

AUGUST 1978

THIS MONTH IN LA THEATRE HISTORY

On August 6, 1978, *Zoot Suit* officially opened at the Mark Taper Forum after a successful workshop production in the spring. (See ALAP's *NewsFlash* from March - May 2021). Gordon Davidson, Center Theatre Group's Artistic Director, had commissioned Luis Valdez to write and direct a play in 1977.

Valdez fictionalized two real events: the Sleepy Lagoon Murder case when 22 young Mexican-American men were arrested, apparently chosen based on their dress and the "duck tail comb" hair style, and then convicted in 1942. All the while, the white press stirred up racial stereotypes and hysterical of crime.

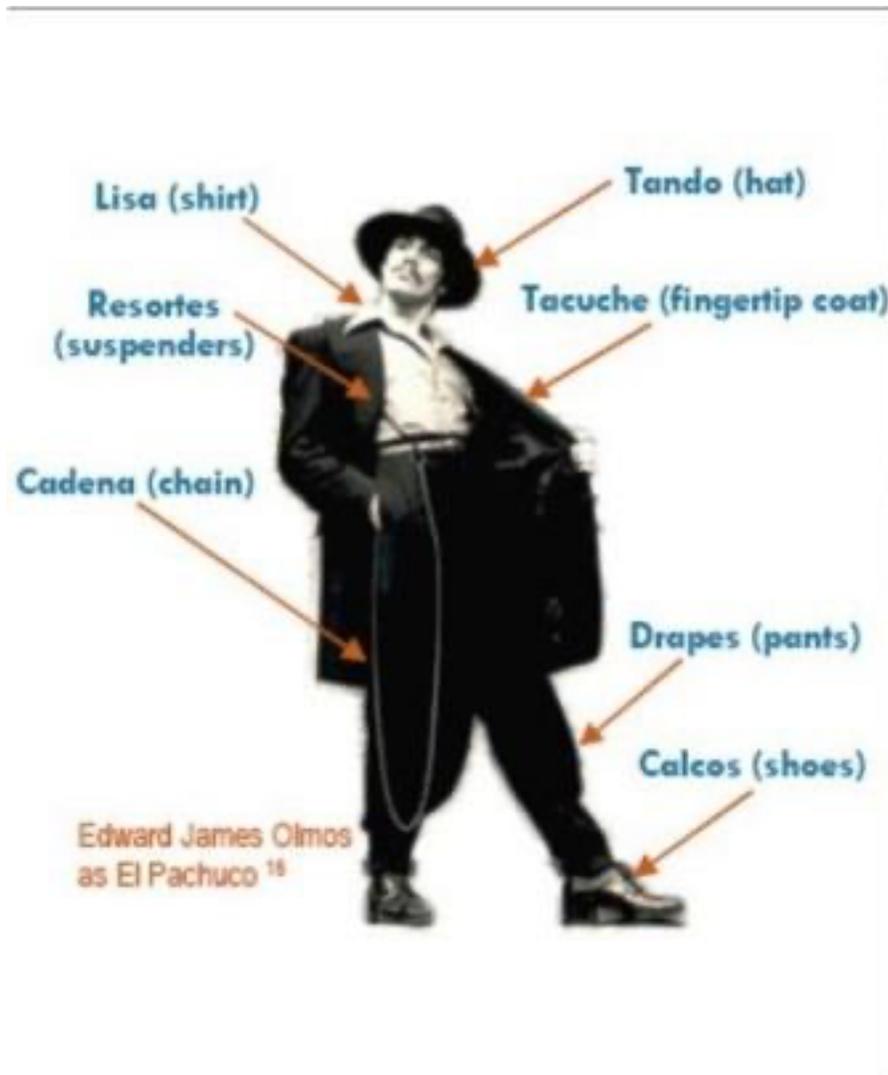
This press propaganda helped stir the Zoot Suit Riots which for the most part was actually perpetrated by sailors and soldiers on leave. Mostly Mexican Americans youth were beaten and their clothes literally torn off, as the Zoot Suits were supposedly unpatriotic because they used so much fabric when fabric was being rationed during World War 2.

Because of those misnamed riots, we think of the Zoot Suit solely as part of Mexican-American youth culture, but in truth the style began in Harlem in the 1930s because it was a style particularly well-suited to swing dancing to Big Band jazz music. As from the photo below, young white Americans also adopted the suit, here attending a Big Band concert

in Washington D.C. These boys obviously did not get beaten for being "unpatriotic."



But in Los Angeles and throughout the Southwest, Pachuco's (according to Webster's a member of neighborhood gang, but in this context shouldn't be assumed to mean criminal gang) adopted the Zoot Suit - for dancing - and then added their own flair. It was both a rebellion and a statement of cultural identity for this subset of Mexican-American culture. The Pachuco's held an ambiguous place - both admired and feared - and Valdez highlighted that tension with the older generation of Mexican-Americans in the play.



Edward James Olmos as El Pachuco begins the play by putting on his suit in a highly stylized way... it's clearly part of the choreography by Patricia Birch.

Then he speaks in a Spanish that isn't recognizable because it is caló - a slang dialect mixing Spanish and English. Sometimes this character was like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, explaining and narrating to the audience, and at other times he would be part of the action as an alter ego to the protagonist character of Henry Reyna.



Edward James Olmos above and Daniel Valdez as Henry Reyna. All black and white photos from the original production are by Jay Thompson for the Los Angeles Times.



Below one of the real life victims of the Zoot Suit riots. The police didn't arrest any of the drunken sailors but this man was in jail.





Valdez used all of the political theatre "agit-prop" techniques he practiced with El Teatro Campesino but now adding all the slickness and professionalism of a well-funded major regional theatre.

In the photo at right, an actor who plays one of the racist press propagandists, doubles as the prosecutor, and the judge is a desk made up of newspapers clearly giving the message the conviction in court was built on the propaganda in the press. As in a typical Teatro Campesino Acto, *Zoot Suit* was not subtle, which sometimes was one of the critiques the reviews made, including Sylvie Drake in the Los Angeles Times in 1978. But nonetheless, she concluded:

“By the time the piece is over, Valdez has achieved exactly what he set out to do: not only given us a story with a traceable plot, but also used it to

pull us inside the Chicano, made us understand his pain, his pride, his baloney. We walk out warm and dazed.”



The production changed Los Angeles theatre forever as it brought Mexican culture into the mainstream.

The play was so successful and well-attended, the run was extended and played at the Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood for another 9 months, then was made into a movie and play briefly on Broadway - closing early as the New York critics were far more hostile.



*Big Band jazz music and dance played an important part in the play.
Above and below are two good examples.*



As Los Angeles Times Critic Charles McNulty wrote in his review of the 2017 revival at the Taper: “....the cultural impact of *Zoot Suit* when it first premiered nearly 40 years ago....carved a path that Chicano theater artists such as **Luis Alfaro** and Culture Clash are more easily treading today.”







