry returned to prison, got addicted to drugs, and died while incarcerated.

The audience is left to decide which ending to believe.

The Symbolism of the Zoot Suit

In *Zoot Suit*, the clothes worn by the 38th Street gang represent not only a common bond, but a common rebellion against the Anglo society that they feel has rejected them. In this respect, the wearing of these “drapes,” as they are called, takes on tremendous meaning. Henry Reyna, when confronted by his parents about wearing his zoot suit, insists that it is something he simply *has* to do. Resigned, his mother, Delores, says, “I know how much they [the zoot suit clothes] mean to you” (*Zoot Suit*, pp. 33–4).

The pachuco gang of the 1940s was bonded as much by a common enemy—the outside world—as they were bonded by a shared culture. In Anglo communities, they were often made to feel unsafe and unwelcome. In *North from Mexico*, Carey McWilliams explains Chicano alienation from other neighborhoods in the 1940s:

[In Anglo communities] the skating rink is likely to have a sign reading ‘Wednesdays reserved for Negroes and Mexicans.’ Wherever the Mexicans go outside their own districts, there are signs, prohibitions, taboos, restrictions.

(McWilliams, p. 239)

In this atmosphere of exclusion and fear, the streets that bordered the barrio would often surround residents as if they were invisible walls. Gangs of youth held fast to one another for social support and a sense of belonging. In fact, their association with the gang was so strong that it was often more significant in their lives than the influences of home, school, or the church.

Sources

Like most of Valdez's work up until this point, *Zoot Suit* was a political play designed to showcase the Chicano struggle against oppression and injustice. Based on the actual events that occurred in wartime Los Angeles in the early 1940s, much of the action and events come straight from Sleepy Lagoon courthouse transcripts, which numbered some six thousand pages. Valdez researched the documents at the Los Angeles campus of the University of California, and met with many of the key people involved in the Sleepy Lagoon incident. Valdez was able to interview Alice McGrath of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, who became Alice Bloomfield in the play, and attorney George Shibley, who was called George Shearer in *Zoot Suit*.

Events in History at the Time the Play Was Written

The United Farm Workers Association and El Teatro Campesino

In 1962 César Chávez, a farm worker from Delano, California, founded the United Farm Workers' Association (UFWA) to fight for the rights of Chicano farm workers. The workers that Chávez represented were poor and, up until that point, largely not involved in politics. But Chávez convinced them that if they organized, the Chicanos would have the power to improve miserable working conditions and unfair wages common in the industry. In 1965 the UFWA joined a strike by Filipino workers against San Joaquin Valley growers. That year, the strikers began a boycott

campaign against table grapes that would eventually garner national attention.

Meanwhile, Luis Valdez, a former farm worker who once lived in Delano, had just graduated from college and had become involved in a San Francisco mime troupe. He decided to return to Delano to join the UFWA grape boycott. With Chávez's support and encouragement, Valdez introduced the idea of live theater as a means of political action and awareness to the farm workers. Most of the workers had never seen live theater before and were initially resistant. But Valdez convinced the workers to give theater a chance. He made signs that said “farm worker,” “grower,” and “scab,” (a strike-breaker). He placed the signs around the necks of some of the workers and asked them to enact the characteristics of their signs. Quickly, the workers were acting out exaggerated versions of their characters. The audience roared with laughter and approval.

Thus, El Teatro Campesino, (the Farm Workers' Theater) was founded in the fields of Delano in 1965. The theater group had several roles within the UFWA. Primarily, El Teatro Campesino was a means of educating the public about the grape boycott and the plight of the farm worker. By mid-1967, El Teatro Campesino had embarked on its first national tour, in which productions were staged mainly in local union halls. In addition, the group's home performances served as a source of inspiration for the poor and often hungry strikers. Over the years of the boycott, El Teatro Campesino helped workers maintain their resolve and, at the same time, educated the public about the plight of the farm worker. By 1970, the strike led 17 million American households to stop buying table grapes. Because of this overwhelming public response to the boycott, the growers were eventually forced to negotiate contracts with the UFWA. The success of the boycott gave Chicanos the resolve to fight further injustice.

The 1970 Vietnam Protest

To voice objections to the disproportionate amount of Latinos sent to Vietnam and coming home in body bags, Chicano groups organized a massive rally that took place in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. Initially, the gathering was a great success attended by more than ten thousand peaceful, mainly Chicano demonstrators. It grew less peaceful when the police and sheriff's deputies arrived to break it up. Wearing riot gear, they shot tear gas projectiles randomly into the crowd. Three people were killed that day: a fifteen-year-old named Lyn Ward, Angel Diaz, and journalist Rubén Salazar.

Salazar was a highly regarded Chicano reporter who had a regular column in the *Los Angeles Times*. He used his column as a forum to express his views on Chicano identity, political action, and cultural pride. Not everyone agreed with his pro-Chicano stance. Someone connected with the Los Angeles sheriff's office, Salazar claimed, had previously threatened his life. During the rally, a sheriff's deputy shot a metal tear gas case into a bar where Salazar was sitting. The metal case hit Salazar, and he later died. Many feel that the Chicano civil rights movement lost much of its momentum on the day this beloved voice was silenced, and was unable to ever fully recover.

Reviews

In 1978 *Zoot Suit* opened in Los Angeles at the Aquarius Theater to glowing critical praise and several months of sold-out success. Some critics lauded its depiction of Los Angeles history through the experimental methods. One reviewer called *Zoot Suit* an “undisputed smash hit” and a “landmark work” that gave its audience “an entertaining, action-packed plot of social substance while offering all the flair of an experimental piece” (Lomeli, p. 101).

By the time the play opened on Broadway in 1979, *Zoot Suit* had already started a cultural craze in Los Angeles with a resurgence in pachuco clothing style and language. Universal Studios executives, impressed by the play's impact, hired Valdez to direct a film version of *Zoot Suit*, which was released in 1981.

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