

## Prisoners on the Great White Way: *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* as the First US Latina/o Plays on Broadway

Ashley Lucas

In 1974 a former prisoner named Miguel Piñero became the first U.S. Latino playwright to see his work produced on Broadway. His play, *Short Eyes*, gave audiences on the Great White Way a complex and disturbing picture of life inside New York's House of Detention and garnered widespread critical acclaim. After this triumph, the most renowned theatre district in the U.S. would not host another Latino-written and -directed play until 1979, when Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* moved to Broadway after an extended sold-out run at Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum.<sup>1</sup> Though it is not often categorized as a play about incarceration, most of the action in *Zoot Suit* takes place in the courtroom, where a group of Mexican American youths are tried and wrongly convicted of murder, and in the prison in which they are subsequently confined. While *Short Eyes* won two Obies and the Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play, *Zoot Suit* was met with incomprehension, and in some cases hostility, from the critics on Broadway and closed after five weeks of performances.<sup>2</sup> Both plays use Latino prisoners as their central characters. Though the reception of the two plays in the popular press differed, with *Short Eyes* receiving glowing praise and *Zoot Suit* largely dismissed, the critics used the same rubric to judge them: the plays were overtly evaluated in terms of received notions of cultural authenticity and criminality. This suggests that the commercial success of *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit*'s failure on Broadway both had to do with the ways in which New York critics registered the playwrights' differing representations of racialized criminality.

Though these plays have each received a significant amount of critical and scholarly attention, their shared status as the first two Latino-written and -directed plays to make it to Broadway has been largely ignored. Even more significantly, scholars have not adequately considered the fact

that these first two Latino plays on Broadway both depict Latino criminality. These are staggering omissions. After all, the U.S. Bureau of Justice predicts that seventeen percent of all Latino males in this country “will enter State or Federal prison during their lifetime.”<sup>3</sup> Portrayals of Latino criminality thus have a heightened importance in the creation of mainstream discourse on Latina/o culture because of the extent of mass incarceration’s impact on Latina/o communities across the country.

The first two Latino plays on Broadway focused on the condition of the criminalized Latino, and to some extent, the reviews of these plays could be read as reflecting mainstream views on Latino criminality in the 1970s. Though neither play can be said to reduce prisoners to stereotypes, a close analysis of the plays’ New York reviews shows that these critics often measure the accuracy and believability of Piñero’s and Valdez’s characterizations in terms of narrow, prejudicial notions of incarcerated Latinos. The New York reviews inflate these stereotypes into a measure of the plays’ “authenticity” in portraying race and criminality.

The differences in the reviewers’ receptions of *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* appear to stem from the plays’ critiques of racism and criminality. Fundamentally, in writing these plays, Piñero and Valdez fight for the same kind of social justice, but they approach it from dissimilar angles. Piñero portrays the horrors of prison life, thereby critiquing the social inequalities that cause blacks, Latina/os, and the poor to wind up in prison; the play also depicts the inhumane ways in which incarcerated people, including white prisoners, are treated. Piñero clearly but implicitly reveals the flaws in deep-seated and widely accepted ideologies of crime and punishment. The characters in *Short Eyes* are neither allegorical nor larger than life. They are believable as real human beings, and they live in a small, very controlled world which reflects social problems both inside and outside the walls of confinement.

*Zoot Suit*, on the other hand, uses historical events to systematically point out patterns of racism in the press, courts, and prisons, which have caused the widespread persecution of people of color. The play itself and the character of El Pachuco are over the top and larger than life. The showy musical numbers and the allegorical figures used to represent the press and the courts lend the play a sense of Brecht’s epic dramas and demand that spectators step back from the world of the play to actively examine the political messages being conveyed. Many of the Broadway critics responded unfavorably to Valdez’s didacticism or to the staging techniques which highlight the political nature of *Zoot Suit*’s story. Despite its careful attention

to the wrongful conviction and incarceration of the play's main characters, *Zoot Suit* is not described by the New York critics as a drama with prison experiences at its heart.

This perception as to the plays' "real" subject matter — with *Short Eyes* but not *Zoot Suit* being seen as a play about prison — is among the most striking of the several dissimilar responses the two plays evoked. Reviews of *Short Eyes* tend to focus on the authenticity of the version of incarcerated life depicted in the play. Clive Barnes, writing for the *New York Times*, describes the play as "a prison play, but a prison play with a difference,"<sup>4</sup> the difference being that it is written by an actual prisoner. Miguel Piñero had been in and out of prison since he was fifteen years old.<sup>5</sup> He wrote the play while imprisoned at Sing-Sing, where he was involved in a theatre troupe known as the Family. Director Marvin Felix Camillo conducted the Sing-Sing theatre workshops that brought this remarkable group of performers together. As prisoners who had worked with Camillo during their incarceration were released one by one in the early 1970s, the Family transitioned into doing theatre in the world outside Sing-Sing. All but three of the actors playing prisoners in the Broadway production of *Short Eyes* were members of the Family,<sup>6</sup> and many of the play's reviewers commented on the quality of the acting being done by these formerly incarcerated men in comparison to that of the trained actors in the cast. For example, Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* called the play:

a remarkably compelling group effort. In general, the few professionals in the company... speak up the most clearly, but it is the Family, those former inmates who provide the nucleus of the troupe, who contribute the greatest splashes of color and variety to *Short Eyes*.

It is, however, the overwhelming vitality of the occasion that is so striking. Junkies, thieves and thugs, these inmates are bursting with life ...<sup>7</sup>

This critic's commentary exoticizes the former prisoners onstage by noting the "color and variety" they bring to the play. When Watt describes the "vitality" of these "junkies, thieves," "thugs," and "inmates," he fails to indicate whether he is discussing the characters or the actors. For this reviewer, the conflation of the fictional characters and the men playing these parts serves to further authenticate the script and the performance as representing the "reality" of incarcerated life, even if the reviewer's concept of prison life is somewhat misguided. The "vitality" that Watt so values seems to be ascribed to whatever it was that made these prisoners dangerous and outside the realm of social

order. He does not, for example, credit their energy and stage presence to their acting abilities, their recently restored freedom, or to a spirit of resistance to the prison industrial complex. Without having any information at their disposal about who these actors were before or during their incarceration, the reviewers write about the performers in *Short Eyes* as though the fact that they were incarcerated conclusively proved that each man was guilty, inherently criminal, and defined more by the experience of prison than by any other aspect of his life.

A further example of the conflation between the characters and the actors portraying them is the critics' persistent failure to understand the nature of the characters' incarceration. The New York House of Detention, where *Short Eyes* is set, is a jail, not a prison, which means that those being held there are charged but not yet convicted of any crime. Some characters indicate that they have been in and out of jails and prisons for years, but at the moment of the story, their fate is yet to be determined. All of the characters are awaiting trial or sentencing, and legally all of them remain innocent until found guilty in court. However, some reviewers of the play either fail to recognize the legal status of the incarcerated characters or confuse the characters with the formerly incarcerated actors who played them in the Broadway production. In his review of the play, for example, *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll fails to make one or both of these distinctions:

The young convicts — heisters, muggers, druggies, whatever — act out a violent and ironic parody of straight society, complete with its racism, its conflicting codes, its moralities that are hard to tell from corruptions.

...

The brilliance of the play is to show these violent young men instinctively reaching for a balance of personal expression and communal structure.<sup>8</sup>

Kroll does not specify who his “young convicts” are. One would think he means the play's characters, except that, again, some of them (including the central character) have *not* been convicted of anything. If, on the other hand, Kroll's “young convicts” are the actors, the assumptions he feels entitled to make about them bear reflecting-upon. Though U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics show that nearly half of the people in prison in this country are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses,<sup>9</sup> the stigma of criminality suggests to Kroll that the once-imprisoned actors in the play are “heisters, muggers, druggies,” inevitably “violent young men.” The flippant “whatever” attached

to the end of Kroll's list of types of miscreants indicates that, in his mind, the nature of a person's crime is irrelevant; if you landed in prison, you are some kind of deviant who ought to be restrained. Under this rubric, all offenses are equal, and no incarcerated person is redeemable.

If indeed Kroll is referring to the actors rather than to the characters when he talks about "the young convicts," then he has assumed that all of the former prisoners onstage were either incarcerated for a violent crime or that they became violent people because of their social conditioning in prison. As Kroll writes about what he calls the "anti-universe of prison life," he appears to be condemning the prison system and by extension the society which creates it. However, by failing to make distinctions between the actors and the characters they play, Kroll characterizes the formerly incarcerated actors as inherently violent even as they prove themselves successful on Broadway — clearly demonstrating in the process that they are not, or at least are more than, merely violent.

Despite the high class context of Broadway, the reviewers value Piñero's play as a window into the "real" lives of a hidden underclass population. *The Christian Science Monitor* ran its review of *Short Eyes* under the section heading: "N. Y. black theater" (thus suggesting that all plays with black people in them, or all multiethnic performances, fit into this category). Their critic, John Beaufort, characterizes Piñero as an inept writer valuable because of his authentic criminality:

*Short Eyes* is a crudely shocking, sensational, and in some respects technically elementary play. Yet it is also something more. Mr. Piñero [sic] draws on his experience and observation to depict the inmates as individual human beings with distinctive motivations, surviving in an inevitably hostile environment.<sup>10</sup>

Though Piñero's gritty drama disturbs this reviewer, it also captivates him. Beaufort seems impressed with the playwright's ability to make prisoners into human beings. Considering how many stereotypes about prisoners are propagated in the arts and the news media, Piñero has indeed achieved a great feat in representing prisoners in a way that is both complex and believable. However, the implicit assumption in this review, and in most of the others, is that Piñero has presented a slice of prison life — something he "draws" (like a police sketch artist) from "his experience and observation," with a fictional plot, perhaps, but not much embellishment on the kinds of things that happen in prison.

In fact, though the characters and events in *Short Eyes* are far from implausible, the play does not depict an average day in prison. Physical violence among prisoners certainly does occur, but more often prisoners live from day to day with the threat, rather than the actuality, of such violence being inflicted on them. In hastening to grant Piñero a degree of representativeness he does not, in fact, claim, these reviewers reveal a double condescension: they overvalue Piñero's prison experience for the dimly-understood "authenticity" they believe it confers, while undervaluing him as a playwright, someone who has, with almost Sophoclean intensity, condensed the all-pervasive violence of the prison system (including the originating violence inherent in its existence and legitimate status) into a single day.

Such distinctions — Pinero's artistry as distinct from his authenticity — are lost on most of the play's other reviewers as well. The critics remark over and over again on the otherness of the characters, actors, and playwright, commenting on their race, ethnicity, accents, bilingualism, violence, and criminality. However, rather than using these descriptors negatively, the reviewers point to them as indicators of honesty, brilliance, life, authenticity, and, as Martin Gottfried of *Women's Wear Daily* put it, "simply good work."<sup>11</sup> In a sense, Piñero and the other members of the Family are perceived to be good theatre-makers not because they make a good fiction, but because they make a fiction that resembles these audience's assumptions about prison life so completely that they fail even to recognize it as such.

An anecdote from the *Newsweek* review captures a version of this reaction to the play — one of revulsion mixed with attraction:

Audiences have been shocked but moved by the play. "One little old lady came into the lobby during intermission," says [the play's director] Camillo, "and I asked her how she liked it. 'Terrible!' she said. 'Where can I get a copy of the script?'"<sup>12</sup>

As this audience member and the critics' reactions indicate, *Short Eyes* employs shocking and disturbing images which evoke accepted notions of criminality. It then reverses the audience's expectations by deepening and complicating the identities and motivations of the criminalized characters.

Five years after *Short Eyes* opened on Broadway, *Zoot Suit* faced similar audiences but resisted traditional notions of Latino criminality in ways that *Short Eyes*, at least on the surface, did not. Valdez and his collaborators were trained theatre professionals, not former prisoners, and their play depicts a fictionalized version of a true story, that of a group of falsely accused juveniles who were blatantly abused by the courts and the

press during the highly publicized Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial of 1943. Though the play is set in the past, it makes a still salient social commentary on wrongful conviction, racism in the criminal justice system, and bias in the news media. The New York critics, ignoring most of these dimensions, gave the play mixed reviews and justified many of their critiques by pointing out ways in which they perceived *Zoot Suit* to be less than authentic in its representation of Latino criminality.

Most of *Zoot Suit*'s critics specifically address the play's blending of fact and fiction. Though the plot of *Short Eyes* is fictitious, the reviewers have no trouble at all in construing either the people or the events of the play as real or at least very believable. The characters and events in *Zoot Suit*, however, are based on real people and actual histories, which would seem to give these authenticity-craving reviewers what they want. However, the reviewers criticize Valdez's "free adaptation of real events"<sup>13</sup> and even complain that, "Without knowledge of the case, it isn't possible to tell where fact leaves off and fantasy begins"<sup>14</sup> — an argument that goes so far as to blame Valdez for the reviewer's lack of interest in (or, perhaps, access to information about) the Sleepy Lagoon case. Because Valdez retells past events in a way that challenged traditional versions of history, his factual accuracy and personal bias become points of contention for many reviewers. Edwin Wilson of *The Wall Street Journal* implies that the playwright has twisted the events of the Sleepy Lagoon Trial to create a "political melodrama" in which "Mr. Valdez has fashioned his political saga out of his own ideas."<sup>15</sup> (Wilson does not cite any of Valdez's alleged dishonesties.) The Broadway reviewers repeatedly characterize *Zoot Suit* and Valdez as embodiments of a political viewpoint, rather than, as they had done with *Short Eyes*, as a play about the criminal justice system.

The reviewers are at least correct in characterizing *Zoot Suit* as a political play. Valdez never hid his political views nor apologized for them, and *Zoot Suit*'s reception on Broadway was undoubtedly colored by Valdez's work with El Teatro Campesino and the United Farm Workers,<sup>16</sup> even though *Zoot Suit* is a distinct departure from Valdez's earlier artistic endeavors. More than one reviewer, in contextualizing *Zoot Suit*, invokes Clifford Odets' 1935 agitprop drama, *Waiting for Lefty*,<sup>17</sup> a play with a political agenda that aligns more naturally with Teatro Campesino's *actos* than with *Zoot Suit*. The comments made about the *Zoot Suit*'s politics are often tied to remarks about the mixing of influences, theatrical genres, and performance styles within the play. In a rather favorable review entitled "West Coast Folk Play," John

Beaufort points to “Louis” Valdez’s ties to Cesar Chavez as well as the fact that *Zoot Suit* was commissioned by Gordon Davidson, then artistic director at the Mark Taper Forum. Beaufort describes the play as “combin[ing] conventional elements of symbolism, the living newspaper, the semidocumentary, and the agitprop theater.”<sup>18</sup> While Beaufort accurately describes the way *Zoot Suit* is written and performed and does not take issue with it, other reviewers point to Valdez’s multifaceted approach to playwriting and directing as “a bewildering mixture of styles”<sup>19</sup> and “most elementary in terms of dialogue and staging.”<sup>20</sup> For the critics who do not like the play, the markedly political playwriting and staging techniques in *Zoot Suit* serve as evidence of Valdez’s ineptitude and lack of understanding of what makes good theatre, rather than, say, as evidence of his knowledge of a range of dramatic forms and his commitment to the political significance of art.

This tendency to read *Zoot Suit* as an overwhelmingly (sometimes problematically) political play contrasts strongly, again, with critics’ tendency to read *Short Eyes* as a highly personal work of disguised autobiography. The word “political” never once appears in the Broadway reviews of *Short Eyes*. Instead, comments such as (in the *New York Times* review of *Short Eyes*) “Piñero’s dialogue sizzles with truth” and “the cast gleams with honesty”<sup>21</sup> portray it as an apolitical slice of life. Though *Women’s Wear Daily* comes close to recognizing the subtle critique of the prison system woven into Piñero’s “point-making play,”<sup>22</sup> the fact that Piñero and most of the cast were “actual” prisoners seems to place *Short Eyes* in some realm safe from politics. By contrast, reviews of *Zoot Suit* cannot restrain themselves from invoking other partisan dramatists (Brecht, Odets), complaining about Valdez’s involvement in the farmworkers’ struggles, and in other ways recasting Valdez as a shrill propagandist rather than as an artist.

A large part of the reviewers’ problems with *Zoot Suit* stems from the ways in which the imprisoned Latino characters resist the stigma of criminality. While *Short Eyes* puts the language of drug addicts and prisoners into the mouths of emotive and insightful characters, the rhetoric used in *Zoot Suit* articulates a more didactic attack on the criminal justice system and a sense of ethnic pride drawn from Valdez’s work in the Chicano Movement. In a review entitled “*Zoot Suit* Proves Moot,” Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* critiques the manner in which the character of El Pachuco voices his political jabs at the powers that be: “...when [El Pachuco] talks it is in a sing-song Spanish of pained contempt.”<sup>23</sup> Barnes ignores the poetry in El Pachuco’s code-switching, and mocks the meter and flow of El Pachuco’s lines



as a means of undermining Valdez's social critique. In doing so, Barnes also fails to notice the play's use of a phenomenon that, one would think, cultural critics would instead find fascinating: its use of *caló*. This subversive form of slang developed by *pachuca/os* enabled the Mexican American youth of the 1940s to communicate in ways that their Spanish-speaking parents could not understand. The *caló* that Barnes hears as "pained contempt," presumably contempt toward white people, is in fact an act of rebellion against older Mexican Americans as well.

Barnes seems to hear all the non-English words in the play as glorifying the struggles of Latina/os and as criticisms of institutions characterized by white power, such as the military, courts, or police. Though Valdez does make such critiques, the lead characters in the play defy narrow concepts of ethnic loyalty and hatred; besides their active rebellion against the older generation of their own families, embodied in their use of *caló* among other things, they also include Tommy, a white youth, as a trusted member of their circle of *pachuco* friends. The character of Hank Reyna even enlists in the U.S. military. The events of the play which would appear most slanderous toward white people are those in which Latina/os are chased down and trapped by members of the U.S. Navy, the police, and the judicial system, but all of these dramatized incidents have a strong basis in historical fact.

Neglecting all of these complications, Barnes reduces the politics of *Zoot Suit* to an us-against-them battle between whites and Chicana/os played out both on stage and in the audience: "When I saw [*Zoot Suit*] last year in Los Angeles it had a largely Chicano audience who were rooting for the good guys and booing the bad guys. It was street theater of very effective force. But Broadway is not the street where it lives."<sup>24</sup> Presumably *Zoot Suit*'s Broadway audiences were much more white than Chicana/o, and in that context, Barnes implies that the Great White Way is not a place where the struggles of Mexican American youth have a strong emotive or cultural impact. In essence, he suggests not only that white Broadway audiences have no reason to care about the persecution of brown youth, but that the Chicana/o audiences in Los Angeles cared out of a blind sympathy drawn along racial and ethnic lines, rather than from ethical as well as ethnic principle. This oversimplified reading of the cultural perspectives of both audiences ignores, among many other things, the fact that whites and Mexican Americans worked together to free the Sleepy Lagoon Defendants, historically and in Valdez's play.

The New York reviewers are not at all in agreement as to the political relationship between *Zoot Suit* and its Broadway audiences, but these

critics agree that this relationship is to be measured in terms of how they, as individual critics, relate or fail to relate to the play's representations of Mexican Americans. The reviewers focus not on whether individual characters are or are not believable and/or sympathetic; they couch their acceptance or rejection of the play in terms of whether or not they care about Mexican Americans as a people by the time they finish watching the play. Joel Siegel of WABC-TV calls *Zoot Suit*'s central narrative "universal" and lauds "the story of a people saying, 'We want to be Americans — but on our terms, not yours. We will not surrender what makes us unique.'"<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* values the cultural specificity of Valdez's rendering of the *pachuca/os*' struggles:

...we're seeing the image and energy of a culture that's never been seen on a Broadway stage before. Valdez is trying to bridge the gap between his brown people and the white majority, and he does this difficult feat with honesty and a subtlety for which he hasn't gotten enough credit.<sup>26</sup>

Though Kroll does not attribute the same universality to the play that Siegel does, this reviewer appreciates the fact that *Zoot Suit* opens up a new cultural space on Broadway. Despite still feeling different than Valdez and "his brown people," Kroll sees the play as a useful and compelling tool for understanding the other.

For Christopher Sharp of *Women's Wear Daily*, *Zoot Suit* has the opposite effect, that of widening the gulf between whites and Mexican Americans. After claiming that the play "can cause an Excedrin headache by the second act," Sharp describes feeling personally attacked by the play:

...Valdez commits the worst mistake a playwright could make: He insults his own audience... Edward James Olmes' [sic] erstwhile narrator shouts, "Stop the play." Then he says, referring to the audience, "That's exactly what they pay to see, one Mexican killing another one." Maybe that's what they pay to hear in Los Angeles... but Broadway audiences are used to less condescending treatment.<sup>27</sup>

Though Sharp's comments about ethnicity are not as explicit as those of some other reviewers, his characterization of the Los Angeles and New York audiences suggests a significant cultural difference between the two groups. He feels targeted by this moment in the play and is angered by it, at least in part, because he feels the playwright is accusing him of racism. In his book *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity*, Jon Rossini argues that El Pachuco's words to the audience implicate Chicana/o spectators as

much as white theatre-goers. The character breaks the fourth wall during a moment of heightened intensity as a strategy of catching audience members off guard while they were experiencing a powerful emotion.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the ethnicity of the audience member, each person listening to *El Pachuco* is asked to pause and evaluate why popular portrayals of violence among minorities are so commonplace as to often go unquestioned. Sharp, however, feels that *El Pachuco*'s words inflict a kind of ideological violence upon white audiences, putting them down as a means to feed the "willful independence of Chicanos."<sup>29</sup>

T. E. Kalem, the theatre critic for *Time Magazine*, also points toward Valdez's presentation of *latinidad* in the play as being a downside of the production. He writes, "If there had been a savory ethnic core to the musical, it might have taken flight, but both the music and the dances are grounded in standard World War II U.S.O. fare."<sup>30</sup> This comment has an odd resonance because *Zoot Suit* could only be called a "musical" in the same sense that *Mother Courage and Her Children* could be. Both plays use music to stop the action of the play or to move along transitions between scenes and settings, but they are not musicals in the sense that characters regularly break into song in the middle of a scene while behaving as though singing were as natural as dialogue. Beyond this miscategorization of *Zoot Suit*, Kalem suggests here that if Latina/os are going to sing and dance on stage, they should do so in a way that evokes their foreignness rather than their participation in U.S. national culture. The *pachuca/os* involved in the historical Sleepy Lagoon Trial and Valdez's characters were U.S. citizens who came of age in the 1940s, and Danny Valdez's music and Patricia Birch's choreography in *Zoot Suit* reflect the music and dance styles that were popular among all Americans at that time. Thus, the singing and dancing ends up not being ethnic enough for Kalem.

If Kalem finds the play to be somehow not Latino enough, Richard Eder of the *New York Times* has just the opposite problem with the show. He writes contemptuously about the Mexican American youths of the 1940s upon whom the play was based: "It was a time when public and official prejudice against the Chicano community was exacerbated by the activities of Pachuco youth gangs with their extravagant zoot suits and ducktail hair-cuts."<sup>31</sup> This critic either misses or dismisses the fact, presented throughout *Zoot Suit*, that the Hearst press, and not actual gang activity, generated and then escalated the negative public perceptions of young Mexican Americans at the time.

Though the reviewers from *Time Magazine* and the *New York Times* have differing critiques of *Zoot Suit*, they both seize upon the representations

of Mexican Americans as problematic and unsatisfactory. Whereas the critics universally believe in the authenticity of Piñero's black and Latino characters, they have mixed and often contradictory things to say about Valdez's more obviously politicized Mexican Americans, with *Time* wishing they would behave, in effect, more like Mexicans and Eder wishing they would more compliantly assimilate. Through the sleek and valorized portrayal of El Pachuco, Valdez overtly celebrates Mexican American and Chicano identity in a way that Piñero does not do with his African American and Puerto Rican characters. Piñero strongly identifies his characters both by their status as prisoners and by their ethnic and racial differences, whereas Valdez's heroes identify themselves as Mexican Americans (or as allied with the *pachuca/os*) and are labeled criminal by institutional power structures which conspire against them. Thus, precisely and ironically because of their refusal to accept this imposed label, they are that much harder for the critics who had appreciated *Short Eyes* to read as "authentic."

One might be tempted to dismiss the negative reviews of *Zoot Suit* as merely racist were it not for the highly favorable reception of *Short Eyes* just five years earlier by some of the same critics. One might, on the other hand, blame Valdez for simply writing a lesser play. Though such considerations are notoriously hard to theorize, one should at least take into account the overwhelmingly positive reviews and extended runs of *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles before blindly assuming that Valdez wrote a truly unlikable play. A comparison of the two plays' Broadway reviews, however, suggests that Piñero succeeded where Valdez did not because, without intending to, he more palatably packaged the idea of racialized male criminality. Piñero's characters struggle against their own shortcomings as well as the power structures which confine them. They maintain racial and ethnic differences while painfully acknowledging that blacks, whites, and Latinos are all implicated in the perpetuation of the cycle of violence and incarceration. In contrast, Valdez's Latina/o characters fight primarily against the system which oppresses them and secondarily against weaknesses within their community. They collaborate with a white attorney and a white labor organizer, but in their persistent cultural separatism, they reflect the Chicano nationalism of the late 1970s when the play was written. Ultimately, Valdez's characters actively resist the label of criminality, while Piñero's characters grapple with the nature of criminality and its causes. For Piñero's audiences, the label "criminal" thus stays in place, stabilizing the spectators' perceptions and allowing them to persist in a system of naming that feels safe and reliable to

those who believe they know the difference between a prisoner and a free citizen. Valdez's proudly Latino characters, by contrast, refuse to stay put under that comforting term "criminal."

Perhaps because of the extent to which they were misread by the New York critics, at present *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* are mostly consumed in their published or film versions, despite the relevance and immediacy of their critiques of the U.S. criminal justice system. Though El Teatro Campesino revived *Zoot Suit* for a national tour in 2002, neither of these plays has been regularly produced outside of smaller regional theatres and college campuses between their debuts and the present. Though they still hold value in print and in movie form, neither play can be fully realized unless mounted as live theatre. The success of *In the Heights* and the revamped bilingual version of *West Side Story* suggest a renewed interest in commercial Latina/o theatre — and possibly an opportunity for a sorely-needed revival of these two masterworks.

Broadway, however, is not the only street that needs these plays. In an age when prison theatre programs are growing in popularity across the country, educators could be giving prisoners the chance to perform Piñero and Valdez's words in addition to Shakespeare's. Prisoner reentry programs could stage their own productions of *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* with returning citizens as a means of cultivating public speaking skills and the ability to collaborate and engage with others. More colleges and universities, particularly those with large Latina/o populations, should be teaching and producing these plays as part of the canon of American theatre. As the U.S. now incarcerates more people than any country in recorded history has done, the time has come for us to reevaluate our notions of crime and punishment. *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* push us to perform just such a reevaluation — a task we can no longer afford to neglect.

In the end, the intellectual poverty and political naïveté of the Broadway reviewers — displayed as much in their positive reception of *Short Eyes* as in their negative reception of *Zoot Suit* — represent a missed opportunity. Both Piñero and Valdez make striking and valid critiques of the criminalization of Latino males in the U.S., and these playwrights' political commentaries only become more relevant as the numbers of Latina/os in prison steadily increase. In our age of mass incarceration, 427,000 Hispanic men and 33,400 Hispanic women remain confined in state and federal prisons across the country.<sup>32</sup> In this context, Piñero's and Valdez's arguments about the racialized stigma of criminality call for renewed examination. The

Latina/o plays that came to Broadway after *Zoot Suit*, including *Anna in the Tropics*, *Latinologues*, and *In the Heights*, have furthered the public dialogue concerning Latina/os in many ways, but they do not, in any sustained way, deal with issues surrounding Latina/o criminality. Though less stigmatized versions of Latina/o culture have now graced the stages of the Great White Way, U.S. culture has yet to let go of its predisposition to characterize the Latina/o as criminal. For all these reasons, Valdez and Piñero remain strikingly current in ways that their initial New York reviewers failed to imagine.

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Zoot Suit* ran at the Mark Taper Forum from August 17 to October 1, 1978. Previews began on August 6. Center Theatre Group Website, <http://www.centertheatregroup.org/about/history.aspx>, 22 August 2009. [Ed. Note: The popularity of the initial run at the Mark Taper Forum led to an unprecedented extended run at the Aquarius Theater in Hollywood].

<sup>2</sup> Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 179.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics Website, Criminal Offenders Statistics, Summary Findings, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#inmates>, 28 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Clive Barnes, "Theatre: 'Short Eyes,' Prison Drama: Play by Miguel Pinero Moves to the Public," *New York Times*, 14 March 1974, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 35:13 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 23 Sept. 1974) 258.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 165.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Kroll, "In the Oven," *Newsweek*, 8 April 1974, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 35:13 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 23 Sept. 1974) 261.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Watt, "'Short Eyes' a Compelling Drama," *Daily News: New York's Picture Newspaper*, 27 May 1974, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 35:13, (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 23 Sept. 1974) 258.

<sup>8</sup> Kroll, "In the Oven," 261.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics Website, Prison Statistics, Summary Findings, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm#selected>, 28 May 2009.

<sup>10</sup> John Beaufort, "Grim, Shocking 'Short Eyes,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22 March 1974, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 35:13 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 23 Sept. 1974) 260.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Gottfried, "Short Eyes," *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 March 1974, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 35:13, (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 23 Sept. 1974) 259.

<sup>12</sup> Kroll, "In the Oven," 261.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Eder, "Theater: 'Zoot Suit,' Chicano Music-Drama," *The New York Times*, 26 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 313.

<sup>14</sup> John Beaufort, "West Coast Folk Play, 'Zoot Suit,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7, (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 314.

<sup>15</sup> Edwin Wilson, "Terror in Los Angeles," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 315.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Watt, "'Zoot Suit' Slithers in at the Winter Garden," *Daily News*, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7, (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 312.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, p. 315; Joel Siegel, "Zoot Suit," WABC-TV7, 25 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 315.

<sup>18</sup> Beaufort, "West Coast Folk Play," 314.

<sup>19</sup> Eder, 312.

<sup>20</sup> Watt, "Zoot Suit," 312.

<sup>21</sup> Barnes, "Short Eyes," 258.

<sup>22</sup> Gottfried, 259.

<sup>23</sup> Clive Barnes, "'Zoot Suit' Proves Moot," *New York Post*, 26 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 316.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Siegel, 315.

<sup>26</sup> Jack Kroll, "Heartbeats from the Barrio," *Newsweek*, 9 April 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 314.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Sharp, "Zoot Suit," *Women's Wear Daily*, 27 March 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 313.

<sup>28</sup> Jon Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrioting Ethnicity*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008) 74.

<sup>29</sup> Sharp, p. 313.

<sup>30</sup> T.E. Kalem, "Threads Bare," *Time*, 9 April 1979, Joan Marlowe and Betty Blake, eds., *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 40:7 (New York: Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 9 April 1979) 316.

<sup>31</sup> Eder 313.

<sup>32</sup> West, Heather C. and William J. Sabol. "Prison Inmates at Midyear 2008 – Statistical Tables," U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pim08st.pdf>, March 2009) 17.

