

An Interview with Luis Valdez

Carlos Morton

Luis Valdez founded the internationally famous Teatro Campesino on the strike lines of the fields around Delano, California, during the Grape Strike of 1965. He and a group of (then) non-actors whom he trained performed the numerous *actos* he wrote to dramatize the plight and cause of the farmworkers. He then led a tour to major cities around the country which brought him national recognition and an Obie Award (1968).

In the early 1970s Valdez took his group to Europe and Mexico where they received international acclaim as the spirit and voice of the Chicano people. In 1978 he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant and was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles to write *Zoot Suit*. It became a critical and commercial success and eventually moved on to Broadway in New York City—the first time ever a Chicano author had won that distinction. *Zoot Suit* has been released as a motion picture written and directed by Luis Valdez for Universal Studios.

Where did your love for the theatre begin?

When I was 11 or 12 I picked up ventriloquism and had two little dummies which I made. My gringo dummy was called Al Nelson, and my Chicano dummy was Marcelino Pimpim. I used to sit with them on my knees and play one against the other in bilingual dialogue in the labor camps where my family worked. During breaks people would set their boxes down under the trees and listen. The dummies would talk about work, no work, pay contractors, being cheated. All my relatives still remember. Years later when I went back they would ask me. “¿Qué pasó con los monos?”

What kind of education or formal training did you have?

By the time I got to high school, I just wanted to forget about the fields. I went to a high school with kids who lived in the mansions on the hills, and kids of poor farmworkers from the ranchos. I remember one time coming from a speech contest in Santa Barbara and being invited to a party in a mansion. I

was explaining what conditions were like in my part of town, and one of the girls sighed, "I don't know what I would do if my family became destitute." And I remember thinking, "I can't even afford that word; I'm so destitute I can't even afford to say *destitute*."

Did you ever suffer from discrimination?

Oh yes, it was more blatant then. People would call us "dirty Mexicans." I remember going to a movie in Reedly where we weren't allowed to sit in the Anglo section. We were told by the ushers to sit with the rest of the Mexicans, because this section was reserved for whites. Those are things you never forget.

But you eventually did make it to college, didn't you? Isn't that where you started writing plays and acting in them?

In 1960, at San Jose State, I wrote *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which was produced there. A newspaper clipping shows me after I won a speech contest, claiming to want to be a playwright for the Mexican people. In 1964 I went to San Francisco with my play under my arm, hoping to get it produced. The only problem was that there were no Chicano actors, even fewer than in college. The San Francisco performance in 1964 was done by an Iranian — he was dark and had an accent.

As a young man, in the sixties, did you go through a revolutionary phase?

I was really turned on to Emiliano Zapata. I had a mustache and started wearing guaraches. I used to wear fatigues and a coat. White levis, shades. People said I looked like a communist. I also began feeling an immense cultural pride because of my Yaqui Indian roots. When I walked out of my microbiology class I started whistling the International Hymn very dramatically to myself. In 1964 I went to Cuba and spent a lot of time drinking rum and smoking cigars. We were staying at the Hotel Riviera but working in the tobacco and corn fields. It reminded me very much of California. One time I was sitting on a curb in Havana watching those old cars that they keep running. 1952 Chevys. This car passed by and I thought I recognized some friends of mine. I stood up to shout "hello" and realized it couldn't be. I had flashes throughout the whole thing, and I found myself crying a lot. It was a release, a feeling that finally I could get it all out. I remembered things that seemed melodramatic, but they were real, like the time that my mother's knees bled while she had been picking.

Is that what made you go back to your farmworker roots and start a theatre in Delano?

There was this organizer, Cesar Chavez, and all these campesinos — Mexicanos and Filipinos — marching through the streets of Delano in 1965. We marched down Ellington Street. The house where I was born is no longer there — it's now Highway 99. It was like a hallucination, an acid trip, a myth. I even saw some of my relatives out in the fields scabbing. I knew I had to

come back to Delano to straighten things out. About a week later Cesar came to San Francisco to speak and I sought him out. We ended up in a church. That was the first time I heard the song "De colores" sung in the context of La Huelga. Shortly afterwards I told him about my idea to start a *teatro* to help the strike.

How did you get non-actors to act out your scripts?

One of the first meetings took place in a little pink house in Delano. I introduced myself and started talking about theatre like a real intellectual. After about fifteen minutes I realized that the audience was going to sleep. I had to *show* them what theatre was. I had prepared some signs with the words "striker," "boss," and "strikebreaker." I asked for volunteers to act out what was happening on the picket lines. Next thing you know there was laughter in and around that pink house with people sticking their heads through the windows trying to find out what was going on. I knew I had an instant hit.

What did you hope to accomplish with your plays?

We were and still are recreating our own reality. Our vision is that we have been a hard working, courageous people. There have been three prevalent images of the chicano in this country— 1) the pachuco, a violent, urban *vato loco*; 2) the farmworker, a passive peon, Don Juan-Yaqui brujo type; and 3) el Spanish grandee or Latin lover type.

How do you respond to the critics who accuse you of being a mystic, an escapist obsessed with the indigenous past?

People tend to classify; that's society's influence. Society has tried to impose its reality on us. As Chicanos, Hispanos, Indios, we have resisted that vision of reality because it is not broad enough. It denies many of the spiritual values which are a great part of our people; it dismisses many of the truly piercing perceptions that we have about life as superstitions. Campesino life is both practical and spiritual, down to earth and yet imbedded in the stars.

Other critics question your glorification of the pachuco in Zoot Suit. Why not write a play about a Chicano lawyer or doctor instead of a lumpen figure who speaks caló, dresses funny, and carries a knife?¹

To me *pachuquismo* was the direct antecedent of what has come to be termed "Chicano consciousness." In the 1940s *pachucos* were caught between two cultures, viewed with suspicion by both conservative Mexican-Americans and Anglos. The *pachucos* were the first to acknowledge their bicultural backgrounds and to create a subculture based on this circumstance. The Anglo establishment, caught up in its "war-time hysteria" labeled the *pachucos* "zoot suiters" after their most flamboyant fashion. They were highly visible and easy targets for the U.S. Servicemen in Los Angeles in 1942. The *pachuco* emerged as a cult figure for he was the first to take pride in the complexity of his origins, and to *resist* conformity.

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Note

1. The origins of the zoot suit are vague. According to Luis Valdez, it is a variation of the fingertip coat worn by Clark Gable in the movie, *Gone with the Wind*. There is also documented a published description of a "bizarre outfit" made for a young black customer by a South Carolina tailor in 1941. The classic zoot suit, according to Valdez, consisted of baggy pleated pants with tight cuffs and a high waist under the wide shouldered, loose-fitting fingertip coat. A pork-pie hat with feather, and a three-foot watch chain hanging to the ankles completed the outfit. The clothes were very expensive for the time, ranging in price from \$60 to \$200 for an entire suit.

Among Mexican-Americans, the zoot suit was quickly adopted in the early forties by the *pachucos*, a non-conformist group of urban lumpen who spoke their own bilingual hip dialect and wore ducktails and pegged pants. The girls, or *ruchas*, sported bouffant hairdos piled high above the forehead, low-cut blouses, and skirts shortened to several inches above the knee or slit along the side to show a fair amount of leg.

In a September, 1942 photo essay in *Life* magazine a government official was quoted as saying that "the wasteful manufacture of 'zoot suits' and 'juke jackets' is interfering with the U.S. war effort and must stop." In accompanying photo captions, the editors wrote: "Here *Life* presents some of Washington's teen-age zoot-suited hepcats as solid arguments for lowering the draft age to include 18-year-olds." In June of 1943 the infamous "zoot suit riots" erupted in Los Angeles when gangs of sailors and marines took to the streets attacking anyone caught wearing this singular attire. By the end of the summer the riots had spread to Detroit and Harlem, pitting Black and Mexican-American zooters against white American "patriots."

James Laver, a costume historian, has said that "costume is the very mirror of an epoch's soul." What was it about the zoot suit that so offended the sensibilities? Octavio Paz, Mexican poet and philosopher, wrote about the zoot suit in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: "Its novelty consists in its exaggeration . . . he takes an ordinary suit and turns it into something beautiful, something artful." In much the same manner young Chicanos today take a standard Detroit model automobile and personalize the body by lowering it, chroming the sides, decorating the interior, even painting murals on the trunk and hood.

Thus, the zoot suiter stood out, even among his own people, and wore the clothes with defiance. Wrote Paz: "In this way he can occupy a place in the world that previously ignored him and thus become one of society's wicked heroes. The pachuco becomes the prey of society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter."

Paz realized that the *pachuco* was a victim of racism, a figure caught in the middle of two worlds, burdened with a crippling inferiority complex. He wondered: "Why doesn't the *pachuco* return to the dress of his forebearers? The zoot suit is simply a fashion, and like all fashions it is based on novelty—the mother of death, as Leopardi said—and imitation."

Valdez, on the other hand, views the *pachuco* as an innovator who recognized his duality, a rebel who refused to bow his head, a cult figure and predecessor of the Chicano movement. One need only look at the fifties when ducktails, pegged pants, and shades were the fashion to vindicate the style. Suddenly it was hip to be bad.

The zoot suit is still being used today among Chicano youth whom Valdez calls "the children of the pachuco." Today they are known as homeboys, vatos, and low riders who still speak the same *caló* (hip bilingual dialect) and shock society with their styles. The zoot suit may be a hand-me-down from the forties, but Chicanos are wearing it with pride.