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## 'ZOOT SUIT,' FILMED FROM THE STAGE

By Vincent Canby

"ZOOT SUIT," which opens today at the Criterion 2 and other theaters, is a holy mess of a movie, full of earnest, serious intentions and virtually no achievements. Its source material, like that of the 1979 Broadway and Los Angeles stage productions on which it is based, is the 1942 Los Angeles trial of a group of young Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos, for the murder of a rival gang member.

The trial, before a court so outrageously biased that the conviction was subsequently overturned, summed up the bigotry directed against the Mexican-American community at a time when the rest of America was off making the world safe for democracy. The film is awash in irony, but it's a lot of hollandaise sauce on a very small piece of broccoli.

"Zoot Suit" was directed by Luis Valdez, who also conceived and directed the original stage production at the Aquarius Theater in Los Angeles, and it is an amalgam of various theatrical styles, none of which works very well on the screen.

At its center is the story of Henry Reynal (Daniel Valdez), an idealized, none-too-young-looking Chicano youth. Henry is the leader of the gang being railroaded to San Quentin, largely, according to the movie, because of the inflammatory newspaper stories ordered by the press lord at San Simeon. Hovering around poor Henry and acting, more or less, as the film's master of ceremonies, is Henry's demonic, zoot-suited alter ego, el Pachuco (Edward James Olmos), who represents - I think - all of the fury inside Henry as well as the vestiges of an outdated machismo.

Because the story is so simple that it probably wouldn't take more than 30 minutes if told straightforwardly from beginning to end, the movie, like the stage production, is fancied up with flashbacks, flashes forward, musical numbers and theatrical tableaux of the sort that Hal Prince does far better in "Evita," and which are risky no matter who does them.

The movie, photographed entirely on the stage, in the aisles and just outside the Aquarius, opens

with shots of people arriving at the theater to see the show and then, from time to time in the course of the presentation, cuts to more shots of the audience that is supposedly watching the performance of "Zoot Suit" that we are seeing. Just so we get the point of this fractured reality, el Pachuco cautions us that the story "only makes sense if you grasp our stylization." We do, we do, but that's not enough.

"Zoot Suit" isn't satisfactory either as a filmed recording of a stage show or as a movie. It's a bunch of failed theories about, among other things, (1) how to capture on film the immediacy and excitement of a live performance and (2) how to make an extravagant movie, one with energetic, jitterbugging musical interludes, that doesn't cost an arm and a leg.

This stylization, which is just sophisticated enough to look sophomoric, can never disguise or make transcendental the truisms of a script that, I suspect, might be quite exciting as street-theater but which is simply attitudinal on the big screen.

The cameras aren't kind to any of the actors, especially Mr. Olmos, whose performance as el Pachuco was clearly designed to be seen at some distance, up on a stage. He is undone by close-ups that show us the landscape of his face and that isolate his sinuous body movements, better seen in relation to what's happening on the rest of the stage.

The only person who comes across with force is Tyne Daly, who plays Alice Bloomfield, the dedicated young Communist lawyer who fights for the release of the Chicano gang members and almost falls in love with Henry. She is flesh and blood. The others are marionettes. Vincent Canby

### Chicano on Trial

ZOOT SUIT, directed by Luis Valdez; written for the screen by Mr. Valdez, based on his play; director of photography, David Myers; edited by Jacqueline Cambas; music by Daniel Valdez; produced by Peter Burrell; released by Universal Pictures. At the Criterion 2, Broadway and West 45th Street; Murray Hill, 34th Street east of Lexington Avenue; Beekman, Second Avenue and 65th Street; RKO 86th Street 2, at Lexington Avenue, and other theaters. Running time: 103 minutes. This film is rated R.

Henry Reyna . . . . . Daniel Valdez

El Pachuco . . . . . Edward James Olmos

George . . . . . Charles Aidman

Alice . . . . . Tyne Daly

Judge . . . . . John Anderson  
Enrique . . . . . Abel Franco  
Joey . . . . . Mike Gomez  
Lupe . . . . . Alma Rose Martinez  
Press . . . . . Frank McCarthy  
Dolores . . . . . Lupe Ontiveros  
Lieutenant Edwards . . . . . Ed Peck  
District Attorney . . . . . Robert Phalen  
Rudy . . . . . Tony Plana  
Della . . . . . Rose Portillo  
Smiley . . . . . Marco Rodriguez  
Tommy . . . . . Kelly Ward  
Blondie . . . . . Helena Andreyko  
Bailiff . . . . . Bob Basso

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