
April 1978

THIS MONTH IN LA THEATRE HISTORY

“When the character of El Pachuco, memorably played by Edward James Olmos, swaggered onto the Taper stage, Chicano theatre became American theatre,” so stated writer-director Luis Valdez at about the time of the 2017 revival of *Zoot Suit* at the Mark Taper Forum. (The production was part of a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Centre Theatre Group.)

But *Zoot Suit* began its life in the New Theatre for Now series in **April of 1978** at the Taper, then later opening with a revised version of the play in August of that same year.



*Luis Valdez, 1st Mexican-American director to have a play on Broadway, rehearsing the original production of **Zoot Suit***

While I will explore that premiere production in the next issue of the newsletter, it's worth recalling the theatrical genesis underlying this ground-breaking production.



Center Theatre Group's Artistic Director Gordon Davidson, Luis Valdez, and United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez.

Valdez, after graduating from San Jose State and working with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, returned to his birthplace of Delano, California in September 1965 to support Cesar Chavez's farm workers strike using what he had learned. However Chavez responded to Valdez's proposal: "There's no money for theater in Delano. No actors, no stage. Not even time to rehearse. You still want to do it?"



So, Valdez put placards around the necks of the workers on the picket line, created characters they could play and developed - often through improvisation - broad, satirical sketches which he dubbed “actos.”

As Jorge Huerta wrote, “In the typical acto, the heroes and villains are clearly defined and a solution is either hinted at or plainly stated: 'Join the Union,' 'Boycott grapes,' etc.” They were meant to be performed anywhere, with simple props and masks. And so was born **El Teatro Campesino**.

Elements of corrido (song), religious pageants and fables (mito) all would become part of the techniques used in El Teatro's

productions.



By 1971, the company had moved to San Juan Bautista, separating itself as an arm of UFW and thus further developing its own aesthetic.

(Right: El

Teatro Campesino's annual Christmas show *La Pastorela*.)

As Valdez said in an interview with Carl Heyward: “Without El Teatro I would not have been able to write *Zoot Suit*.... We attract young people, people who are confronted with rather stark realities. They have to hope for something, man. If they don't have the arts telling them about the essence and meaning of life, offering some kind of exploration of the positive and negative aspects of life, then there is no hope.”
