



## Theater: 'Zoot Suit,' Chicano Music-Drama

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*(The New York Times* reviews the Broadway play, *Zoot Suit*.)

**Zoot Suit**, like the garment that serves as its symbol, is a great deal of loose material draped over a spindly form.

Its attempt to construct a theatrical political pageant about the situation of the Chicano, or Mexican-American, populace in Los Angeles is overblown and undernourished. It is a bewildering mixture of styles—realism, stylization, agitprop and plain showbiz gaudiness—that clash and undermine one another.

*Zoot Suit*, which had its formal opening last night at the Winter Garden after two press openings—I saw the performance on Saturday—was written and directed by Luis Valdez, creator of the Teatro Campesino in California. It was put on last spring in an experimental version at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, substantially revised for a fall production later in the year and polished and adjusted further for its New York premiere.

The early version, which I saw last April, was interesting and affecting though very uneven. The revisions, which are in the direction of theatricality and away from the elements of naturalism that contributed to both the play's character and its awkwardness, have had the effect of making it windier, more grandiloquent and less alive.

**Zoot Suit** is a free adaptation of real events that took place in Los Angeles during World War II. 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 haircuts.

One such band, the 38th Street Gang, was arrested and convicted in a mass trial of murder during a gang fight. The conduct of the trial, both in court and in the press, was so one-sided that the conviction was later overturned. The long defense effort was sustained by a committee of liberals and leftists, supported by a number of prominent figures from Hollywood and elsewhere.

Mr. Valdeg uses the zoot suits and the gangs as images of a minority group whose younger generation was unwilling to accept second-class status and engaged in an extravagant form of protest. The zoot suit was a way of asserting dignity; one of the most graphically moving scenes in the play is the humiliation of a Pachuco by a gang of sailors. He loses his dignity along with his clothes.

The play centers on Henry Reyna, leader of the 38th Street Gang. It uses flashbacks to show the gang's activities, has a series of scenes showing the trial, the time in prison, the relationships of the youths and their Anglo defenders, and—very sketchily—the relationships of Henry and his contemporaries with their families.

The narrative and flashback scenes alternate with dance sequences in which the angular gyrations of the young Chicanos serve as a kind of choreographed protest. Newspapers are an insistent motif, reflecting the play's denunciation of the press role in whipping up anti-Hispanic sentiments. Stacked-up newspapers serve as furniture, newspapers on a clothesline are the family laundry, and in the fine opening scene, a blown-up newspaper, hanging as a curtain, is pierced by an enormous knife blade. It rips a hole through which a flamboyant zoot-suited figure steps.

He is El Pachuco, and he is a mythical figure who acts as one of Henry Reyna's voices, and provides a sardonic commentary on the events. El Pachuco, played with comic ferocity by Edward James Oimos, managed to dominate the stage at the Mark Taper Theater. At the Winter Garden, his presence is less effective and eventually it becomes a stage mannerism.

Other devices, such as an omnipresent reporter, nicely played by Arthur Hammer, which worked in the earlier version, seem merely affected here.

The role of Henry Reyna's father, who provided a witty, ironic sense of Chicano life in an indifferent society, has been cut; and with it has gone some of the play's life.

Henry Reyna himself is played by Daniel Vaides with appealing passion, softened by reflectiveness. The character's symbolism eventually eclipses his reality, however. A whole series of scenes with Alice Bloomfield, the defense committee organizer, are shallow and mechanical. The incipient love relationship between Henry and Alice, played by Karen Hensel, and his conflicting love for his old girlfriend, are badly and heavily written.

There are some good scenes in which George Shearer, as Henry's lawyer, overcomes the Chicanos' suspicion of him. The trial makes a comical, though only partly convincing travesty; and Vincent Duke Milana is a fine, obtuse judge.

The political arguments of **Zoot Suit** are presented in stilted and paper-thin terms; and the rhythm of changes, in which the characters are dancing at one moment, fighting or making love at another, and speechifying a moment later, is jarring and unsatisfactory.

“**Zoot Suit**” aspires to be story and symbol, universal message and popular entertainment all at once; but its creators have failed to join all these things together.

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