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Works Cited

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Zoot Suit

Luis Miguel Valdez

Born: June 26, 1940; Delano, California

Quick Reference

First produced: 1978, at the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles

First published: 1992

Type of work: Protest drama

Time of work: The early 1940's

Locale: Los Angeles, California

Principal Characters:

El Pachuco, a mythical figure, the alter ego of Henry Reyna

Henry (Hank) Reyna, a twenty-one-year-old Chicano gang leader with Indian features

Enrique Reyna, Henry's father

Dolores Reyna, Henry's mother

Lupe Reyna, Henry's sister

Rudy Reyna, Henry's younger brother

Della Barrios, Henry's girlfriend

George Shearer, a socially committed "people's lawyer"

Alice Bloomfield, a Jewish activist, the defense committee organizer

The Press

The Play

A huge switchblade stabs through a giant newspaper. Headlines read: "Zoot-suiter Hordes Invade Los Angeles, June 3, 1943." The knife slashes down, and a young Chicano steps through the hole in pegged trousers and a four-foot watch chain. Reaching back into the slit, he finds his knee-length jacket and pork pie hat. Slipping into this "zoot suit," he steps forward, assumes a "cool" stance and begins to speak in Spanish.

He is El Pachuco, the spirit of the Pachucos — gangs of young, alienated Mexican-Americans living uneasily in a country which regards them with suspicious distaste. A play about these Pachucos is about to unfold, he says, switching easily into English, realizing that Anglos — Americans not of Mexican descent — may not otherwise understand what they are about to see and hear.

When El Pachuco finishes, the curtain flies up to reveal a lakeside dance in progress a year earlier. Jitterbug rhythms fill the July night air as El Pachuco and the dancers salute the zoot suit, singing of how it establishes their identity and brings romance and excitement into their lives. Suddenly a rival Chicano gang, the Downey Gang, appears at Sleepy Lagoon. Hank Reyna, the leader of the 38th Street Pachucos, yells a warning to Rafas, his opposite number of the Downey Gang, who has begun to manhandle Hank's brother Rudy.

A moment later sirens sound from all directions — *la jura*, the law. Pachucos are rounded up and stand with their hands raised. When they turn around, they form a line-up inside a police station. In a series of barked messages, headlines, and press releases, the audience learns that a Chicano has been killed and hundreds have been arrested.

Hank remains on stage as the others are marched off. El Pachuco, the ever-vigilant observer, now makes it clear that he is, among other things, Hank's alter ego — his other self. Hank is convinced that the police mean to charge him with the murder although he is innocent and had planned to report for duty to the Navy the next Monday. El Pachuco warns, "This ain't your country," and

Hank, acknowledging brotherhood with him, resolves defiance.

Left alone after the police interrogate him, attempting to wring a confession, Hank's thoughts travel to his barrio home shortly before the killing, to his loving, good-humored Mexican family. It is a bit macho in the men's insistence — Hank and his father's — that a stricter standard of behavior and modesty applies to sisters and girlfriends than to the men. Hank's father Enrique, although slightly puzzled by the young people's American ways, is proud of his manly son and remembers his own youth as a revolutionary in Mexico. Hank, he thinks, is made of the same stuff.

Meanwhile, the yellow press is stirring up Los Angeles against the "Mexican Crime Wave" and "Zoot-Suited Goons"; in this play headlines, reporters, and newspapers themselves take on symbolic dimensions as they contribute to racial prejudice. The jailed Pachucos maintain their bravado under Hank's leadership, though they have little confidence in Anglo justice. Consequently, they are as mistrustful as El Pachuco when George Shearer, a "people's lawyer," offers his services. Convinced that they face the gas chamber, they accept the gringo's offer and narrate to him the events of July 21, 1943.

Pachucos and Pachucas dance again. Rudy is drinking heavily when Rafas and his gang appear. This time Hank and Rafas pull switchblades: El Pachuco abruptly halts the play. "Two more Mexicans killing each other" is just what the Anglo audience "paid to see," he says. When he "unfreezes" the action, Hank lets Rafas go with a kick.

Bundles of newspapers mark the cell where Hank now receives a new visitor, Alice Bloomfield, who tells Hank that Pachucos are now being accused by the newspapers of taking orders from Japan. Hank is dumbfounded, but he distrusts the alluring do-gooder and her social worker's jargon.

The trial of the gang, presided over by a judge who is recognizable as a policeman seen earlier, is a travesty. From his bench — a bundle of newspapers — he humiliates the defendants while smiling on the prosecutor — the Press. Hank's girlfriend Della testifies damagingly, in a flashback to the confusing events of the Sleepy Lagoon killing, and the kangaroo court hands down a verdict of life imprisonment for Hank and the gang as the first act concludes.

Attacks on Chicanos by sailors and Marines in weeks succeeding the trial do not discourage Alice Bloomfield from organizing a defense committee to seek an appeal, but Hank remains suspicious, and El Pachuco warns him not to expect much. In addition, George Shearer has been drafted into the Army, and a tangle with a guard lands Hank in solitary confinement.

Alice Bloomfield deluges Hank with letters reporting the enlistment of Hollywood celebrities to support his cause. Hank finds himself attracted to her, but he has doubts — and his feelings for Della offer more conflict. Similarly, Alice's Jewish sensibilities respond to Hank's plight, but she is alienated by his explosive anger, his commitment to Della, and her awareness of his deep-rooted

prejudices against the Anglo society to which she belongs.

America's war abroad passes in a flurry of shouted headlines while Hank waits in prison. On the heels of American victory comes triumph for the Pachucos, too, when their appeal succeeds and they are released. The final scene of the play, "Return to the Barrio," is left deliberately ambiguous. Hank must resolve his relationships with Alice and Della. Rudy appears unable to forget the humiliations received at the hands of servicemen during the war. Suspicious police still dog the Pachucos, and the euphoric moment of Chicano pride and unity felt by the Pachucos at their release quickly vanishes. The future for those with brown skins, the play seems to say, may lead either uphill or downhill: to integration into American life or to more violence, prison, and even death.

Themes and Meanings

Zoot Suit is a fast-moving, didactic play in a variety of styles that protests Chicanos' treatment in America. Based on incidents that occurred when Pachuco gangs stirred hostility in Los Angeles during World War II, but concerned with the 1970's as well, the play lashes society for abusing its own children. For poor, dark-skinned Mexican-Americans, injustice has become a way of life.

Products of slums and victims of discrimination, Chicanos seek escape wherever they can find it — in music, dancing, drinking, and extravagant display of costume. Even Lt. Edwards, a Los Angeles policeman, discerns the root of their problem. "Slums breed crime, fellas," he announces to an assembled group of reporters, waiting eagerly to chronicle the latest Chicano excesses for a bigoted readership. "That's your story." The idea that depressed surroundings produce angry, scared people, that vice and crime can be extirpated only if the environment that breeds them is abolished is hardly a new or radical notion: Benjamin Franklin taught it more than two hundred years earlier in Philadelphia.

As foreigners in their own country, Chicanos suffer not only the arrogance and rejection of Anglo society but also great psychic stress as they struggle, half-unwillingly, to observe the customs of their persecutors, to accept a way of life that they do not really understand. Attempting to adhere to strictures they recognize as socially approved but unwilling to abandon their own language and culture, they find themselves caught in the middle.

When young men such as Hank don the zoot suit, however, and leave the city in their jalopies for romantic spots such as Sleepy Lagoon, they are able to put behind them the tedium of the barrio and the stultifying pressure of conformity to another culture: "Put on a zoot suit, makes you feel root like a diamond, sparkling, shining ready for dancing ready for the boogie tonight." As preposterous as it may appear to others, the zoot suit helps the Pachuco achieve pride and self-respect. Its ostentation demands recognition. Rather than hiding, "keeping his place," he flaunts his presence. On the other hand, he knows that duck-tail haircuts, platform shoes, and pegged pants arouse antagonism more often than they command respect.

El Pachuco's role in the play, then, is ultimately ambiguous, since as the "cool" side of Hank and the incarnation of Chicano pride and defiance, his sardonic advice and encouragement lead always away from the mainstream of American life toward the alienation of a subculture. Zoot Suit proclaims that the treatment people receive will determine the direction they take and suggests that for Chicanos it may be too late; the gap between the barrio and Main Street may be too wide. El Pachuco's seductive and convincing voice urging the integrity of La Raza and distrust of the Anglo often seems to be the right one.

Dramatic Devices

From start to finish, the audience's attention is riveted on El Pachuco, the quintessence of the "cool" Chicano. Not only does he comment on the action in chorus-like fashion but he also shares Hank's role as protagonist. In effect, El Pachuco is master of ceremonies, a leading figure, and an interpreter of what is seen. Dressed in a zoot suit to end all zoot suits, he carries himself, as a New York reviewer said, in a "backward tilt that suggests he is suspended by a wire from the navel." He is outrageously self-reliant and unintimidated by anything Anglo authority can invent. Unsinkable, unfoolable, unflappable, he wins first grudging admiration, then affection, and finally a sort of respect as he rallies flagging spirits.

The play is openly partisan in its celebration of El Pachuco as a hero of his people, striving — in Luis Valdez's words — to be "theater as beautiful, rasquachi, human, cosmic, broad, deep, tragic, comic, as the life of La Raza itself." Maintaining "beauty and spiritual sensitivity" inside this ethnic context has been difficult in a production designed for general audiences, and Luis Valdez has revised his play for many years, hoping to strike the right balance between pessimistic naturalism, joyous affirmation, and folkloric theatricality.

To complement its ethnic quality and provide authenticity, a large portion of Zoot Suit is spoken in *calo*, or street Spanish — so much so that an audience gradually becomes familiar with oft-repeated words and phrases. Spanish is not used merely as flavor, as so often is the case of foreign languages in Hollywood films or television programs. Further, it is *calo*, not readily comprehensible even to many Hispanics. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, even native Mexicans may have great difficulty in catching the meaning of lines.

Because the unrelenting enemy of the Chicano in Zoot Suit is the Press, representing biased Anglo opinion and racial superiority, newspapers are treated as nearly animate things. Valdez uses the papers much as Elmer Rice used numbers in his expressionist classic, *The Adding Machine* (pr., pb. 1923). Beginning with the newspaper/curtain that first reveals El Pachuco, newspapers both define and confine Chicano lives. When reporters rush out of a press conference, they leave the street littered with newspapers from which Hank's father Enrique, a municipal street sweeper, learns what is happening to his son.

Other devices used by Valdez that are associated loosely with the expressionist theater are the flashback, the split stage, and a robot-like behavior that is introduced at critical points. The

courtroom scenes make use of the latter to suggest the mechanical administration of justice and a lack of human feeling. When Alice “sends” letters, she reads them aloud to recipients who reply in like fashion. Near the end of the play, when Hank struggles to decide which woman has the better claim on him, his barrio girlfriend Della or the advocate in his legal battle whom he has come to love, each woman stands at an opposite end of the stage in a visual reminder of the conflict Chicanos face between two ways of life.

Critical Context

Luis Valdez coined the term *acto* to describe a short play in which reality and performance are barely distinguishable — its performers are shown “in the act” of living as well as performing. His first *acto* was *The Theft* (wr. 1959), a symbolic one-act about the harassment and crucifixion of a beatnik. Later, stirred by social action plays he had seen on a 1964 visit to Cuba, Luis Valdez began writing *actos* as an organizer for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers about the time of the 1965 Huelga (strike). Starting with the short “message” playlets, many of them broadly comic, performed outside by volunteer actors, he went on to organize *El Teatro Campesino* and to write more ambitious short plays such as *Los vendidos* (pr. 1967; the sellouts), an agitprop (agitation and propaganda) performance about intimidation and racial stereotyping, and *Bernabe* (pr. 1970). The latter, about man’s relationship to the earth, draws on the Chicano’s pre-Columbian heritage and introduces a zoot-suited pachuco as well.

Zoot Suit shares the legacy of modern protest drama, much of it propagandistic and leftist, extending from central Europe between the world wars to America during the Vietnam War era. The play’s influences range from the expressionist theater of Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller to such antiwar efforts of the 1970’s as David Rabe’s *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (pr. 1971), which also features a dark-skinned choral figure, brutal realism, free form, and an even more unrestricted treatment of time and events than Valdez attempts.

Zoot Suit is agitprop drama meant to depict social injustice as Bertolt Brecht’s plays did, making use of rapid scenes performed on a nearly empty stage where locations change swiftly, with little transition. While the play refers to incidents that occurred historically in the Los Angeles of the 1940’s, it seeks to combat the racial prejudice of any era. It depends to a great extent on the semi-documentary technique used by the “living newspapers” of the Depression; like them, *Zoot Suit* dramatizes injustice in order to educate and awaken responses, and it “reports” its story in fragmented scenes. Newspapers serve symbolically as furniture, as a drop curtain, even as laundry hanging on a barrio clothesline.

Essay by: James E. Devlin

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