

Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*: A New Direction for Chicano Theatre?

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On March 25, 1979, the first Latino Play to be produced on Broadway opened at the Wintergarden Theatre: *Zoot Suit*, written and directed by Luis Valdez. Luis Valdez, who had founded the world-famous Teatro Campesino in 1965, had gone to Broadway. Applauded by some, scorned by others, Valdez had seemingly abandoned the "rasquachi" theatre of the people for a slick, professional standard that he had been opposed to for so long. In 1971, Valdez had asked: "Will Broadway produce a Chicano version of *Hello Dolly* now that it has produced a Black one?"¹ And for some critics, Valdez had fallen prey to his own apprehensions. But did he? Is *Zoot Suit* a valid picture of the Chicano, and does it have a political message, or is it an innocuous "song and dance routine" that leaves its audience "swinging its praises" rather than studying the social issues involved?

Before examining the above, and other questions that have been stimulated by Valdez's latest effort, let us briefly trace the evolution of his most lasting contribution to the world of theatre: El Teatro Campesino. Spawned from the very birth pangs of the California farmworkers' unionizing efforts, the Teatro Campesino was indeed a theatre composed of striking farmworkers whose sole purpose was to expose the injustices in the fields and urge other farmworkers to join the Union. From the beginning, Valdez acknowledged the "rasquachi" quality of his group, and even called attention to the fact that his company was composed of humble farmworkers rather than middle-class would-be actors seeking a career in New York or Hollywood. In an interview in 1966, Valdez said: "We don't think in terms of art, but of our political purpose in putting across certain points."² Early the following year, however, he reminded the same interviewer:

There's no doubt that what the people (farmworkers) want are new cars, education so they can send their kids to college, a middle-class home,

security—the whole shebang, the middle-class line. It's romantic and sentimental to try to accomplish anything else.³

If Valdez recognized the economic goals of the people he was trying to organize, then why shouldn't he, too, seek financial security and everything his audiences sought? Unfortunately, few societies remunerate their theatre artists justly, and Valdez knew that he and his troupe were dedicating themselves to a life of meager means if they continued to appeal to the *gente del pueblo*, who could hardly be expected to pay professional prices for a performance. Still young, Valdez accepted his economic situation because he wanted to, not because he had to. He could have gone on to graduate school after college, or sought a well-paying position, but chose, instead, to nurture his Teatro and expand its horizons.

In 1967, two years after its inception, the Teatro Campesino left the Union, and began to express non-farmworker issues relevant to the nation's second largest minority: the Mexican/Chicano. It was not an economic decision, nor an ideological difference which separated the Teatro from its progenitor, but rather, an artistic objective. Performing for striking farmworkers in the fields and in meeting halls was an important obligation for the Teatro, but when the troupe had gone to campuses and other sites throughout the nation, Valdez recognized that his group needed to concentrate more on its aesthetics. The Union demanded much of the group's time in terms of organizing, leafleting, and all the other daily functions necessary to a fledgling labor union short on manpower. By moving to another town, not too far away, the Teatro Campesino gained its autonomy, though it would never abandon its roots and would always be available for farmworker rallies and other functions for the Union.

The separation from the Union led the Teatro to other themes, as it began to explore the *vendido*, or assimilationist, the educational system, the Chicano Movement, and the War in Vietnam. By 1971, the Teatro published its first anthology of *actos*, the short, agit-prop pieces that effectively presented a particular problem, its causes, and pointed toward a solution. Valdez had also continued to write his own plays, following from his first full-length piece, entitled *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which he had written in college.

The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa was an expressionistic study of a Chicano family caught in the socio-economic and cultural crises that so many Americans of Mexican descent find themselves in. The family was basically a farmworker lot who had settled in a semi-rural city, and sought their own form of cultural survival. One son is a pachuco, or hoodlum; another becomes assimilated, and changes his name from Domingo to Mr. Sunday; a daughter gets pregnant out of wedlock; but the oldest son, Chato, is just a head without a body. There are cryptic references to Pancho Villa's stolen head, and we wonder if this is really an incarnation of the Mexican revolutionary, until the daughter, too, gives birth to a body-less head. The play is an interesting view of Valdez's early vision, and his fascination with the same types we will encounter again and again in his work.

Valdez was never content to paint a realistic picture of his protagonists and antagonist, and his anti-war statement, *Dark Root of a Scream*, produced in

1971, combined a contemporary *velorio* for a dead Chicano Vietnam Veteran, with Aztec and Maya motifs. All this symbolism was too much for some observers, while others hailed Valdez's dramaturgy as a unique vision. What was undeniable was the fact that Valdez was the premier Chicano director and playwright, and that his Teatro Campesino was the uncontested leader of a burgeoning Chicano Theatre Movement. Since 1967, when other Chicano *teatros* began to form in *barrios* from California to Michigan, Texas to Seattle, everyone looked to Valdez and his Teatro for inspiration and leadership.

After hosting the first "Chicano Theatre Festival" in 1970, the Teatro Campesino realized that there were many groups throughout the *barrios* of the U.S. that needed guidance, stimulation and communication with one another if they were to successfully pursue the tasks of creating long-lasting, effective theatre groups. The festival became a yearly event, and after the second gathering in 1971, a coalition of *teatros* was formed: El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán. *Aztlán*, the Nahuatl word for "the land from whence we came; the land to the North," had become the Chicanos' symbol of national identity within the boundaries of the United States, and this new collective of Chicanos actively attempting to educate and entertain their people adapted the name and its acronym, TENAZ, with pride and a sense of purpose. The Chicano Movement, centered on campuses throughout the Southwest and Midwest, was in full swing, and the Teatro Movement, which had grown out of the student revolution, now had an identity and an organization to look to for guidance.

As TENAZ began to organize its coalition, groups besides the Campesino assumed positions of responsibility. Teatro de la Esperanza, of Santa Barbara, handled finances; Teatro de la Gente, of San Jose, hosted the Fourth National Chicano Theater Festival. Various other leading groups or individuals took on assignments on the Board of Directors when elected. Interestingly, none of the Teatro Campesino's members, including Valdez, ever assumed the Chair, but their presence was always expected, and their organization called upon to handle communications for the organization. And when Valdez spoke, the people listened.

By 1974, there were several *teatros* that had been in existence since the late 1960's. These groups had begun to explore themes the Teatro Campesino and Valdez had not yet touched upon. Or, if Valdez had dramatized a particular situation, such as the educational process in the *barrios*, other *teatros* created their own statements about the schools. The *acto* was still the basic form employed by most of the groups, and though some may have termed their creations "plays," the style was strictly in the *acto* genre. A few *teatro* members had begun to seriously study world theatre in college and university courses, and there was a growing recognition of the limitations of a student group overloaded with enthusiasm, but low on training. The older groups did not want to produce the Campesino's published *actos*, because they sought their own theatrical statements. The comment that "the Teatro Campesino performed that here last year," was anathema to these groups who wanted to be recognized on their own merits and creative abilities.

Yet, everything the *teatros* were producing in the mid-1970's was a direct

descendant of the Campesino style. By gathering together members of various groups each summer in the early 1970's, Valdez had shared his expertise with these representatives who were supposed to return to their respective groups and teach the members at home what they had learned. The exercise proved fruitful for both the Teatro Campesino as well as the representative groups, for there was a crossfeeding that led to some innovative styles, such as the dramatized *corrido*. Unfortunately for some groups, their representatives elected to remain in San Juan Bautista, the small, rural town where the Teatro Campesino had finally settled in, and the exchange proved a loss of much needed talent back home. *Teatros* could not condemn their members for seeking the artistic security of working with Valdez and his troupe, though they resented the move. The Teatro Campesino might have denied membership to these workshop participants, but it, too, was constantly in search of talent, with a constant turnover in personnel like all the other groups.

The Teatro Campesino performed its now famous *Gran carpa de los rasquachis* as the final presentation of the Fourth Annual Festival in 1973. This combination of Valdezian *acto*, *corrido* and *mito* presented the evolution of a typical Mexican immigrant, Jesús Pelado Rasquachi, as he crosses the border to this side, works the fields, marries, fosters a family, and watches helplessly as his children turn to drugs, assimilation, or Anglo husbands. He is left to apply for welfare when he can no longer work in the fields. This final humiliation kills Jesús, and when asked by the Devil if he liked it in the "United States," he screams "No!" and delivers a monologue to the audience about the condition of the Mexicano/Chicano in this country. With constant musical narration, a rope around the neck motif, and the quick, fluid style Valdez is known for, the *Carpa* won standing ovations and critical acclaim wherever it was performed. It toured Europe twice, and was adapted to video for a national telecast on Public Broadcasting stations. At first glance, the message seems to be appropriate to a political theatre group, but this production generated ideological debates for years.

Valdez had begun to investigate his indigenous ancestors and their philosophies several years prior to the creation of *Carpa*, but this "super-acto," as I have termed it, relied on images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, hand-in-hand with Quetzacóatl, the Feathered Serpent, to become the final solution of Jesús Rasquachi's problems. *La gente del pueblo* loved it; the *políticos* did not. "How could the leading Chicano theatre group get confused by spiritual ideologies in the midst of all this oppression?" they asked, and Valdez responded with a smile, and a warm hug. "In Lak 'ech; tú eres mi otro yo," Valdez would intone, and continue "Si te hago daño a ti, me hago daño a mí mismo; Si te amo y respeto a ti; me amo y respeto a mí mismo." This Maya-Quiche phrase began to permeate Valdez's thinking, and when the Virgen de Guadalupe and Quetzalcóatl spoke the phrases in Maya-Quiche and in Spanish, with the indigenous music as background, it seemed, indeed, that here was The Solution.

Some groups attempted to emulate this neo-Maya philosophy, studying the ancients and attempting to create *mitos*, or myths that expressed their new-found thinking. Other groups, notably the urban Marxist *teatros*, did all they could

to counter Valdez's influence by spawning debates on Spirit vs. Matter, the idealists vs. the pragmatists. Valdez published his poem "Pensamiento Serpentino"⁴ as a rejoinder to his critics in 1973 and one dissident responded with an essay entitled: "Pensamiento Campesino: A Cultural Trampa; or, Is the Teatro Campesino Campesino?"⁵ Valdez felt that the Chicano must return to his indigenous roots, while his critics argued that we must learn from political analyses of the Chicano's condition, not a Christian/Maya combination that relied on the people's spiritual base for solutions to their plight.

In 1974, El Quinto Festival de los Teatro Chicanos; Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano was held in Mexico City. This two-week affair became the turning point in Valdez's relationship with TENAZ, for it was there that he and his group came under heavy attack by the many Latin American theatre companies and their directors who were appalled at the *Gran carpa de los rasquachis*. "How can you use the image of Guadalupe, that symbol of all the Church's injustices?," they asked, ignorant of the fact that Valdez knew his audience, and what it wanted. "The Church is an institution," he countered, "and as you can see by the character of 'St. Boss' Church,' dressed in a robe and mitre covered with the dollar sign, we are not upholding the Roman Catholic hierarchy. But La Virgen de Guadalupe is a symbol for humble campesinos and urban Chicanos and Mexicanos that cannot be denied."

There were still active critics of Valdez's philosophy in the ranks of TENAZ, and when they joined with the Latin Americans who felt Valdez had failed his constituency, the numbers seemed overwhelming. A morning critique session of the Campesino's performance the previous evening turned into a philosophical debate that satisfied no one, because there was no changing anybody's mind. Those that supported Valdez were strengthened in their thinking, as were the people who opposed his latest ideology. Nobody discussed aesthetics, or whether the work Valdez was doing may not be right for Latin America, but was ideally suited to his public to the north. The debate ended with other groups wishing they had been given the courtesy of critiques for the productions they had also presented the night before.

It was after the Mexico City festival that Valdez and his troupe began to slowly pull out of the national organization's meetings and activities. By 1976, the Teatro Campesino and Valdez were no longer members of TENAZ, and had broken most communications with the organization. The organization needed Valdez and his group more than he needed TENAZ, and his separation from the organization was never ignored, though leaders of the coalition did little, if anything, to get him involved again.

The relationship between Valdez, his Teatro, and TENAZ, is perhaps the key to understanding his influence upon Chicano Theatre in terms of the national organization. Though TENAZ does not represent all of the well over seventy-five groups throughout the country, it does bring together the leading troupes for festivals, seminars and quarterly meetings. Member *teatros* of TENAZ represent the longest lasting *teatros* in Aztlán, and the discussions generated in the yearly seminars indicate a growth in aesthetic and political awareness well beyond the rhetoric of the late 60's and 70's.

When Teatro Campesino ceased its involvement in TENAZ and its yearly festivals, all eyes shifted to another California group, El Teatro de la Esperanza. This *teatro's* piece entitled *La víctima* was the highlighted performance at the 1977 festival, and it was clear that the Santa Barbara troupe had assumed the aesthetic leadership once held by Valdez's troupe. Teatro de la Esperanza has been hailed by some critics as the new leader of Chicano collective dramaturgy, and this group is now making its impact on the national Teatro scene, and must be recognized for its influence on Teatro Chicano, even as Valdez continues to make his own impact.

A few years ago, Luis Valdez made a conscious decision to write a play which would be produced professionally. Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director of Los Angeles' Center Theatre Group, had been interested in producing a work by a Chicano playwright, and his knowledge of Valdez and his Teatro Campesino led him to invite the Chicano playwright to write a play for the CTG. Davidson's company wanted a play that was endemic to Los Angeles, and Valdez had long been fascinated by the so-called "Zoot Suit Riots" of the early 1940's in that city. He was particularly interested in the events surrounding the infamous Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial, in which seventeen Chicano youths had become the scapegoats for anti-Mexican sentiment in Los Angeles and other cities of Mexican population. As he launched his Teatro on a five-month tour of Europe with *La gran carpa de los rasquachis*, Valdez premiered his new play during the CTG Mark Taper Forum "New Theatre for Now" series. Produced as a work-in-progress, *Zoot Suit* amazed everyone and sold out its ten-day run in less than two days. Tickets to Valdez's latest achievement became prized possessions, and people clamored for an opportunity to see what the leading Chicano playwright had written and directed. Though this reviewer felt that the play needed much work to be technically successful, audiences and most other critics loved it. Davidson's group decided to inaugurate the regular season the following August with a six-week run of the revised play, and when it, too, sold out in record time, the run was extended and the play moved to another, larger theatre, the Aquarius, in Hollywood.

Los Angeles had been smitten by "Zoot Suit Fever," and press releases chimed that the city was "Swinging its praises" for the Valdezian spectacular. Chicanos lined up at the box office for hours to get tickets, and the play is still running in Los Angeles, eight months after its initial opening. The Shuberts picked up the option for the play in New York, and *Zoot Suit* opened on the The Great White Way on March 25th, 1979, less than a year after its first presentation in the New Theater for Now series. Fans flew into New York for the gala opening from all parts of Aztlán, and cheered, stomped and whistled as the curtain came down that opening night. Valdez, his cast, and producers went to the traditional Sardi's opening night festivities, eager for the reviews early the next morning. The reviews came, and what had started out a triumphant celebration ended in depressing calm as people silently read the devastating reviews to themselves. No one could read these notices aloud.

What had happened? *Los Angeles Times* Drama Critic, Sylvie Drake, who has had continuing praises for Valdez and his work since he began, was in

New York for the opening, and felt that the production had been better than ever that night. She wrote: ". . . *Zoot Suit* has, ironically, never seemed in better shape . . . with an assurance and focus well beyond all three of the previous L.A. versions."⁶ Obviously, the Shuberts felt the play would succeed and invested \$750,000 to open it on Broadway. But the New York critics called *Zoot Suit* "overblown and undernourished";⁷ "a great deal of loose material draped over a spindly form";⁸ and "simplistic . . . poorly written and atrociously directed."⁹ Though the three major newspapers seemed intent on cutting short any hopes of the play's survival, the producers decided to appeal more strongly to the Hispanic community, which was not as affected by negative press. The effect of the Los Angeles production was felt in every *teatro* from Seattle to San Antonio. For the New York critics, Valdez's eclectic style was too much, but for Los Angeles's huge Chicano population, the play says something and attracts people from all walks of life.

It is difficult to know whether other *teatros*, if offered the opportunity, would follow Valdez's footsteps to the professional stage. Some *teatro* members are disappointed that Valdez has chosen the path of what they term "commodity theatre," and still, one wonders how many of these critics would resist the call of financial independence through the media. Others would argue that there is only dependence on the media and its whims, and that it is the truly independent theatre that rejects those cushy grants and Hollywood attractions. Yet, many *teatro* members find themselves at an important crossroads in their evolution as they enter their early 30's and think of raising families and gaining some form of financial security.

Caught between the need for security on the one hand, and the desire to remain a people's theatre on the other, *teatro* members are being forced to look at what the progenitor of it all is doing, and wonder if Valdez's choices are the correct ones. Ideologically, *Zoot Suit* contradicts the earliest tenets of Chicano Theatre, for Valdez has said that he wants no one to leave the theatre feeling bad. "I want people to walk out of the theatre feeling up," he has said, and has created a situation that allows this attitude. The events are historical, and can be interpreted as having happened then, not now; the Chicano characters become the pawns of both the good and bad Anglos. It is the non-Chicano lawyer and defense committee leader who save the youths from prison, not themselves. Indeed, Henry Reyna rejects assistance when his Pachuco aspect takes over and inspires his machismo. We see Henry's family life, but have no idea where they work, how they really think and, most importantly, how Henry became involved in his lifestyle. Many questions about the pachuco syndrome remain unanswered, troubling some critics who feel that this is simply an idealization of the pachuco.

Other *teatros* and Chicano playwrights must look at what Valdez has done, study its positive and negative aspects, and decide how they can best benefit from the experience. In any case, no one will be able to ignore the success of *Zoot Suit*, and the impact it has had on its audiences. The Chicano has become a subject of interest to the media, and Chicano playwrights and *teatros* will have to decide whether they wish to step into the marketplace as buyers, sellers, or

as critics. Whatever course of action they take, one thing is certain: Luis Valdez has opened the doors.

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Notes

1. Luis Valdez, *Actos* (San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha Press, 1971).
2. Beth Bagby, "El Teatro Campesino: Interviews with Luis Valdez," *Tulane Drama Review*, XI, No. 4 (Summer 1967), 78.
3. Bagby, p. 79.
4. Luis Valdez, "Pensamiento Serpentino," *Chicano Theatre One*, Vol. I (Spring 1973), 7-19; also published by Cucaracha Publications, San Juan Bautista, CA, 1973.
5. Jorge González, unpublished ms. in the author's collection.
6. Sylvie Drake, "Broadway Cool to *Zoot Suit*," *Los Angeles Times*, Part IV (March 27, 1979), 1.
7. Richard Eder, "Theatre: *Zoot Suit*, Chicano Music-Drama," *New York Times* (March 26, 1979), C-13.
8. Eder, C-13.
9. Douglas Watt, "*Zoot Suit* Slithers in at the Winter Garden," *New York Daily News* (March 26, 1979), 21.