

Zoot Suit

LUIS VALDEZ

1978

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.

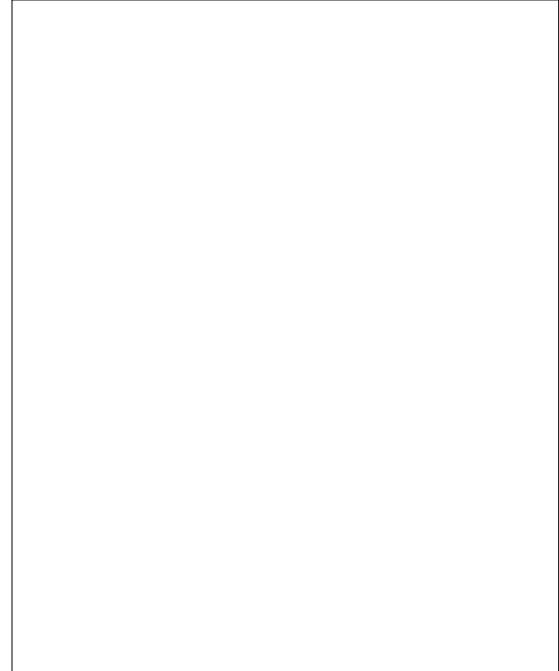
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Luis Valdez was born June 26, 1940, to migrant farm workers in Delano, California; he was one of ten children. His interest in drama began early: a schoolteacher introduced him to puppetry, and in high school he appeared on a local television station. He also periodically helped his family in the fields, as they moved from farm to farm, following the planting and harvest schedule. He received his Bachelor Arts in English from the San Jose State University, where he produced his first play. Later, his alma mater awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Arts degree.

Valdez worked with the San Francisco Mime Troupe for a year before helping Hispanic labor leader César Chávez organize workers during the Great Delano Grape Strike of 1965. To support this effort, Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworkers' Theater), serving as its Artistic Director for many years. This small theater group began performing *actos*—brief theatrical “sketches”—to communicate the need for unionization among farmworkers and to educate the public about the migrant workers' plight. Eventually, the troupe took a more artistic turn, producing plays in San Francisco and elsewhere. In 1968, El Teatro won an Obie (a distinguished off-Broadway award) for “demonstrating the politics of survival.”

Valdez began writing *mitos* or “myths,” such as his 1967 *Dark Root of a Scream*, a condemnation of the Vietnam War, and his 1973 *La carpa de los Rasquachis*, a story of the Mexican immigrant experience. His unique combination of *acto* (sketch), *mito*, and *corrido* (musical), along with his personal brand of Brechtian self-consciousness, combined with his goal of socio-political change quickly brought Valdez to the forefront of Chicano theater, and he enjoyed success with nationwide tours of his works. *Zoot Suit* (1978) was produced with the Center Theatre Group of Los Angeles, while he continued his leadership role at El Teatro Campesino.

Although *Zoot Suit* received mixed reviews during its New York debut, Valdez had the honor of being the first Chicano director to have a play



Luis Valdez

produced on Broadway, and popular enthusiasm for the play encouraged him to take it on a successful national tour. This accomplishment marked the beginning of his rise as an individual artist, and he produced a well-received film version of *Zoot Suit* in 1981. In 1987, he directed the hit film *La Bamba*, which chronicled the short life of Hispanic rock star Richie Valens, and created several performances for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). In the 1990s, Valdez divided his time between screenwriting and teaching at California State University, Monterey Bay.

PLOT SUMMARY

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 I, 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 I, 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 I, 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 cacophony 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

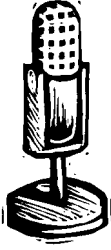
Adella

See Della Barrios

Della Barrios

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.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- *Zoot Suit* was filmed on stage in 1981 by Universal Pictures at the Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood with segments of cinematic material interspersed, lending occasional moments of realism. It is widely available on VHS.

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.

Judge F. W. Charles

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.

Downey Gang

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

Lieutenant Edwards

Lt. Edwards is the tough cop who tells the press he refuses to "mollycoddle these youngsters any-

more" 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.

Ismael

See Smiley Torres

Newsboy

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

El Pachuco

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.

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.

Sergeant Smith

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

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.

THEMES**Culture Clash**

Henry and his gang are charged with the murder of a fellow Mexican American, Jose Williams, not because there was convincing evidence of their guilt, but because of their ethnic identity and their radical style of dressing and behavior. The underlying conflict that leads to their arrest and unfair trial is a clash between Mexican Americans and the dominant Anglo culture. The zoot suiters represented a small population of Mexican Americans. They sported ducktailed haircuts and slick suits and promenaded with swaggering coolness, affectations which were seen by some Anglos as an affront to mainstream society. More common were the assimilated Mexican Americans of the 1940s, who accepted being segregated in barrios, Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, and who held low-paying, low-status jobs. They were tolerated in society as long as they limited their aspirations and kept out of the way. Enrique is a fully assimilated Mexican American, who works as a street cleaner and is proud of his son for joining the Navy to fight as an American; for Henry to do so would indicate that he would also be assimilated.

Trouble comes when groups of Mexican-American zoot-suiters, or pachucos, congregate in dance halls and begin to get rowdy. With the war hysteria of the 1940s, such rowdiness was seen as an imminent threat, and the death of Jose Williams seemed proof of the violent nature of the pachucos. The historic 38th Street Gang did not actually carry switchblades, but Valdez portrays them as quick to

brandish and use such weapons; thus they seem to fulfill the violent nature suspected of them. Lt. Edwards and Sergeant Smith arrest only Mexican Americans at the dance, automatically letting the Anglos, including the violent Marine Swabbie, go free. From this point on, the harsh treatment of the prisoners is shown to emanate from ethnic hatred and distrust. They are treated like—even called—animals. The problem is perpetuated when the pachucos return the hostile treatment by distrusting Anglos.

It is not until George proves his dedication and the boys accept his help that a bond is formed across the two ethnic groups. Yet culture clash rages on while he fights for their release, and Rudy is attacked by twenty marines and stripped of his zoot suit. Even the hard-won freedom granted to the boys does not signal a resolution, since the clash continues at their celebration, when cops assume that Joey has stolen George's car. The problems of the barrio transcend the problems of one gang: El Pachuco announces that "The barrio's still out there, waiting and wanting, / The cops are still tracking us down like dogs, / The gangs are still killing each other, / Families are barely surviving."

Civil Rights

For Mexican Americans like Henry, the issues is not just ethnic conflicts, but actual civil rights abuses, and his trial is not unique in its judicial travesties. The Chicano Movement sought to correct these and other wrongs, as part of the tide of the larger Civil Rights movement taking place in the 1960s. The battle had many fronts: from the courthouse to the schoolhouse, Hispanics, African Americans, and other ethnic groups educated themselves and the public on the daily injustices committed in the United States. For Hispanics, the separate and unequal education system (there were separate, poorly equipped, schools for Mexican children), lasted far beyond the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that won legal equality in schooling for blacks. Hispanic children did not attend integrated schools until a federal ruling in 1970 forced the Texas school system to eliminate segregation.

Police brutality was another alarming civil rights issue. A group of prominent Mexican-American citizens, who created a forum in 1948 to pursue delays in veterans rights for Mexican Americans, shifted their focus to actively expose and prosecute

police brutality cases. Police raids and wholesale roundups of Mexican Americans were commonplace at social gatherings, where women and children were beaten along with men; the mass arrests depicted in *Zoot Suit* were not an exaggeration. In addition, urban renewal programs targeted barrios, which were called “blighted” areas. In these “slum clearance” programs, whole neighborhoods were wiped out to make way for freeways and other works projects that, while beneficial to the dominant culture, did little to improve the lives of the Hispanic community; the uprooted Mexican-American families were often fraudulently displaced and not properly compensated for their losses.

Various groups within the Chicano movement both initiated legal reprisals and attempted to educate the American public about these civil injustices. In a 1969 conference, attendees wrote a manifesto entitled *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, in which they sought restitution for “economic slavery, political exploitation, ethnic and cultural psychological destruction, and denial of civil and human rights.” Valdez was a leading artist who contributed to this effort.

STYLE

Valdez’s Mexican Theatre Forms

Zoot Suit is a combination of *actos* (or “protest skits”), *mitos* (“myth”), and *corrido* (“ballad”); the combination draws upon traditional Mexican songs and dances, traditional stories, and the political activism of Valdez’s previous work with the socially active *El Teatro Campesino*. The play also has a strong documentary element with its basis in historical events. The result is musical docudrama of epic proportions.

In the beginning of his career, Valdez wrote, or rather orchestrated, since he did not always commit the *actos* to paper, simple and brief political protest pieces aimed at audiences of migrant workers. Most lasted only fifteen minutes. These *actos* used masks, simple but exaggerated storylines, and minimal settings and props. Often the actors sported cards proclaiming their generic roles—“worker,” or “patroncito” [manager]—rather than adopting an

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- What kind of influence does El Pachuco have over Henry? Is his a positive effect or a negative one?
- Revolutionary theater attempts to move the audience to reform social injustices. What techniques does Valdez’s play employ in its attempt to sway the audience?
- What is the impact of the bilingual aspect of this play on Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish speaking audiences? What does this device say about American culture?
- Compare Henry Reyna’s fictional life with the historical Henry Leyvas’s life. Speculate on why Valdez made the choices he did in fictionalizing Henry’s life for the stage.

actual character. Characterization is not important in social protest plays, since the purpose is to condemn acts committed against a people, not a person. Thus Henry Reyna “is” El Pachuco, representing the tragic and self-destructive genre of pachuco gangs as well as their victimization by a xenophobic society.

The *mitos* moves the allegorical agenda of the *actos* into the spiritual realm. Valdez created *mitos* to fulfill his vision of “a teatro of legends and myths.” He told David Savran in an interview for *American Theatre* that to him, myth is “so real that it’s just below the surface—it’s the supporting structure of our everyday reality.” In a Valdez *mito*, a mythical character interacts with the other, human, characters and sometimes takes controls the play like an onstage director. El Pachuco was not the first mythical character Valdez used: the Aztec god Quetzalcóatl and a precursor to El Pachuco, *La Luna* (“the moon”), appear in his allegorical play *Bernabé* (1970), and a child named Mundo (“earth”) is born to skeletal figures in *El fin del mundo* (1976; the title means “The End of the Earth”). Comet sightings and symbolic sets and rituals further un-



In a flashback sequence from the film adaptation of Zoot Suit, Henry and Della recreate the events of the dance for the judge; El Pachuco stands above the proceedings on a platform in the background

derscore the presence of myth in these plays. The mythic quality of El Pachuco in *Zoot Suit* is signaled by his ability to stop and start the action with a snap of his fingers; it is confirmed when he rises, Christ-like, wearing the Christian cross but also dressed in an Aztec loincloth, in Act II, scene vii.

The *corrido* has a long history in Mexican culture; its presence adds an element of folk art to Valdez's plays, being the Hispanic version of the American musical. Valdez's fusion of these unrelated theatrical forms into a fresh, new, dramatic concept put Chicano theater onto the American theatrical map.

Brechtian Influences and Epic Theatre

In addition to historical and traditional Hispanic elements, Valdez also looked to the Epic Theatre technique pioneered by German playwright Bertolt Brecht (*Mother Courage and Her Children*). Brecht's best-known plays were socially conscious works that sought to make audiences think about the playwright's political agenda. To achieve such results, Brecht turned to "alienation" techniques that prevented the audience from judging his plays on an

emotional level, thus freeing them to judge a play's concepts in a purely intellectual, empirical manner. These techniques included placards that informed the audience of the major plot points that would be unfolding within each act. Brecht also broke up his narratives with satirical songs that jarringly diverted the audience's attention from episodes that might allow them to form an emotional connection to characters. El Pachuco functions as an alienating device in *Zoot Suit*, often stopping the action and directly addressing the audience. Valdez's play also qualifies as Epic Theatre in its use of a wide range of characters across a considerable time period.

Mixing Spanish and English

In areas of the United States with significant Spanish-speaking populations, the practice of mixing Spanish and English in newspaper journalism, radio programming, public signs, and schools as well as in drama has become a hotly contested topic, raising issues of cultural hegemony—whether one language should dominate another. In 1978, to use whole lines of Spanish in a play was to address it primarily to a bilingual audience, although the non-

Spanish-speaking members of the audience had little trouble understanding the context of the Spanish. In *Zoot Suit*, the characters switch to Spanish in moments of intimacy, teasing, and emotional outbursts, as when the 38th Street Gang routs the Downey Gang, and Tommy elatedly proclaims the victory in mixed Spanish and English: “Orales, you did it, ese! Se escamaron todos! [you ran them all out!].”

Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, mixes English with Spanish in her novels. She explained that Spanish is “the language of sensations and emotions, of the day to day.” Duke University professor and poet Gustavo Perez Fermet, author of a collection of poems called *Bilingual Blues* agreed, saying that “English is very concise and efficient,” while “Spanish has sambrosura, flavor.” In *Zoot Suit*, the scenes of the trial and the boys’ discussions with George are primarily in English, while the dance and fight scenes have whole passages in Spanish, especially the insults. Official business is communicated in English, while “street” business is communicated in the gang’s vernacular Spanish, which is not formal Spanish but “pachuco” Spanish, full of slang expressions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sleepy Lagoon Murder and the Zoot Suit Riots

Valdez’s play is loosely based on the events of a 1942 murder, which came to be known as the “Sleepy Lagoon Murder.” On August 1, 1942, a man named Jose Diaz (renamed Jose Williams in the play) was found by the side of a road, bleeding and unconscious. He later died of head trauma; he had been drunk at the time of his attack. Although his wounds could have been inflicted by an automobile, it was determined that he had been the victim of a gang fight that had occurred nearby. Public outcry, fanned by the headlines of the newspapers, resulted in a roundup of hundreds of Mexican Americans. Henry Leyvas (Henry Reyna in the play) and twenty-one of his friends, who had participated in the fight, were arrested and charged with the murder of Diaz. The young Chicanos

sported “zoot suits,” long, baggy trousers topped with long-tailed coats and long “ducktail” hairstyles, the fashion for *pachucos* or teenage Mexican gang member.

In an outright violation of the gang members’ civil rights, the district attorney requested, and the judge ordered, that the defendants be required to wear their zoot suits during the trial and not be allowed to cut their hair, so that the jury would see that they were “hoodlums.” Further, they were required to stand up whenever their names were mentioned, even when the statements were inflammatory or indemnifying. They were also denied the right to speak with their lawyers. E. Duran Ayers, the Head of the Foreign Relations Bureau, was brought in as an “expert” witness to attest to the “bloodthirsty” nature of Mexicans, descendants of the Aztecs, renowned for their practice of human sacrifice. Ayers’s formal report stated that “the Mexican would forever retain his wild and violent tendencies no matter how much education or training he might receive.” Nine of the men, including Henry Leyvas, were sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for second-degree murder.

About six months after the end of the trial, riots broke out in Los Angeles. The riots, known alternatively as the “Zoot Suit Riots” and the “Sailor Riots,” were a xenophobic reaction to the Mexican-American youth gangs, made all the more intense by the events of World War II. In the summer of 1943, a large group of sailors traveled through the Mexican-American community in East Los Angeles in rented cabs, beating up every “zoot suiter” they encountered, including women and young boys who really didn’t fit the pachuco image. In response, the police went after the victims: scores of Mexican Americans were rounded up in mass arrests. Although a handful of Anglos were arrested, none were charged. The local press fanned the flames of the riots by reporting a “Mexican crime wave” that was being valiantly controlled by the service men. It was not until military officials declared the city of Los Angeles off limits for all military personnel that the riots diminished. In October of 1944, the Court of Appeals unanimously overturned the Judge’s decision on the Sleepy Lagoon case due to legal misconduct, and the 38th Street Gang members were released.

World War II

It is not a coincidence that the Zoot Suit Riots occurred during the heat of World War II. Xenopho-

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1940s:** The Hispanic community and other ethnic groups suffer obvious racism at the hands of the military, the police force, the press, and the judicial system during the xenophobic years of World War II.

1978: Student movements of the last fifteen years seek equal opportunities in education for Chicano children and an end to civil and human rights abuses of Chicano people in the United States. By 1978, however, the Chicano movement is in decline.

Today: Most people uphold their legal and moral obligation to treat all Americans equally. The sense that equality has been achieved has led some institutions, colleges and universities, to remove their Affirmative Action programs, even though true equality does not exist for all ethnic groups or all U. S. citizens.

- **1940s:** The United States joins World War II in 1941. At the time of the Zoot Suit Riots, enlistment in the armed services is at a fever pitch as military bases across the country prepare men and women for the war. There is almost universal support for the United States' involvement in the war.

1978: After tremendous public pressure, the last

U.S. troops left Vietnam in 1973. Anti-war sentiment is still high in 1978, and many veterans are still seen as butchers guilty of horrible war atrocities.

Today: In the last twenty years the United States has been involved in several military offensives but no large-scale wars. Hand-to-hand combat has given way to remote weaponry. Military personnel and veterans are viewed neither as heroes or scapegoats but as people performing assigned jobs.

- **1940s:** Fashions are fairly conservative and universal; there is not much variety in clothing styles for mainstream Americans. Zoot suits are a conspicuous marker of otherness, an attempt by Hispanic men to set themselves apart from Anglo society.

1978: Dressing differently is a fashion rage, from paper dresses to hippies' bell-bottom jeans. Conventional fashions such as the standard business suit are considered "square" or "uncool."

Today: Dress is much more casual than the 1940s, yet more conservative than the 1970s. Radical trends, such as body-piercing and tattoos, proclaim the wearer's statement of opposition against mainstream society.

bia, undue contempt or fear of foreigners, was exacerbated by a perceived threat that Americans of foreign heritage would turn against Anglo Americans. To prevent this occurrence, thousands of Japanese Americans, including two hundred Japanese-Latin Americans, were herded into internment camps throughout the West. It was not until 1988 that restitution was made to those who suffered physically, emotionally, and financially from the relocation.

In the 1940s, fear of foreigners extended to numerous cultural groups; Los Angeles had many ethnic neighborhoods, and the presence of military

bases full of personnel readying themselves for war made Los Angeles a hot spot for culture clashes and violence. Ironically, of the ethnic groups who enlisted in World War II, Mexican Americans suffered the most casualties.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Zoot Suit was the product of Luis Valdez's theater troupe, El Teatro Campesino, which had previously

specialized in social consciousness-raising *actos*, that offered broad-brush depictions of farmworkers' plights. Valdez received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to research the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial so that he could create a play that would represent the experience of minorities in America. *Zoot Suit's* April, 1978, premiere and initial ten-day run sold out in two days. The audience consisted of season-ticket holders along with members of the Mexican-American community of Los Angeles who were eager to see Valdez's latest creation. An ad for second production in August of 1978 announced the "Second Zoot Suit Riots" and tickets again sold out. The Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle honored Valdez with a best play award. The play received standing ovations every evening in Los Angeles. The following year, Valdez became the first Latino playwright to open on Broadway, and the public once again expressed its approval.

The New York critics, however, were less impressed. Richard Eder of the *New York Times* called the play "overblown and undernourished," and Douglas Watt of the *New York Daily News* condemned it as "poorly written and atrociously directed." It closed on Broadway after a disappointing four weeks. A national tour proved more successful, especially in urban areas with Mexican-American communities.

In 1980, Valdez produced a screenplay adaptation of his play under contract with Universal Pictures. The idea was to film the play live at the Aquarius Theater in Los Angeles and intersperse filmed, realistic, scenes. The film was released in 1981, having been completed on a three-million dollar budget in a mere six months. As with the stage production, Daniel Valdez played Henry, and Edward James Olmos made his film acting debut as El Pachuco, having earned his first pay as an actor in the same role in the theatre. The film's success was largely attributed to Valdez's artful weaving of filmed stage scenes and the more cinematically realized scenes. It won first place at the Cartagena Film Festival in Columbia in 1982 and the San Francisco Bay Critics award for best musical in 1983.

However, after the initial excitement, and for a decade after its release, critics accused Valdez of "selling out," of presenting stereotypical female characters with zero self initiative, and designing his productions to please Anglo audiences. In the face of such criticism, Valdez maintained his com-

posure, as indicated by his response to David Savran who interviewed Valdez for *American Theatre* in 1988: "That [the accusation of selling out] doesn't bother me in the least. There's too much to do, to be socially conscious about. . . . In some ways it's just people sounding me out. . . . People help to keep you on course. I've strayed very little from my pronounced intentions."

CRITICISM

Carole Hamilton

Hamilton is a Humanities teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she discusses Valdez's treatment of the love relationship between Henry and Alice and its effects on the plot and reforming mission of the play.

Zoot Suit is a tightly written drama with each element contributing to its overt demand for social reform, specifically a correction of the social injustice suffered by Henry Reyna and his gang. Luis Valdez conducted thorough research on the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial of 1942 and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 in order to present the facts responsibly, but he also wanted to present the psychological and mythical truths of the Chicano experience. As a result, his work is a combination of documentary and myth, fact and fiction, instruction and entertainment. On the whole, both the play and the later film version succeeded beautifully in accomplishing these goals, especially in the popular arena.

Criticism was leveled at Valdez's portrayal of women (stereotypical) and complaints were leveled that the playwright turned his back on his roots with the farmworker's theater and had somehow "sold out" to the expectations of Hollywood and Broadway. To this criticism, Valdez turned a deaf ear. He did admit, however, that he had to revise the story's plot between the stage and film versions to correct a flaw that misled audience members. In a 1982 interview two weeks after the opening of the film adaptation, Valdez told Roberta Orona-Cordova in *Mexican-American Theatre* that he struggled with his portrayal of the love affair between Henry and Alice Bloomfield. The historical Henry had fallen

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Julia Alvarez's novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* chronicles the experiences of four sisters who immigrate from the Dominican Republic to the United States, losing their Spanish language and culture before they fully acquire fluency in English. In a similar vein, Sandra Cisneros recalls her childhood in a Spanish-speaking section of Chicago in the lyrical vignettes of *House on Mango Street*.
- Ernesto Galarza's 1971 novel *Barrio Boy* and Jose Antonio Villareal's 1970 *Pocho* both explore growing up in a barrio from a young boy's perspective.
- The 1997 novel *Macho!* by Victor Villaseñor describes Cesar Chavez's strike efforts through the eyes of a seventeen-year-old boy who migrates to California from Mexico.
- The poems of Ricardo Sánchez in 1971's *Canto y grito me liberación* (title means "The Liberation of a Chicano Mind") explore the ambigui-

ties of living in two worlds, while Rodolfo Corky Gonzales's epic poem, "I am Joaquin" explores the Chicano identity. Lorna Dee Cervantes's poems address the erosion of ethnic identity in transplanted families; her "Freeway 280" expresses frustration over urban renewal programs that razed Chicano neighborhoods.

- Several films also explore territory similar to *Zoot Suit*: Robert Redford produced and directed *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), an endearing comedy about a group of Mexican-American citizens who resist oppressive big business owners out to abuse the farmers' civil rights; Edward James Olmos, who plays El Pachuco in *Zoot Suit*, stars in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982), a film about a Chicano murderer that allows the audience to believe in Cortez's guilt until the last moment; Olmos also directed and starred in a stunning film portrayal of a hardened Chicano prison inmate and his family: *American Me* (1992).

in love with Alice, and Valdez wanted stayed true to history in his dramatic version of the story. The inclusion of this cross-cultural affair hampered what he wanted his play to communicate, however. It alienated some members of the audience, who could not accept a white woman falling in love with a Chicano, "They didn't like the romance or the politics of it: a white woman falling in love with a pachuco." The same issue came up in another interview with Gregg Barrios, who told Valdez "The love angle between Henry and Alice Bloomfield bothered me in the play." Valdez responded:

Actually, that angle in the play got me a narrower audience, especially in the confrontation scene and when Henry makes a choice between the two girls. I think what it is that led a lot of people astray was that point. That was really *not* the point I intended. Again, it was the play trying to decide what it was going to say after all . . . when I began to transfer the play to a screenplay . . . I focused more on Henry and this business with Alice was put into its proper perspective.

The affair between the historical Alice Bloomfield and Henry Leyvas (Valdez changed the name to Reyna), took place through their letters. Valdez includes fictional versions of these letters in the play, but they culminate in an intense physical encounter in the prison and the incident provides a pivotal moment in the plot. Alice's belief in Henry revitalizes his hope for release, just when he is ready to give up. Her commitment is not just to obtaining justice in his particular case but because she has "never been able to accept one person pushing another around." At that moment, they understand each other, but their rapport quickly conflates with passion.

Why is this passion bothersome or "alienating" to some members of the audience? It would be overly simplistic to dismiss these viewers' concerns as evidence of their own prejudice. There is also the matter of Henry's obligation to Della. On the eve of

the arrests, Henry promised her a big “pachuco” wedding when he returns from his tour in the Navy. She is not simply awaiting him patiently at home; she shares his misery, having been committed to a year at the Ventura State School for Girls—a prison of sorts—for her ostensible participation in the murder. Two brief scenes before his tryst with Alice, Henry complains to El Pachuco how much he misses Della. This love relationship seems permanent: for Henry to betray Della with *any* other woman seems unpardonable. That he would betray her with an Anglo woman complicates matters considerably.

In addition, a love interest between Alice and Henry muddies Alice’s social reform agenda: campaigning for Henry out of love is not the same as campaigning against a social injustice. Furthermore, a love interest between these two characters, a hybrid marriage, would be a form of assimilation, which the play opposes. Enrique is the model of the assimilated Mexican American; he sweeps the dirt from the city’s streets but has no power to sweep away its injustices. Assimilation is a kind of acceptance of the limitations society places on Mexican Americans. Enrique’s big dream is for Henry to find a way out and up; the solution seems to be Henry’s enlistment in the Navy, an event that Enrique plans to celebrate in style. However, as El Pachuco reminds Henry, joining the Navy will do nothing to solve the problems of the barrio, “Forget the war overseas, carnal. Your war is on the homefront.” For Henry to marry Alice is the same as his going off to the Navy: he would be joining the culture that oppresses him, not aligning himself with his own culture and fighting for a better Hispanic lifestyle.

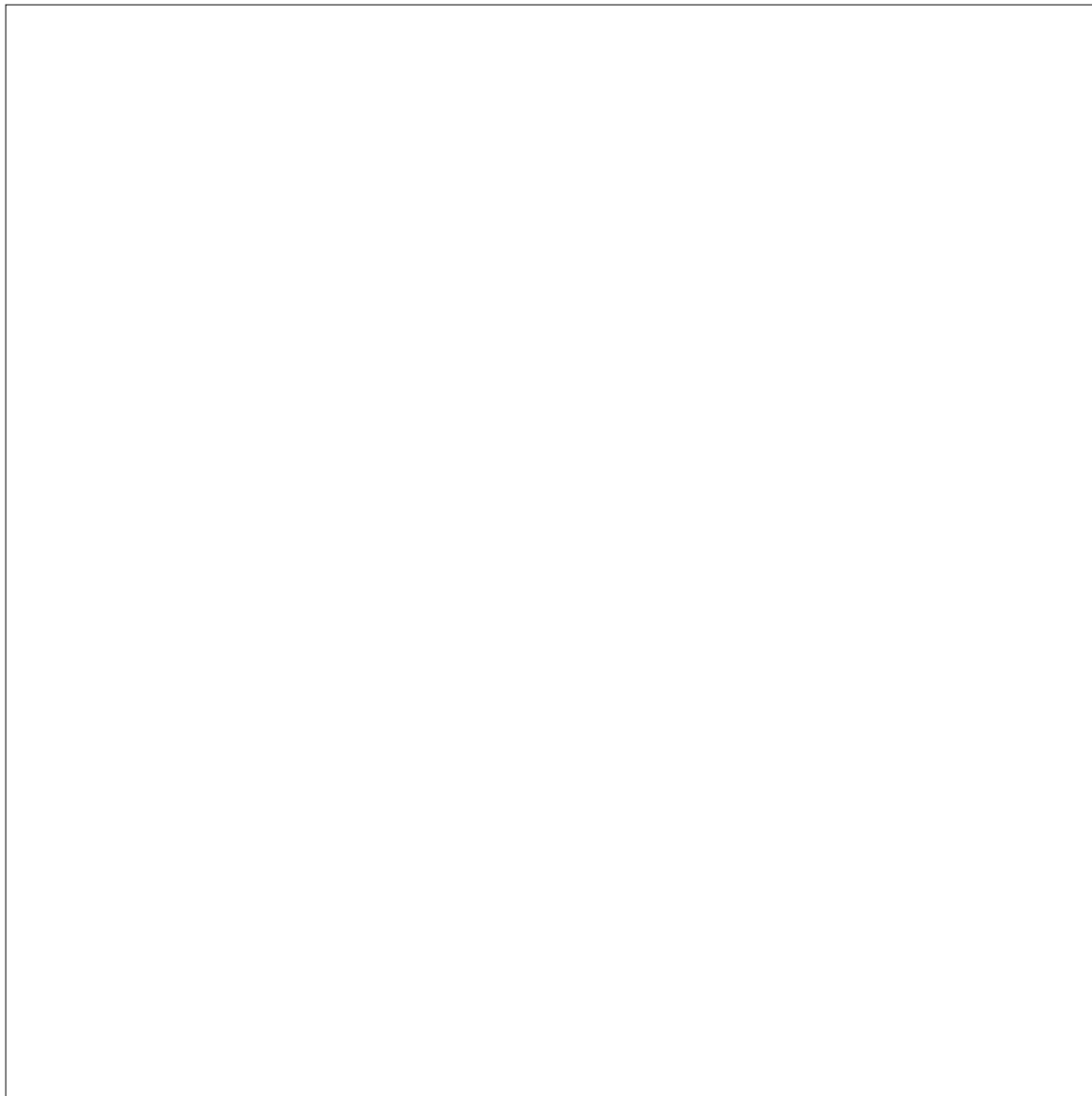
The staging of Henry’s moment of decision between Alice and Della underscores the significance of his rejection of Alice/Anglo culture and his acceptance of the war “on the homefront.” Alice stands alone, while Della is surrounded by Henry’s family and the gang. This blocking of characters suggests that in choosing Della, Henry chooses his own culture, with all of its perils and promise; had he chosen Alice, he would have taken an avenue out of that culture, a move away from his social responsibilities.

One reason that Alice is able to connect with Henry is their shared experience of social oppression: she is Jewish and the year is 1943, America is fighting World War II in part to free the Jews from

German leader Adolf Hitler’s genocidal persecution (Hitler believed that Jews and other ethnicities were inferior and a detriment to the new society he wished to build). Alice helps him to win his battle, just as the Americans are winning the war in Europe. Henry elatedly tells El Pachuco, “We won this one because we learned to fight in a new way.” Alice’s experience and wisdom make her an excellent steward for Henry’s transition to this new frame of mind. She helps Henry advance into social adulthood—or rather humanity, since Anglo society, as represented by Sgt. Smith and Lt. Edwards, treats him like an animal.

Henry may be an “hombre”—a man—to his doting parents, but he is a “greaseball” to the police; Sgt. Smith reminds Lt. Edwards that “You can’t treat these animals like people.” Alice, on the other hand, asks Henry to write for her People’s World newsletter. She treats him like an educated and valuable member of society whose words are significant. She can redeem him through her conviction that he is innocent and socially worthy. She is one of the few outside of his family who accept his integrity, in a world that judges him guilty of the “crime” of looking different, of adopting a defiant style of dress, the pachuco style. She presides over his transition from an animal held in solitary confinement to a man taking part in the affairs of the world. The fact that he spent ninety days—echoing nine months—in confinement hints at a kind of rebirth, as he is released from solitary confinement (a kind of womb), into his parent’s home, appearing as the guest of honor, an object of celebration, like a newborn child.

El Pachuco is with Henry at the beginning of his solitary confinement, but Henry gets fed up with his alter ego’s negative attitude, his constant refrain that “No court in the land’s going to set you free.” Henry yells, “Fuck off,” and El Pachuco departs for the streets, where he takes Rudy’s place in a beating, is overwhelmed by the Anglos, and stripped of his zoot suit. El Pachuco has been Henry’s confidante and alter ego up to this point but now he disappears, and Henry, who has gotten used to his ubiquitous presence, asks in vain, “Are you even there anymore?” He is not, because El Pachuco has been crucified by the Anglos. This act parallels Henry’s crucifixion, in the solitary confinement cell. In the very next scene, Alice takes over the guardianship of Henry from El Pachuco, appearing at the prison and expressing devotion to his cause.



During the brawl at Sleepy Lagoon, Della (Rose Portillo) comforts a badly beaten Henry (Daniel Valdez, the playwright's brother) while El Pachuco (Edward James Olmos) watches from the car

The transfer of mentorship has completed, and Henry will be in her hands until he returns to society, rising from the dead just as El Pachuco rises after his beating.

El Pachuco rises wearing a hybrid of icons: the Christian cross and an Aztec loincloth; Henry rises from his incarceration witnessed by a Jewish mother archetype. At this point, Alice's job is finished, so El Pachuco reappears. With a snap of his fingers (signaling that he has resumed control of the play), El Pachuco speaks of the tentativeness of Henry's

new social standing. He is not free, he is merely back in the barrio, with all of its prejudice and injustice. Henry's is the only voice that does not recite a version of his future—because he has so little control over it. Alice has raised this man from incarceration only to put him back into the same vicious cycle of ethnic oppression and injustice.

Alice's faith in Henry is a mark of her own integrity, making her a role model for the audience. This is revolutionary theater, not mere entertainment, and Valdez wants the audience to learn from

her example. In this respect, Alice's guardianship over Henry would be complete and actually more effective without the love affair. Valdez realized this, and when he wrote the screenplay for *Zoot Suit*, he downplayed their passion. In its place he emphasized Alice's human compassion. The shift away from love to humanitarianism is at once more acceptable to the audience and more focused on the central issue of social injustice in this play.

Source: Carole Hamilton for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1999.

Carey McWilliams

In this essay, McWilliams provides information on the historical events that shape Valdez's play. He assesses the social importance of Zoot Suit, calling the work "more than a play: it is an event of historic importance."

A year or so back, Luis Valdez, founder-director of El Teatro Campesino—an agitprop group formed during the Delano, Calif., farm workers' strike in 1965—came to see me in New York. It was the first time we had met. Luis had become interested in the dramatic potential of the Sleepy Lagoon murder case and wanted to talk to me about it because I had served as chairman of the defense committee. With the inevitable tape recorder at his side, he interviewed me for several hours. Since the trial had taken place in 1942, there were some big gaps in his knowledge of the facts. For example, he had not been able to find a transcript of the trial; nor had he heard of Alice McGrath, who served as secretary of the committee. It was a good talk. I liked Luis: an authentic, rather earthy person with a robust sense of humor. He knew what he wanted to know, which is a blessed relief in an interview. After he left, I had a feeling, rather tentative I must admit, that something just might come of our talk.

On March 25, *Zoot Suit*, the play Valdez wrote based on the case, opened Winter Garden Theatre after a long and successful run in Los Angeles where it is still grossing \$90,000 a week. In this odd way a legend was born—some thirty-six years after the event. Just as the case on which the play is based marked the beginning of the so-called Chicano Rebellion, so the play marks a new chapter in Mexican-American experience. As William Overend pointed out in the *Los Angeles Times* (May 9, 1978), the present has finally caught up with the past.



ZOOT SUIT IS MORE THAN A
PLAY: IT IS AN EVENT OF HISTORIC
IMPORTANCE”

Young Chicanos who were not born when the Sleepy Lagoon case was tried have flocked to see the play. Not only has *Zoot Suit* tapped a huge new audience in Los Angeles but it has been received with a general community enthusiasm that would have been unthinkable not so many years ago.

In the spring and summer of 1942 racial tensions were mounting in Los Angeles. The Japanese-Americans had been evacuated. Defense industries were booming. Rationing was an annoyance. Housing was in short supply. Manpower needs were acute. Drove of soldiers and sailors cruised through the streets in taxicabs looking for trouble. A disproportionate number of young Mexican-Americans were being drafted because they did not hold draft-deferred jobs. The likelihood of an explosion was obvious.

In this tense social setting, a free-for-all fight took place at an East Los Angeles gravel pit known as “Sleepy Lagoon,” and the next day—August 2, 1942—a young Chicano was found near the scene and was rushed to the General Hospital where he died from injuries he had received. The police promptly rounded up twenty-four young Mexican-Americans, members of one of a number of Chicano youth gangs, and a grand jury indicted them for first-degree murder. After a long trial before a gruesomely biased judge, seventeen were convicted in what was up to that time the largest mass murder trial ever held in the county. Before, after and during the trial the press, in cahoots with the police, kept up a vicious attack on Mexican-American youth gangs; better than any commentary these news stories reflected the temper of the times and the intense bias that existed against Chicanos.

After the verdict had been returned, a defense committee was formed, on which I served as chairman, to finance an appeal. New counsel was retained to prepare and argue the appeal. The costs were substantial; the trial had gone on for several

months and the testimony filled 6,000 pages of transcript. But the committee was able to enlist the support of a number of Hollywood figures—Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten, Anthony Quinn—and some middle-class elements in both the Mexican-American and the larger community. On October 4, 1944, the District Court of Appeals (in *People v. Zamora*) reversed the convictions “for lack of evidence.” The defendants were released after having served nearly two years in San Quentin Prison; it had been impossible to raise bail pending the appeal. The unanimous decision of the appellate court castigated the trial judge for bias, prejudicial remarks and gross misconduct. Later, all charges were dismissed.

Even before the convictions were reversed, the grand jury held open public hearings to inquire into charges of police brutality. I testified at these hearings on October 8, 1942, and warned that further trouble was to be expected if the combined press and police attacks continued. (The testimony is included in Julian Nava’s *Viva la Raza*, 1973.) The following June, the “Zoot Suit Riots,” which lasted a week or more, erupted in Los Angeles. This, in brief, is the factual background which Valdez has tapped for his fine play. But *Zoot Suit* is more than a play: it is an event of historic importance. The reversal of the convictions in the Sleepy Lagoon case represented the first major victory Mexican-Americans had won in the memory of the living. Slight Wonder, then, that the play has drawn such an enthusiastic response from the Hispanic community in Los Angeles.

As a footnote: during the 1943 riots a citizens’ emergency meeting was called, which I chaired, to see what might be done to “cool” a dangerous situation. After the meeting I telephoned my friend, Attorney General Robert Kenny, in San Francisco and arranged for him to meet me the next morning in Los Angeles. At this early morning session I entreated him to urge Gov. Earl Warren to appoint an official committee of inquiry and suggested individuals who might be named. Warren accepted Kenny’s recommendations and the commission then adopted a draft report I had prepared. Release of the report had the desired effect: if order was not fully restored, a war time truce was established.

Source: Carey McWilliams, “Second Thoughts” in the *Nation*, Vol. 228, no. 13, April 7, 1979, p. 358.

Brendan Gill

In this mixed review of Zoot Suit, Gill compares Valdez’s play to a “broadened and

cheapened” version of the classic musical West Side Story. While the critic feels that the work is suitable entertainment and deals with important social issues, he felt that it ultimately lacks true greatness.

In the pompous program notes accompanying “*Zoot Suit*” (at the Winter Garden), we are instructed that the show is “loosely based on the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Mystery of 1942 and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 in Los Angeles [which] like other historical events that pass into folklore have become a kind of myth—a mixture of fact and fancy certain to elicit strong feelings when examined from any of a variety of perspectives.” A footnote in fine print further instructs us that “while some of the events portrayed did indeed occur, others did not,” and continues, “The characters are merely representatives or composites. ‘*Zoot Suit*’ is not a documentary, but a dramatization of the imagination.” Now, nothing makes me more uneasy, in or out of a theatre, than phrases like “loosely based,” “folklore,” “myth,” and “fact and fancy” (to say nothing of “dramatization of the imagination,” which comes close to being gibberish). They all hint at the same ominous likelihood—that we are to be at the mercy of an author who makes words mean whatever he needs them to mean, and are therefore never to know whether our sympathies are being engaged by something that actually happened or are being manipulated by something that, for dramatic purposes, ought to have happened.

My feelings about the role of the writer as truth-teller have led me to seem to take “*Zoot Suit*” and its fevered rhetoric much more seriously than it deserves. A big, noisy, brightly colored show, it is a West Coast descendant, broadened and cheapened, of “*West Side Story*,” itself a show with a sufficiently long pedigree. In this version, Puerto Ricans have given way to Chicanos—those Mexican-Americans who make up a large portion of the population of Southern California. Within the barrios, they speak (or spoke in the forties) a lively patois of their own devising, but to judge by “*Zoot Suit*” their customs are (or were) markedly less original, resembling in thought, word, and deed those of every minority group that has ever sought to tell its story on an American stage. As a social document and a statement of protest, “*Zoot Suit*” is sorrowfully abreast of “*Abie’s Irish Rose*.”

In attempting to present a favorable view of the Chicano culture, Luis Valdez, the author and direc-

tor of “*Zoot Suit*,” appears not to have been aware of how unpleasant his view of that culture is bound to appear to most contemporary Americans. We are shown Chicanos being brutalized by white policemen, white prosecutors, and white judges, and we cannot fail to deplore their fate; at the same time, we are being shown Valdez’s Chicano ideal, which consists of a family with the father as its absolute master. His sons must kiss his hand in parting, and the only advice he can give to a son who is on his way to prison is that he must act like “a man.” Women must obey men without question or protest. Men, possessing women like chattels, may sleep with anyone they please, but women must remain chaste. One must be loyal, even to the point of murder, to one’s family, one’s gang, one’s barrio. Well! A long evening of such grisly “macho,” utterances is difficult to sit through, especially when we are expected to find virtue in them.

The large cast is headed by Daniel Valdez, brother of the author. He is a handsome and dynamic young man, if no actor, and he is assisted by, among others, Charles Aidman, Abel Franco, Paul Mace, Julie Carmen, and Edward James Olmos, who, acting as a sort of spokesman for the author, vulgarly fraternizes with the audience. The choreography is by Patricia Birch, the setting is by Thomas A. Walsh, the costumes are by Peter J. Hall, and the lighting is by Dawn Chiang. The grotesquely overamplified sound was “designed” by Abe Jacob, and I understand that there have been protests as far away as Woodlawn.

Source: Brendan Gill, “Borrowings” in the *New Yorker*, Vol. LV, no. 7, April 2, 1979, p. 94.

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