TRIAL BY MEDIA: *ZOOT SUIT* AND THE CAREER OF LUIS VALDEZ

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The many recent articles that dealt with the passing of Chicano musician Lalo Guerrero were often accompanied by the lyrics of one of his best-known songs, «No Chicanos on TV», which was loosely inspired by Joyce Kilmer's poem *Trees*. The song begins by establishing the lack of a media presence for Chicanos, despite their significance as a consumer group:

I think that I shall never see
Any Chicanos on TV
It seems as though we don't exist
And we're not even missed
And yet we buy and buy their wares
But no Chicanos anywhere.

It concludes by further emphasising the absence of the Chicano population from the U.S. media and by calling for an embargo on consumer goods by Chicanos until their presence is recognised like that of other ethnic groups:

Don't buy the product, if you see,
No Chicanos on TV
Huggies has its three babies
White and black and Japanese
Chicano babies also pee
But they don't show them on TV.

The humour in Guerrero's version of the poem does not obscure the serious issue of the lack of representation of Chicanos in the media. It also highlights the concern with this invisibility amongst Chicanos. Indeed, the

song has been used to introduce a number of studies on the lack of media representation of this group (Escalante, pp. 131-169). Another prominent concern of Chicano commentators is that when Chicanos are represented, whether in literature or in visual media, these portrayals are very often overtly negative and racist. The often-cited example of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* represents one such case. The novel, which was first published in 1935, deals with the story of Danny, a war veteran who returns to Monterey, California, to find that he has become a property owner. Danny is classified as a *paisano*, a group described by Steinbeck in the foreword to the novel as follows:

> What is a paisano? He is a mixture of Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian blood. His ancestors have lived in California for a hundred or two years. He speaks English with a *paisano* accent and Spanish with a *paisano* accent (Steinbeck, p. 4).

Danny learns of the change in his circumstances in the opening passage of the novel:

> When Danny came home from the army he learned that he was an heir and an owner of property. The Viejo, that is, the grandfather, had died leaving Danny the two small houses on Tortilla Flat. When Danny heard about it he was a little weighed down with the responsibility of ownership. Before he ever went to look at his property, he bought a gallon of red wine and drank most of it himself. The weight of responsibility left him then, and his very worst nature came to the surface. He shouted, he broke a few chairs in a poolroom on Alvarado Street; he had two short but glorious fights. At last his wavering bow-legs took him toward the wharf where, at this early hour in the morning, the Italian fisherman were walking down in rubber boots to go out to sea. Race antipathy overcame Danny's good sense. He menaced the fishermen. «Sicilian bastards,» he called them, and «Scum from the prison island,» and «Dogs of dogs of dogs.» He cried, «chinga tu madre, *piojo*» (Steinbeck, p. 7).

Steinbeck's portrayal of this precursor of the Chicano not only embodies some of the worst attributes that stereotypical depictions of Chicanos project –lack of responsibility, drunkenness and violence– but he also casts Danny as a racist, although at least his use of Spanish epithets is correct in this instance, unlike elsewhere in the novel. Steinbeck's evocation of the Chicano understandably drew hostile responses from that group, and in the 1937 edition of his book, he offers an apology to those he may have offended:

> When this book was written, it did not occur to me that *paisanos* were curious or quaint, dispossessed or underdoggish. They are people whom I know and like, people who merge successfully with their habitat. In men this is called philosophy, and it is a fine thing. Had I known that these stories and these people would be considered quaint, I think I never should have written them. I remember a little boy, a school friend. We called him the *piojo* and he was a nice, kind, brown little boy. He had no mother or father –only an elder sister whom we loved and respected. We called her, with a great deal of respect, a hoor-lady (Steinbeck, pp. xii-xiii).

Steinbeck's caricature of the Chicano and Chicana was replicated in countless films made in the same period. Citing Allen Woll's study *The Latin Image in American Film*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that there is a:

> substratum of male violence common to Latino male stereotypes – the bandido, the greaser, the revolutionary, the bullfighter. Latina woman, meanwhile, call up the heat and passionate salsa evoked by the titles of the films of Lupe Velez: *Hot Pepper* (1933), *Strictly Dynamite* (1934), and *Mexican Spitfire* (1940) (Shohat and Stam, p. 196).

Other problematic Hollywood depictions of ethnic groups use stereotypical cultural markers inaccurately, as in the 1933 Dolores Del Río vehicle, *Flying Down to Rio*, which features Brazilians wearing Mexican sombreros, dancing the tango, and speaking in hybrid accents that are neither Spanish nor Portuguese (Friedman, p. 227).

The work of Luis Valdez, who emerged as the founder of El Teatro Campesino in 1965, shows a keen awareness of the pernicious stereotypes of Chicanos in the media and asserts an alternative vision of Chicano life that was grounded initially in the harsh realities of the injustice endured by farm workers. The *actos* staged by Valdez and his theatre group highlighted the abuses faced by farm workers who engaged in a lengthy strike in a bid to secure adequate working conditions and a fair wage. Although the objectives of the group became more expansive and shifted towards an emphasis on creating a culture that could foster Chicano pride in their distinctive identity, the works produced by the group remained strongly political. As Valdez stated at this stage of his career:

> El movimiento progresa día tras día y nosotros tenemos que seguir un paso adelante con nuestros mensajes políticos. Actuamos no para la gloria falsa de un aplauso, sino para educar, informar, y unir La Raza (Jiménez, p. 119).

This statement makes clear Valdez's interest not in creating art for art's sake but in fomenting solidarity among Chicanos through theatrical works that illustrated their struggles and problems as a subaltern group. The *actos* also stressed the need for a farmworkers' union and served as a vehicle for communicating these messages to Chicanos in urban areas. The importance of this work at this point in the evolution of Chicano literature cannot be overestimated, as there was little in the way of a model for aspiring playwrights or actors to follow. While many of these works were rather ramshackle affairs acted by non-professional actors in straitened circumstances, if nothing else they provided an importance document of contemporary Chicano history and inspired other writers to engage with the representation of their culture. Valdez followed the *actos* with the «Plan of Delano», which proclaimed the initiation of the farmworkers' grape strike in the town of Delano, California, as the start of a new social movement. As Chon A. Noriega notes, the conflation of the theatrical works and the later manifesto amounted to:

> ... a unique expression that coupled together seemingly opposed egalitarian and communitarian goals, so that the call for equal justice within the United States justified an affirmation of a Mexican past and culture that then made such equality its inevitable outcome (Noriega and López, p. 5).

Even his detractors acknowledge the pivotal role Valdez played in the development of Chicano theatre through the Teatro Campesino. Despite his commitment to this pioneering work, however, Valdez felt constrained by the collaborative nature of the group's working methods and the narrow range of topics dealt with in the plays produced. Jorge Huerta describes this longing for more creative autonomy as follows:

> Although he and his troupe were working collectively from the beginning, the individual playwright in Valdez was anxious to emerge. Discussing the process of writing plays outside of the group, Valdez recalled: «I used to work on them with a sense of longing, wanting more time to be able to sit down and write» (Valdez, 1992, p. 8).

As he embarked on a solo career as a playwright and director, Valdez explored more general topics outside the plight of the farm workers in his plays, which increasingly incorporated Aztec spirituality. He also developed an interest in filmmaking that led to his cinematic adaptation of Rodolfo «Corky» Gonzales's poem «I Am Joaquin.» It is at this stage in his career

that the critical reaction to his work amongst Chicanos becomes less than overwhelmingly positive. Chon A. Noriega's analysis of the film suggests that «Valdez's film adaptation exemplifies his own artistic shift from community-based organizing to addressing a mass audience for which community must be imagined» (Noriega and López, pp. 104-5). While this statement certainly points to the fact that there was not an established audience for material that dealt with more general issues relating to Chicano identity, it may also be read as an implicit criticism of Valdez's move from community activism to artistic individualism.

Moreover, at the outset of the Chicano movement, the production of literary and cinematic works was very often subject to standards that were highly prescriptive. Jorge Huerta, in the introduction to his collection *Necessary Theater: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience*, explains the title of this work by proclaiming the significance of the plays in decidedly political terms:

> If Chicano theater was necessary in its early stages as an educational tool, it is equally important today... these plays serve as historical documents and living examples of the necessary theater; they are expressions of the Chicanos' continuing struggle for cultural, linguistic, economic, spiritual and political survival (Huerta, 1989, p. 5).

While, as Huerta suggests, it was vital for Chicanos to be represented and to communicate the hardships they endured, this comment leaves Chicano writers little possibility for the individual expression sought by Valdez, as it appears that serving the community is the pivotal concern of the Chicano playwright. Similarly, in her seminal text *The Bronze Screen*, Rosa Linda Fregoso, who was to become a staunch critic of Valdez's work, suggested that Chicano films should be for, by and about Chicanos (Fregoso, 1993), again concentrating on the need to serve and represent one's people rather than express a personal voice. Juan Bruce-Novoa, in his discussion of the emergence and development of Chicano literature, acknowledges that the strict criteria set for Chicano writers are problematic and may lead to formulaic and even trite writing. He asserts that:

> Chicano literature is in danger of being handcuffed to superficial characteristics. Not that Chicanos do not use words such as carnal, bato, ese in everyday speech. Many do. Still others find it necessary to adopt them into their vocabulary to move in certain circles. Writers may face the rejection of their material by those they consider their own people if they do not include them.

> The standard formula for a successful Chicano piece calls for five or six carnales, a dozen eses and batos, a sprinkle of Spanish and a well placed «Chinga tu madre» (Bruce-Novoa, p. 16).

Significantly, Bruce-Novoa goes on to note that Valdez supported younger writers who did not wish to produce work that they felt was shaped by militant Chicano movement standards at a 1972 national teatro conference. Valdez's insistence on the right of authors to develop their own voices did not mean that he severed his association with the collaborative drama that shaped his early career. In fact, his relationship with El Teatro Campesino continues to the present day, and he has returned to writing plays following a period devoted primarily to filmmaking. What Valdez did assert, however, was the right to experiment with techniques far removed from those of the *actos*, such as Bertolt Brecht's direct engagement with the audience, which plays a prominent role in *Zoot Suit*. Valdez also worked within mainstream Hollywood to produce films directed not just at Chicanos but also at wider audiences.

Given the ambivalence with which Valdez has been treated by critics, it is not surprising that the role of the media lies at the centre of his play *Zoot Suit*. The play dramatises the trial of the Chicano 38th Street Gang for the murder of José Díaz, whose body was found in the reservoir known as the Sleepy Lagoon on August 2, 1942. The previous evening, he had attended a party that was also host to members of the gang. The police arrested the entire gang after the discovery of the body and charged 22 of them with criminal conspiracy. Although there was little evidence to link the accused to the crime, they were denied bail and deprived of their rights to a fair trial. The publicity surrounding the trial was fervently anti-Mexican-American, while the court proceedings themselves were full of irregularities, including the refusal of Judge Charles W. Fricke to allow the defendants to cut their hair or change their clothes throughout. The reaction to the trial and other racist incidents scapegoating Mexican-Americans led to the so-called Zoot Suit Riots in early June 1943, when Chicano youths and servicemen clashed in violent street brawls (Sánchez, pp. 266-7).

The climate leading up to the trial and the subsequent riots was marked by increasing hostility towards Mexican-Americans in the United States. The wartime imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps meant that local newspapers, particularly those owned by William Randolph Hearst, turned to Mexican-Americans as a suitable substitute for hatemongering. Indeed, the Mexican-American community was polarised by World

War II, as some identified strongly with the United States and sought to assimilate by serving in the army, while others celebrated their difference. In the *barrios* of Los Angeles, younger Mexican-Americans forged a separate identity that was expressed by wearing flamboyant outfits that became know as zoot suits. Mario T. García describes this style as follows:

> There were at first two particular types of dress for male gang members. One type originated in El Paso and consisted of high-waisted pants and bell-bottomed trousers. Another style involved fully draped pegged-bottom pants, a long jacket, and a porkpie hat. The latter style became more popular and became know as the zoot suit. Young women also belonged to gangs and possessed their own distinctive dress. Some wore very short skirts, while others favored pegged skirts. Hairdos were also distinctive (García, p. 104).

In his examination of the events surrounding the Zoot Suit Riots, Douglas Henry Daniels cites a letter printed in *Time* magazine written by a soldier to explain his hostility to the zoot suiters:

> To a soldier who has been taken from his home and put in the Army, the sight of young loafers of any race, color, creed, religion or color of hair loafing around in ridiculous clothes that cost $75 to $85 per suit is enough to make them see red (Daniels, p. 204).

Of course, as Daniels points out, these youths would find it difficult to find employment regardless of what they wore. Moreover, the press's insistent focus on what was dubbed the Zoot Suitor Menace was a cynical means of fostering racism without naming Mexicans and thus jeopardising President Roosevelt's Good Neighbour Policy.

Valdez's play centres on the figure of Henry Reyna, a Chicano who is perceived by the police and the press to be the leader of the 38th Street Gang. As in real life, he and his friends are wrongly accused of murder, incarcerated and subjected to a clearly unjust and racist trial. As the play opens, Henry, who has previously spent time in prison, seeks to join the U.S. Navy, a plan that is thwarted by his arrest, which will deem him unfit for service. Henry's rage and resentment at being scapegoated for being a Chicano are filtered through his alter ego, a flamboyant, violent figure known as El Pachuco. The character of the Press plays a key role from the outset, as the first stage direction calls for the play to begin with the lowering onstage of a giant facsimile of a newspaper front page bearing the headline 'Los Angeles Herald Express, June 3, 1943. Zoot-Suiter Hordes Invade Los Angeles.

US Navy and Marines are Called In.' In this manner, a tension is established between the military and the zoot suiters, and by extension between Henry's dream of joining the Navy and his affiliation with his gang. The prologue to Act One further underlines this ambivalence. El Pachuco first appears after slashing the newspaper with a switchblade and walking through it. This character is destined to challenge Henry's desire to become a marine by emphasising the lure of the zoot suit life that joining the Navy would necessarily lead him to abandon:

> El Pachuco: It was the secret fantasy of every bato in or out of the Chicanada to put on a Zoot Suit and play the Myth más chucote que la chingada. ¡Pos órale! (Valdez, 1992, p. 26).

The next scene introduces Henry and his gang at a *barrio* dance, which is invaded by police who accuse them of the murder. The Press is also on the scene, inventing lurid headlines to publicise the arrests, and the almost constant presence of the Press continues during the interrogation of the gang members. The way in which the press have become protagonists rather than objective reporters is further suggested through the permeation of everyday life by the media. In a surrealistic scene in Act One, Henry watches his mother hang newspapers rather than clothes on her washing line. The sensationalist reporting of the trial continues in scene five, as the press, a cub reporter and a newsboy compete to vilify the 38th street gang by calling them murderers, «zoot suited goons» and suggesting that they use marijuana. At this, however, the character of Alice is introduced as a foil to the overwhelmingly negative representatives of the media primarily embodied by the Press. Alice, as she herself explains to Henry, is a reporter from the progressive press. Understandably, Henry is baffled at the thought that a member of the press could want to report his situation in an impartial, even-handed manner:

> Henry: Look, lady, I don't know what the hell you're talking about.
> Alice: I'm talking about you, Henry Reyna. And what the regular press has been saying. Are you aware that you're in here because some bigshot in Sam Simeon wants to sell more papers? It's true.
> Henry: So?
> Alice: So, he's the man who started this Mexican Crime Wave stuff. Then the police got in the act. Get the picture? Somebody is using you as a patsy (Valdez, 1992, p. 49).

As Henry responds indignantly to her use of this term, El Pachuco intervenes: «El Pachuco: *Puro pedo*. She's just a dumb broad only good for you know what» (Valdez, 1992, p. 49). Again, the conflict between Henry's longing for hope and El Pachuco's nihilism surfaces here, as El Pachuco sees Alice only in terms of a sexual conquest, while Henry, despite his cynicism, is willing to give her a hearing and still believe that the case can be resolved. Ultimately, Alice, in conjunction with lawyer George Shearer, attracts such attention to the irregularities of the trial that the gang's murder convictions are overturned and they are freed on appeal. During the first trial, the character of The Press becomes even more central, however, as he represents the prosecution in the case. This rather heavy-handed device is overly obvious and does nothing to advance the social criticism in the play, although it does point once again the way in which media influence had a profoundly negative effect on the outcome of the first court proceedings. As the play concludes, various characters give conflicting versions of how Henry's life proceeded after the trial. True to form, the Press continues to relentlessly stereotype Henry as a criminal greaser:

> Press: Henry Reyna went back to prison in 1947 for robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. While incarcerated, he killed another inmate and he wasn't released until 1955, when he got into hard drugs. He died of the trauma of his life in 1972 (Valdez, 1992, p. 94).

This inconclusive and unconventional ending reflects the more experimental aspects of the play. El Pachuco plays a significant role in this respect, as it is he who freezes the action at times and addresses the audience directly while, in a technique directly influenced by Brechtian drama, he calls attention to the play as a fictional construct. El Pachuco also has another function – to embody the Aztec warrior past from which Henry descends. It is he, and not Henry, who chastises the Press about its distortion of Chicano identity:

> Pachuco: The Press distorted the very meaning of the word «zoot suit.» All it is for you guys is another way to say Mexican. But the idea of the original chuco was to look like a diamond to look sharp hip bonaroo finding a style of urban survival in the rural outskirts of the brown metropolis of Los, cabrón (Valdez, 1992, p. 80).

Although this challenge to the Press ends with the Pachuco being overpowered by the Military who act as media henchmen, El Pachuco retains his dignity, as under the suit he is revealed to be wearing the loincloth of an

Aztec warrior. *Zoot Suit* was undoubtedly a pioneering work in Chicano theatre. It presented a historical incident that exposed the institutionalised racism of the U.S. system, both in terms of the judiciary and the press. It also depicted Chicano youths in a sensitive and complex manner that suggested the contradictions and tensions of living between two cultures. Furthermore, it was imbued with the Aztec traditions that had long been part of Valdez's plays and sought to reverse negative stereotypes by examining the stereotypes that marked the press coverage of the 1940s. *Zoot Suit* broke all previous theatrical box office records when it opened in Los Angeles in 1978 (Huerta, 2000, p. 6). Jorge Huerta notes that it was not just a commercial success but also a triumph that allowed its creator to expand his vision of Chicano culture further, as its screen version was adapted and directed by him:

> The success of *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles became a watershed moment in the history of Latino theatre and of all theatre in the United States. With his very conscious move into the so-called mainstream, Valdez opened the doors to other professional venues, for himself and other Latina/o theatre artists as well (Huerta, 2000, p. 6).

This assessment of the significance of the play is notable for its insistence that Valdez's personal triumph represents advancement for all Latinos and even all playwrights in the United States. Furthermore, the mention of the so-called mainstream appears to anticipate the accusations of selling out that would subsequently dog Valdez, not just in the case of the film adaptation of *Zoot Suit* but especially in the aftermath of the unprecedented commercial success of his best-known film, *La Bamba*.

The reaction of the mainstream press to Valdez's play when it opened on Broadway in 1979 was less than positive, and it closed after only four weeks. In an article that considers this critical response to the play, Carlos Morton points to a racist strain in a review that suggested that Valdez's poor vocabulary could be explained by the fact that English was not his first language, while another dismissed the work by proclaiming «We gave at the office» (Morton, 1989, p. 21). The former review could perhaps be explained in terms of the linguistic ignorance of its author, who was undoubtedly not familiar with code-switching or Chicano Spanish. The latter is utterly dismissive and condescending, denying the play's artistic merits and branding it as a message play. What these responses recall, however, is Chon A. Noriega's cautionary statement about Valdez's initial move from community-based to professional theatre and the consequent need to address a mass

audience for which a community must be imagined. Clearly, despite the fact that over 30 years had passed since the period in which it was set, *Zoot Suit* dealt with realities and sociocultural issues that did not resonate with audiences outside Los Angeles.

The film version of the play is based on essentially the same material, with some significant changes. As the film opens, the camera pans through the Los Angeles skyline to reveal the setting of the action as the Aquarius Theatre, where the play had been such a success. The fact that Valdez adapts the Hollywood sign to «Hollywoodland» indicates a critical distance from Hollywood akin to the description of the United States as Disneylandia by many Chicano writers (Brito, 1990, p. 122). Moreover, this establishing shot appears to anticipate suggestions that by working in Hollywood, Valdez has sold out. What is most notable here, perhaps, is the mood of excitement and anticipation that greets the play. The viewer is sutured into the perspective of the audience, which clearly relishes the prospect of seeing a play that deals with Chicano reality. This celebratory tone is underlined by the fact that the film moves to a dance scene after El Pachuco appears, rather then addressing the issue of media racism from the outset, as the play does. This insistent focus on the audience thus moves the locus of the viewer's attention from the action on the stage to its significance for the community that responds to it, a none-too-subtle reflection of how Valdez himself sees his play as a cultural watershed for his community.

Critical reactions to the film were generally very positive. Ilan Stavans called it «an astonishing experimental film», while Elena Poniatowska commented that «with Luis Valdez's movie «Zoot Suit», Mexicans discovered the extraordinary strength, the overwhelming freshness, and the real meaning of the word «Chicano»» (Stavans, 1995, p. 89 and Poniatowska, 1996, p. 37). Others were less enthusiastic. Rosa Linda Fregoso criticised the film in an essay on how cultural identity is represented in Chicano art practice, noting that «the major ambivalence of the project of cultural nationalism centered on its systematic elision of women as subjects of its discourse, an ambivalence clearly rendered in *Zoot Suit*» (King and López, 1993, p. 276). The *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby is similarly unimpressed, noting that it is «a holy mess of a movie, full of earnest, serious intentions and virtually no achievements», adding that «the cameras aren't kind to any of the actors, especially Mr. Olmos, whose performance as el Pachuco is clearly designed to be seen as some distance, up on a stage» (Canby, 1986).

Despite the often negative media reaction to his work, both from Chicano and North American critics, Valdez continues to defend his work in Hollywood. In an interview conducted in 2000, he comments:

> I don't consider myself to be «Hollywood». I'm a writer so I stay home and write, but I needed to promote my projects. My major writing efforts have been to break through in television and film, where our greatest exposure can be (Valdez, 2000, p. 86).

Again, it would appear that the most effective means of countering suggestions that working in Hollywood means selling out is to call attention to the fact that the success of one Chicano writer will open doors to others. Whether one views Valdez as a visionary, a sellout whose patriarchal works exclude women, or as a message-driven playwright whose works are less than convincing, he has undoubtedly created a body of work that is unequalled both in its diversity and in its crossover appeal. I leave the final word on the matter to Valdez himself. His response to a question in the same interview about how he keeps going despite such mixed reviews of his work demonstrates his robust ego and his determination to continue along the path he has chosen: «I've seen snobbery, ignorance, and frankly, a lot of misunderstanding in terms of my work. History will absolve me in due time» (Valdez, 2000, p. 86).

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