

Zoot Suit and the Pachuco Phenomenon: An Interview with Luis Valdez

Luis Valdez, playwright, poet, director and actor, was born in Delano, California, on June 26, 1940, to migrant farmworker parents. Second of a family of ten brothers and sisters, Valdez followed the crops picking grapes at around age six. It was at this time that his interest in theatre began; however, because of the family's nomadic life—traveling between orchards up and down California—his very first attempt to enter the theatrical world was thwarted. "I was supposed to be in a Christmas program in the first grade but I never played in it because my family moved away before we performed." Valdez never forgot this incident and therefore studied drama at San Jose State College.

Before graduating from San Jose College in 1964, the Drama Department produced his first full-length play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*. At the end of 1965, when César Chávez launched his historic Delano Grape Strike, Valdez returned to his birthplace to work as an organizer for the farmworkers union. It was there that he joined his farmworker roots and his theatre background by founding El Teatro Campesino.

In 1967, during the Teatro's first national tour, Valdez and his company began to receive wide attention from publications, including *The New Yorker* and *Newsweek*. In 1968 Teatro was awarded the off-Broadway Obie. Teatro also received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award in 1969 and 1971. In 1972 Luis Valdez created for television *Los Vendidos* which later won several awards, among them, the Emmy. In 1976 and 1977, *El Corrido* was on national television (PBS), written by Valdez in collaboration with El Teatro.

In the winter of 1977, motion picture audiences saw him in Universal's *Which Way Is Up?* starring Richard Pryor. Valdez also collaborated on the script with Pryor. Visiting eight western European countries in the fall of 1976, the Teatro's first major European tour featured Valdez

as the character of Jesus "Pelado" Rasquache in *La Carpa*.

Luis Valdez has emerged as an international leader in alternative theatre. He currently serves on the advisory boards of the International Theatre Institute's American Center, and the PBS network *Visions* series. He was the U.S. representative to the 1971 Third World Theatre Conference held in the Philippines, and a delegate to the First American Congress of Theatre in 1973 at Princeton University. In 1976, he was appointed to the nine-member California Arts Council by Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr., and was elected to the Board of Directors of the Theatre Communications, to the theatre community of America. Valdez has also taught drama courses at the Universities of California at Berkeley and Santa Cruz and at California State University, Fresno.

In January of 1978, Valdez was named a recipient of the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation Playwright-in-Residence Award in connection with the production of his original play, *Zoot Suit*. He was commissioned to write and direct *Zoot Suit* for production by the Mark Taper Forum of the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles. After a successful run at the Taper, in August of 1978 the play moved to a nine-month extension of sold-out performances and hit reviews at the Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood, where the movie version of *Zoot Suit* was filmed in 1981.

This interview took place in Luis Valdez's office in the Teatro Campesino's playhouse in San Juan Bautista two weeks after the film version of *Zoot Suit* opened in New York City in January 1982.

Interviewer: Why do you think *Zoot Suit* is an important film today?

Valdez: Well, there probably isn't a filmmaker alive that doesn't think that his film is important. So, whatever I have to say about *Zoot Suit* has to be qualified with that. I'm speaking about my product and so if it hadn't been important to me, I wouldn't have done it. It's important for a number of different reasons. For one, it's the first film within the Hollywood structure that is conceived, written and directed by a Chicano, with a certain amount of artistic control, which was part of the deal to begin with. And if you knew how many deals go down in Hollywood and never get beyond the lunch stage, you'd know how any film that gets made in Hollywood has certain importance, just by virtue of the fact that it got made. This particular film had a lot going against it after New York and there were a lot of conditions that were slapped on it because of the critical response in New York City.

Interviewer: Were these conditions made by people in the movie industry?

Valdez: Absolutely. There was a lot of interest going into New York after Hollywood. There were a lot of offers, including offers of money, which I refused because I was always interested in artistic control.

None of the studios or producers would consider my directing a movie, for one.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on this a bit more?

Valdez: Well, I was a first-time director. I had never directed a film for one; and that was basically it. I suppose there were other reasons; I was a Chicano on top of everything else. And I had difficulties even getting guarantees that I would be able to do the screenplay. Basically, what they wanted was the idea. They wanted the title, *Zoot Suit*. They wanted the notoriety of the play in Los Angeles, and they wanted to convert it into their own film. The concepts that we were kicking around at the time were very different from those in the final film. The crucial element was the character of the Pachuco. That was always the first question that came up: "What are you going to do with the Pachuco?" Originally, the film was conceived in a lot of these discussions with a very different concept in mind; it was more historically based, more realistic, more observing of the Pachuco phenomenon from the outside, rather than from the inside, sort of a broad panorama of the times. While these discussions were going on, Steven Spielberg's movie, *1941*, was just getting into production. Everybody in Hollywood had heard that he was going to do the zoot suit riots as a part of his film. I think the original script had a much larger section on the zoot suit riots than that which actually appeared in the final film. But that news automatically began to change our discussions because somebody was already doing a film on the zoot suit riots, and Spielberg, no less. So in these discussions we began considering other approaches in terms of style and treatment, until we got to New York, where we were assassinated by the critics. All serious negotiations for the play came to a halt. It's very important that people consider the fate of *Zoot Suit* in New York City both as play and film, because the movie critics also slit our throats in New York. It was no different than what they did to the play. It comes from an entrenched racist attitude that has been there for as long as the westward movement has existed, which is well over a hundred years. This attitude refuses to allow us at this time to penetrate on our own terms. It will not allow blacks to penetrate on their own terms either. It does not want us to penetrate into Broadway or penetrate into the closed circle of New York literary publications. It does not want any genuine voice from the West Coast to break through, much less a non-white, Chicano-Indian viewpoint.

Interviewer: Is there any other reason why the film was criticized so severely?

Valdez: Part of the problem was the fact that I chose to maintain the Pachuco, and certain attitudes about American society in general.

I was asked to give up the Pachuco and a certain kind of attitude and maybe acceptance would be forthcoming.

Interviewer: And you wouldn't?

Valdez: And I won't.

Interviewer: Would that be a compromise for you?

Valdez: Yes, that would be a compromise; it would be to wash down the drain everything that the work is intended to do, which is to break through on our own terms.

Interviewer: What is it about the Pachuco attitude that is offensive or that they wanted you to eliminate?

Valdez: He is the rebel. The recalcitrant rebel who refuses to give in, who refuses to bend, refuses to admit that he is wrong. He is incorrigible. And the way that the Pachuco appears in the film and in the play makes a very strong statement. The stance is almost ideological, even cultural; it's mythical. They know then, the Anglo critics, almost instinctively, even if they don't bother to think it out, that what this figure represents is a self-determined identity; it comes from its own base. That's been my argument all along through my work; that we have our own fundamental base from which to work. It's very strong and it's the foundation of civilization; it's not just a by-product of everything that is happening. All of these things are implicit in *Zoot Suit*, but very few critics have actually penetrated into the real meaning of the play. The more negative the critics, the more reluctant and unwilling they are to discuss it, so all they can do is just kick at it; all they can do is say that it is dumb, that it's sophomoric. Reviews, of course, on the west coast have been totally different, so there is a real dichotomy between the way the film was generally received by critics on the east coast and on the west coast.

Interviewer: Do you think the Pachuco is right in what he believes, what he represents in his attitude, his rebelliousness?

Valdez: It depends on what you feel he represents. It requires an interpretation because the Pachuco is neither good nor bad, he is both. He is, if anything, an abstract person who, in the mind of Henry Reyna, is aiding Henry to achieve a higher level of consciousness. I choose to call it the *internal authority*. I mean it has been described a number of different ways; anything from religious terms to psychological terms. You can take your pick. I like to use the word myth, and a lot of people, I suppose, don't really understand what the old use of the word used to be, because myth refers to an underlying structure of a truth that is just below the surface of reality. You could say that the atom is a myth. Nobody's ever seen one so you sort of have to believe it because it is just a structure.

Interviewer: What is this "entrenched attitude" that won't allow Chicanos to penetrate the literary and film industries?

Valdez: This attitude I refer to is the white man's sense of arrogance and belief that the truth resides in Western European culture, and that whether you are talking about capitalism or communism, or about Protestantism or Catholicism, only *their* science, *their* religion, *their* politics and *their* arts are sophisticated enough to be valid. Naturally, the entire non-white world from Africa to Asia has been victimized and colonized by this incredibly arrogant attitude, but it is in America that this ignorance has come to roost. Here, a transplanted European culture is masquerading as American culture, and the way of life of the real natives has been distorted, stolen, ignored or forgotten. Chicanos, any way you cut it, are native Americans. Of course, all of us that are Chicanos can also relate to the Hispanic part of our culture, and we should. But then there is the other, the ignored part, the despised part, the dehumanized part, which is the *indígena*. And it seems to me that part cannot be ignored forever. It was, again speaking very relatively, too effective in its time. You have only to draw a line across the centuries, in terms of achievements of other cultures, to know that pre-Columbian culture was highly civilized. Here in America, speaking again in terms of the cultural patterns of the continent as a whole, there was a map, and that map is being ignored. And that map had a hub, and that hub was in Mexico. We are the New World. You cannot dismiss as much civilization as Mexico has had, especially if you know anything about it. It is an ancient pride that makes us rebel, that makes it ultimately inconceivable to us that all that culture must be lost, that all the truth, power and goodness in life resides in assimilation into the Anglo-American mode. You have only to make the simplest kind of historical and cultural analysis to know that there is something about pre-Colombian civilization that cannot be ignored or dismissed. Consequently, your average Anglo in the street will eventually come around so that he's spouting a new 21st-century "spiritually scientific" philosophy that is very close to the *indio* philosophy of our Mayan and Toltec ancestors, and then all those Chicanos that are following the white man will come around to their own culture; but only by virtue of following the white man. But the white man cannot see us as clearly as we see ourselves. You cannot take a reality like *pachuquismo* and say Pachucos are what they are, just on the basis of what they look like to the white man. The real significance of El Pachuco in *Zoot Suit* is deeper than most people realize. Anytime that a new identity is created, it emerges as a power that is raw, terrible and disgusting to some, and glorious to others. Nobody knows, for instance, what Jesus Christ ultimately

looked like. If he appeared before a lot of people today, they would dismiss him as some kind of tramp. And other people would be able to see the glow, you see. This is the way it is; individuals or those things that change reality sometimes come through life with frightening power. Revolutionaries are very frightening, prophets are frightening; people that have a certain kind of hidden power scare other people. They are intimidating; there was a lot of that in the Pachuco. But those in the know cannot fail to recognize him (in the film) as a reincarnation of the ancient god Tezcatlipoca. His style, his colors, his powers are all attributes of ancient wisdom: "la tinta negra y roja" of the lord of education, the dean of the school of hard knocks. El Pachuco is thus a symbol of our identity, our total identity, with ancient roots.

Interviewer: What is the relationship between the Pachuco and Henry? Is the Pachuco Henry's consciousness?

Valdez: As I said, I call the Pachuco the internal authority. I know he's been called "conscience," he's been called alter-ego, but he is not so much alter-ego as he is super-ego—using Freudian terms—because super-ego is your conscience that tells you what's right and what's wrong. Again, how does the super-ego function in our lives? How does this internal authority appear in our lives? He doesn't really appear as a person, of course. But he sometimes appears as our own voice, talking to us inside our own heads. You know the old cartoons we used to see, the conscience appeared as the little halo around or over the head. And then there was the *diablo*, the little devil, and actually the super-ego is both: the devil and the angel, not one or the other. And your conscience is both, and your conscience plays with you, it tempts you, it challenges you, it presents you with alternatives and lets you decide. It goads you.

Interviewer: What does the Pachuco do?

Valdez: All those things with Henry, good and bad, depending on what your point of view is. Some of the things you agree with, some of the things, you don't. You have people agreeing with different aspects of the Pachuco. Some people like him, some people don't and can't stand him. Some people feel he is evil, and some people feel that he is basically good. It depends on who you talk to. Some people feel he is a monster and some people feel that he is a hero, that he is a figure to emulate.

Interviewer: He seems aware of Henry's reality. The Pachuco is wise.

Valdez: It's not only that; he's super human. He's running the show and for once, from a storytelling point of view, I wanted a Chicano in control of the story, and so the Pachuco is the editor. He is the one that snaps it on and snaps it off. He is the one that controls the point of view, if you will. That's very important, the fact that it's being

seen through this point of view. That became a real question, a literal question when we got down to planning our shots, or even when I started writing the screenplay, because point of view is the most essential question you could ask about any screenplay. What's the eye, who is looking at this? Ultimately what you are left with is one camera lens and you are looking at limited space, the limited shot, the limited angle, and you have to ask yourself, "Okay, who's eye is this?" Henry's story is being observed by the Pachuco most of the time, but occasionally you get Henry's point of view of the Pachuco, and that's the crux of the story. It's obviously Henry's struggle with himself. It is Henry's struggle with himself on three planes, and the physical is not nearly as physicalized in *Zoot Suit*, the film, as it might have been. But it's certainly emotional, and it's certainly intellectual. It's the intellectual part that is unexpected and unappreciated and unwanted by a lot of the general public. You don't often get intellectual movies, which get into discussions, but that is something that was very natural in the play. Since we transferred the play, it just had to be. I didn't want to present an unthinking character. Henry Reyna thinks and has a dialogue going with himself, the way we all do. The way Pachucos even do. And we are portrayed on the screen as being thoughtless, so I also wanted to utilize the device of the Pachuco to show the mental processes inside the head of Henry Reyna, and deliberately so.

Interviewer: What was this struggle like within the consciousness of the Pachuco in the '40s?

Valdez: It was a struggle for identity, because an identity was needed. The question is, of course, why not assimilate when it could be so convenient? Well, for one, the society won't allow many of us to assimilate. We just can't pass for white, whether we want to or not. And the other is, what are we assimilating into? That question must always be asked. There are a whole lot of questions and a whole lot of answers that require a certain amount of discussion. But let me say it's natural for people to confuse the Pachuco in the movie with their experiences of Pachuquismo. All I can say is that in my case, in my life experience, the Pachucos were both good and bad, exactly as I represent them, because the Pachucos that I knew were bad guys, but at the same time it seemed to me they were saying some rather important things and making rather important statements. They were standing up to a society that was, for me as a kid, obviously unjust, obviously racist, and it seemed to me that they had some balls. I admired that. They were the only ones that were doing it. Everybody else, as far as I could see, was holding their hat in their hands. The Pachucos were not afraid. They were dealing with an oppressive inferiority complex. It seemed that the Americano

had everything, that the Gringo was everything, and that the Mexicano was nothing. But there were always fights in the barrio—people taking out their own frustration on themselves. There was a lot of drunkenness and a lot of poverty and lot of hard work, and for what? Along come these Pachucos and they dress good and look nice, and they stand out. Yes they do get busted and jailed and they are obscene and dangerous and drug addicts, but that still does not cancel out some of the positive qualities, as far as my experience was concerned. Now it so happens, later on in the '50s I got stopped occasionally by the Pachucos for carrying too many books home, but I was always able to talk my way out of it; and I learned a bit of *caló*. I learned not to divorce myself from those basic elements in the barrio. No matter what I wanted to do, I knew that I needed them and they needed me. That's always been a principle of mine: not to divorce myself from any of the elements of my reality, no matter how unattractive they may seem. I have tried to resist the bourgeois temptation to look down my nose at the lower class *rasquaches* because, you know, I'm a lower class *rasquache*. If it hadn't been for my interest in the arts, I probably would have ended up in the joint somewhere; but I had something to do.

Interviewer: What would you say to a Chicano who asks you why you glorified the Pachuco? He is an attractive person, a very attractive person.

Valdez: I would say I haven't glorified him. I've presented him both as good and bad. There are a lot of negative things about the Pachuco, and I make no bones about it.

Interviewer: Can you explain this a little more?

Valdez: Sure. I mean, as the character in the film, El Pachuco is always getting in the way of things that Henry's trying to do: his relationship with Della for one, his relationship with Alice, another, and his relationship with his family. There are things that Henry's trying not to do, but the Pachuco is goading him. He goads him into getting into that last fight which gets him into trouble. By the same token, the Pachuco is also goading Henry into a greater level of self-consciousness. I think what you have to ask is what does the Pachuco represent? At the same time that he represents those real life Pachucos, he represents the essence of what Pachuquismo is all about, which is this struggle for identity.

Interviewer: You have discussed Pachuquismo in terms of a struggle for identity, maturity and the struggle toward consciousness. Can you elaborate on this latter point?

Valdez: Well, we have to be as conscious as we can in life, it seems to me. I mean that's the life process. You live, you're born and you become conscious of your surroundings, and other people and yourself, and

that process continues until the day you die. And depending on your level of consciousness, you will do one thing or the other. It seems to me a whole argument could be made that the whole world is into a struggle with consciousness. That's the struggle of everything. That's the underlying force in nature: the struggle towards consciousness, towards awareness. The Pachuco phenomenon was part of this process and part of the struggle. As it is, it helps the rest of us who never became Pachucos, who never could be Pachucos, to become more aware of ourselves. Now consciousness, an awareness doesn't always develop one way or another. You really have to consider where the person is in life, and I don't think that any of these Pachucos would have necessarily become ideologues, because there was no college education. Later on some of these Pachucos, through different methods, were able to get to school, or maybe they just educated themselves in the *pinta*. Then they were able to trust themselves in ideological fashion, but intelligence manifested itself in a number of different ways. I think that this country's pursuit of wealth is adolescent; its underlying motive in capitalist society is to get wealth. To acquire wealth is the key to power and happiness. This is basically an adolescent solution to life, and while we persist as a society now, as a world, as we persist in looking for that solution, we are going to get the other one, which is the adolescent need for heroism and war. So it's not surprising that this country has gone through a roller coaster of wars and depressions that relate directly to inflation, unemployment, depression, military engagements, then prosperity, then peace, and more inflation and unemployment. I mean it's just up and down, up and down, and that's the history of the United States; but that's because it's adolescent. It's an adolescent world. The way people kill themselves off, it's an adolescent world. I sometimes get the impression the whole earth is nothing but a kindergarten, grammar and high school.

Interviewer: Do you think the phenomenon of Pachuquismo is an adolescent phenomenon?

Valdez: Yes, but there is more to Pachuquismo than meets the eye. It has something to do with maturity, and it has something to do with a heroic attitude for life.

Interviewer: How did the Pachuco experience influence Chicanos?

Valdez: The Pachuco phenomenon gave every urban Chicano after that the ability to be urban. It gave us an urban identity that we never had before. I mean, who were these Pachucos? They were the sons of campesinos that had fled Mexico, and these campesinos had never had a chance to live in cities and it was too late for them to really wrestle with the basic problems of what it meant to live in an

Anglo society. Their children grew up in the streets of some of these southwestern towns and cities. They had to deal with it because it was their life and they had to deal with being urban and the way that they dealt with it is they invented Pachuquismo. They took on the zoot suit; they took on the Pachuco slang and they developed a mode of life. Since then, of course, the life style branched out and one piece became the low rider movement and another piece became drugs, but some of those pieces became leaders like César Chávez, who was a Pachuco. Other Pachucos became teachers. It's like a seed that opens up and you have a lot of branches; a plant that grows out of the seed.

Interviewer: There are several lines in the movie which give the audience insight into the conflict Henry Reyna experiences in his relationship with the Pachuco: his *internal authority*. Can you interpret those for us?

Valdez: Sure. Which ones?

Interviewer: "Don't hate your *Raza* more than you love the Gringo."

Valdez: Well, you remember that appears in the Saturday night dance sequence, where Rafas and Henry get into a knife fight. What happens just before this is that Rafas asks Henry to gang up on the sailor. Henry looks at the sailor and says "I don't like the odds." Rafas says, "You think you're some hot shit just because the Navy accepted you," and then Henry says, "As if you didn't try." The knife fight begins and Henry gets really pissed at Rafas and he's about to cut him up. That's when the Pachuco stops him and says, "Don't hate your *Raza* more than you love the Gringo." He's telling Henry to control himself.

Interviewer: Do you mean he loves the Gringo as well?

Valdez: Sure. Well, I mean he's got Anglos in his gang. Later on in the cell, the Pachuco says, "Underneath the big tough bullshit exterior is a little snotnose Mexican kid, begging for the Gringos' attention." A lot of that comes from what was happening forty years ago, along with the whole *Zoot Suit* phenomenon. It seemed to me a lot of those kids were just trying to be Americans.

Interviewer: Are you saying he tried to break away from Pachuquismo and win acceptance by going into the Navy, and never made it?

Valdez: Never made it. The point really of that statement is that you can't really love the Gringo without loving your own people. Unfortunately we still see a lot of people that court the Gringo and go after the Gringo, and they can't do the same thing with their *Raza* out of some failure in themselves to be able to deal with who they are and accept that.

Interviewer: At the end of the trial Henry stood up to hear the verdict and the sentencing. His stance then was that of a hero, a proud

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hero, and the Pachuco says, "The barrio needs you, ése, stand up to them in style." What was your intention here?

Valdez: Show the world Hank Reyna has some balls, and remember, "Pachuco yo." It's the rebellion, the defiance, it's stoicism against the obvious injustice. We had already established that in the script. So what do you do in the face of obvious injustice, but stand up and take it, and go on to the next thing.

Interviewer: There is another line which is very poetic. "You're a marijuana dreamer floating in an endless night of unfulfilled fantasies." What are these unfulfilled fantasies?

Valdez: The bottom line of reality: the fact that out of this endless night of unfulfilled fantasies, come fantasies that become real; and that we are all like marijuana dreamers floating in reality. Shakespeare said it differently and better. He said, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Obviously, I lend a lot of credence to the mind and consciousness. What that does is that it unlocks you from the prison of an overly material universe, and gives you freedom. The material facts of Pachuquismo, for example, are not impressive; that is, the outward view, the external view. Just like the material facts of the poverty of *la raza* are not impressive. We live in a very materialistic society, with a spiritual base that doesn't work. But there are things in life that are not visible, that are nevertheless real. It's like the atom. There are forces that function in life that have to be registered in a different way, other than seeing material measurement. And because they are invisible, many of these phenomena are subject to all kinds of charlatanism, but their reality is nevertheless the substance of art and poetry, not to speak of advanced physics. So why the stuff of dreams, why invoke that, why is Henry Reyna a marijuana dreamer floating in an endless night of unfulfilled fantasies? Because that's where his ultimate power lies. That's where his ultimate humanity lies. It is his cosmic root, and it doesn't mean he doesn't have to deal with the material conditions of his life. He does, as we all do, but it also means that his potential is rooted in infinity. People that root their potential in some kind of limited material manifestation just end up committing suicide.

Interviewer: In one form or another.

Valdez: Yes, in one form or another.

Interviewer: What about, "You know what's wrong with you? You can't stand yourself and you can't stand me telling you." What is it about himself that he can't stand?

Valdez: Well, he had just been rejected by Alice. I mean Alice reaches out and tries to be a friend. And Henry takes it farther and he starts getting romantically involved. So Alice has to backtrack, so Henry

then backtracks even more. He goes back to being pissed. He gets pissed at himself and so then the Pachuco brings it out in him.

Interviewer: Why do you think he gets angry at himself?

Valdez: For sticking his neck out, and for thinking that she would accept him.

Interviewer: Did the "real" Henry Reyna fall in love with Alice?

Valdez: Yes. I had to make a choice whether to develop it or not. It took a while to shape it. If you remember, that element was a little bit different in the play. As much as I think Chicanos got off on it, Anglos resented it. They didn't like the romance or the politics of it: a white woman falling in love with a Pachuco. In real life, they fell in love through letters. It was all through letters. The "real" Alice told me she kept them for a long time but eventually discarded them. So for the stage version, I fictionalized the letters they wrote to each other and then dramatized them. They became little scenes in the play. But once you physicalize something like that it runs the danger of becoming soap opera. I was never really able to achieve a point of satisfaction with that scene on the stage. I also had the problem of not finding the right actress until I ran into Tyne Daly. I had met Tyne before, but she was doing other things during the run of the play. I'm sorry we didn't take her to New York, because she would have made a hell of a difference.

Interviewer: What is it about Tyne that made a difference in the film version?

Valdez: Subtlety, honesty, real warmth between Tyne as Alice and Daniel as Henry. The difference is that Tyne has worked through, broken through, the racism. She is married to George Sanford Brown. He's a Cuban, actually, but he's black. He's a black actor doing a lot of directing now. He's a very handsome actor. Just a hell of a man. They love each other tremendously. You can really tell it's an intense relationship. And they have worked through this difference. Acting the scene out with Daniel was not a problem for Tyne, who was the fifth woman to play Alice. But she is a hell of an actress to begin with, very powerful, so obviously she brought great skill to the role.

Interviewer: At the end of the film Henry started to break down, after he had been in solitary. He said, "I know who you are, *carnal*. You are the one who got me here." What is his point in this line?

Valdez: It is Henry coming to terms with himself. How do we all come to terms with ourselves? The power to do it resides in ourselves, with what we do, you see. It's not outside. People on the outside cannot make you free, no more than people on the outside can imprison you. People on the outside cannot make you more or less than what you are. You are what you are and you are what you are in confronta-

tion with yourself. You are your own best judge. And in fact, Henry was in prison and in solitary confinement because of choices that he made, for good or for bad, and that is really the beginning of his liberation, of his way out. So long as he kept blaming the exterior, the deeper he was going to be driven into himself. It happens to people that are catatonic. They can't deal with the external conditions of their life, because they can't deal with themselves, so they go into themselves and stay there.

Interviewer: What made Henry change after being in solitary confinement?

Valdez: It happens to a lot of people. Once you are left alone and you have to think it through, you are either going to survive or you are not going to survive. You are going to figure out your problems, or what went wrong, or where you made the right moves, or the wrong moves. You have to have a reason for finding yourself in a tough situation. That's Henry's problem; and he makes it. He makes it because he comes to terms with himself.

Interviewer: In what way does he make it?

Valdez: He makes it in terms of getting free. He was free already before he was released.

Interviewer: Are you saying the resolution was an internal one, within himself?

Valdez: That's right. Also he is able to get to the point where he hopes once again. Because he was hoping during the trial, you know, that he would get off, yet not hoping enough.

Interviewer: A line that was implicit throughout the movie was, "You are my worst enemy, my best friend, you are myself." There also seems to be a resolution within this statement. Is this what you intended?

Valdez: Yeah. That's Henry's consciousness. He finally sees himself again. He is stripped down and he is in the loincloth. Then Henry sees himself, his brother, and then back as the Pachuco; and the Pachuco is presented as *el indio*. All of that resonates, it resonates deeply in Hank and it's supposed to resonate in the audience as well. And when you see the Pachuco again and Henry sees him, I want people to feel that Hank had a greater degree of self-awareness coming out of prison. The Pachuco is in white and then we see the three different endings that Henry sees as well. I mean he sees himself possibly going back to prison, or going off to war, or getting married and settling down, and those three things are part of Henry's consciousness. He is much more aware of himself, he is much more aware he has three choices. All of this, of course, is implied; it's all implicit; it's all symbolic, but it's there.

Interviewer: What did he do?

Valdez: He did one of those three things. Possibly all of them. I am telling the story. I leave that up to the audience to decide.

Interviewer: The Pachucos called themselves Chicanos. In the family scene Henry's father said, "Don't use that word, it means you're trash." Why was "Chicano" considered a negative word?

Valdez: Chicano was a dirty word. It's still a dirty word to a lot of people. It's gotten more accepted because the media uses it, but it's one of those words that came up from the street, that came up from the barrio, and the street wasn't even paved. And a lot of people assumed it came from *chicanería*, chicanery, which means trickery. A lot of people say that Chicanos are really *gente baja*. That they are trash, brown trash. These people don't want to be associated with Chicanos. It's a word of uncertain origin, just like Pachuco, just like zoot suit.

Interviewer: Mexican-American and Mexican parents found it offensive, then?

Valdez: At that time they found it very offensive, of course. Now everybody uses it whether they want to or not, but it is a word we got from the Pachuco experience. We didn't end up calling ourselves Pachucos, we ended up calling ourselves Chicanos. Part of the point that's implicit there is that the Pachuco is responsible for the word Chicano. He's the one that used it.

Interviewer: Can you summarize the Pachuco phenomenon or Henry Reyna's experience in terms of who he is in relationship to his surroundings, the larger society?

Valdez: Sure. He is the law of contradiction. Some people call him the law of contradiction. Some people call him duality, dialectical materialism. The internal authority that is at work is necessary in the psychological process of individuation that we all undergo. Every one of us, as human beings, undergoes a process whereby we define ourselves as individuals in life. We do it according to our own personal struggles. The whole Sleepy Lagoon case is told in *Zoot Suit* in terms of the personal struggle of Henry Reyna. There isn't a single social event that in some way you cannot define in personal terms, in the personal terms of the individual involved, because there is always an inside personal life, and an external social life in any event. The entire 1960s, for instance, indicates a lot of us were basically changing. We were undergoing change through that period in life, and so it was a very natural union of the external and the internal; the youth and the rebellion and the joy that we felt in our internal personal lives as people that were undergoing their youth. Our young adulthood was reflected in the excitement and the rebellion in the outside world, and so forth. Well, in Henry's case, in 1942, it was a crucial time that involved a lot of young men going

off to war and becoming warriors and there was the zoot suit phenomenon which was a uniform of a different kind. So society's battles—both abroad and at home, with its own social levels of racism and economic discrimination—were outside, external reflections of Henry's own internal struggle to deal with his evolving manhood, going from adolescent to young man. This internal struggle was one way to deal with this broad panorama of the Sleepy Lagoon Case. The only way to deal with it was in terms of a person and his struggles to form relationships with people. This is part of what *Zoot Suit* is all about. Let me add that what I have learned from doing this work is that we as Chicanos still have a struggle which needs to be fought, consciously or unconsciously; but the bottom lines have never been so clear to me. Some people don't understand our struggles and so there is a need for a focused, concentrated effort to try and rip through this ignorance.

Interviewer: Octavio Paz in his essay on "The Pachuco and Other Extremes" in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1961, gives his own interpretation of the Pachuco. Can you give us your comments about his interpretation?

Valdez: Sure. What, for instance?

Interviewer: He compares Mexicanos to Pachucos; for example, "We live closed up in ourselves like those taciturn adolescents." Do you feel Pachucos lived closed up within themselves?

Valdez: I think there are always closed human circles. To a certain extent, then, what the Pachucos did is no different than what everybody else does; that is to practice alienation in some sort of organized way. That's what men's secret societies are all about, the Shriners and the Masons. All of those exclusive societies, the country clubs, etc. I mean people naturally form *clicas*, because it makes them feel special. What Octavio Paz is relating is something that is important, but he does not seem to recognize the Pachucos' need to feel special in their own closed circle. What he has stated in *Labyrinth*, if I remember correctly, is that the Pachuco is about as far out as the Mexican can get, or as far in. I mean it is isolation, as far away from normal life as you can get. He saw them as abnormal, as hybrids, sterile and remote. But then you have to ask: "sterile in relation to what?" The very fact that the Pachuco is being considered in the context of Anglo American society changes the point of view. The Pachuco in Los Angeles was confronted with a very different phenomenon, which is Anglo American society, which exists like a wall. Paz was not really in a position to judge the Pachuco or the wall that confronted him. I mean he had some important insights, but he couldn't really get into an understanding of what the Pachuco was without having actually shared some of

their experiences by living here. You have to grow up with it, and to be confronted with it on a daily basis. The white society dances around and pretends we are not here. I don't think, at least I assume, that Paz had not known that kind of alienation: to have one's identity totally denied and ignored. The experience of a Mexican going to New York City, having at least Mexico City and a Mexican national identity behind you, is one thing. The experience of a Chicano going to New York is another. It's odd enough to go from East Los Angeles to West Los Angeles and to feel the alienation.

Interviewer: Did you feel that alienation in New York?

Valdez: Yes, and I've gone under the best of conditions. I mean I've done the limousine trip and press conferences and television shows. Yes, I felt the strangeness of it. I might as well have been from Madagascar. I might as well have been from another country. I say this because it's the same frustration the Pachuco felt. I don't think Octavio Paz or any Mexican, unless it is one of those Mexicans that moved and grew up here, really understands that part of the Pachuco experience. The need to stand up and just rebel, to say *no*, is to provide a new possibility: it's to bring a new consciousness into being. Blacks understand it in this country. There is a difference between my point of view and Octavio Paz' even though we may agree on many points. Our conclusions are different.

Interviewer: Will you elaborate on Paz' statement that the Pachuco "flaunts his difference," that he "rejects the society that rejects him?"

Valdez: Right. He flaunts his difference. But what is that difference? Again, where are we coming from? Are we coming from a basic position that takes into account the history of the last 500 years? Not until the pre-Colombian cultures are given their human worth will it be possible to do anything but flaunt this difference. What's interesting is that my experience as a playwright, my experience with Teatro Campesino, is that we achieve greater acceptance in Europe because in Europe they see us a little more clearly, ironically enough. They see us as Mexicans or Chicanos or as Americans, but they *see* us. And they see what we do in a much clearer light. In this country, the descendants of all those European immigrants come to these shores cannot understand us. They cannot really see what we do. They cannot see the artistry of our work, or our art; they cannot see the veracity of our truths. Here we are ethnics, here we are a minority group. As a matter of fact, we are an extension of Mexico. But Mexico has yet to be recognized as the ancient capital of this part of the world. Who is fooling anybody? Mexico is the seat of civilization in this part of the world, with

ancient cultural roots, but the only fact that is constantly recognized is that our people were "conquered." It was only until a few short years ago that Mexicanos were not outwardly identified as cowards and savages. The Sleepy Lagoon case involved some of this. Mexicans lost California and the Southwest because they were supposedly incapable of fighting to retain it. They were whipped and beaten by the United States. Consequently, they were cowards and every Mexican woman was a whore and that, in a broad sense, is still the underlying attitude toward Mexicans. At least that is still the image perpetrated in contemporary American literature, television and film.

Interviewer: One last statement from Paz. He says that Pachuco is "sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions."

Valdez: That's assuming that contradiction is merely negative when actually contradiction is both good and bad, by its very nature, or it wouldn't be contradiction.

Interviewer: What about the "sheer negative impulse?"

Valdez: That's what I'm saying, a sheer negative impulse as opposed to what? What does he counterpose the Pachuco with, Octavio Paz? Octavio Paz is the positive? It's contradictory to say that the Pachuco's stance is sheer negative impulse, then to say in the same breath that he is full of contradictions. I'd say, who isn't? The nature of the human being is to be full of contradictions. The more contradictions you have under control the more sophisticated you are, but you've got to acknowledge the contradictions to begin with. I revel in the contradictions. I think that's what makes us human: our dichotomies. They make us interesting, so to contradict Octavio Paz: if the Pachuco is sheer negative impulse, he is also a sheer positive force.

Interviewer: I've heard people say he has retracted some of his statements. *Labyrinth* is still one of his most popular books. The academicians read it, the Anglo academicians, that is, and they believe what he said. They accept his interpretation at face value. This essay is a permanent document. And he hasn't, to my knowledge, revised the essay. This is why I'm interested in printing your interpretation of the Pachuco, so that we can better understand his life and his struggles.

Valdez: Well, I don't agree with some things I said ten years ago; so after thirty years, can you imagine. That's why I reserve the right to contradict myself. *Consafos*.

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