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# Darning *Zoot Suit* for the Next Generation

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In September 2016, Center Theatre Group's (CTG) education department approached me with a commission to write a set of dramaturgical and instructional materials for the fortieth-anniversary production of *Zoot Suit*,<sup>1</sup> which opened on January 31, 2017. CTG was looking to create expanded pedagogical resources for an anniversary production that would, as the title of a published conversation with playwright Luis Valdez put it, "[pass] the baton of art and activism" by effectively reaching out to youth (Center Theatre Group 2017c). Given the play's importance to Chicana/os everywhere, this commission offered a rare honor and opportunity to research, design, and write materials specifically tailored to young audiences. After all, it is not every day that one gets to play a part, however small, in the staging of a play cut from the same cloth as the Chicano movement itself.

## The Chalk-Trace

Drawing on Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's idea that "the Chicano theatre movement can only be understood in relation to the larger political and cultural movement of which it was a part" (1990, 131), the curriculum I developed asked young people to understand their history and contemporary status through the play's lens. The idea was to uncover how *Zoot Suit*'s themes resonate (or do not) with the issues faced by contemporary Chicana/o youth, for whom *chicanismo* reads differently than it did fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Distinct from the many analyses of *Zoot Suit* as a dramatic and historiographic text, the educational materials I created focus on contemporary cultural elements that influence the present-day understanding of the

play—and by extension, of the Chicano movement as a whole—in the context of our present neoliberal regime. Given the current anti-immigrant climate, the materials highlight empowering (and underresearched) historical examples of Chicana/os in the movement who overcame challenges and made positive contributions to America's historiographical tapestry. My pedagogical objective was to encourage positive intergenerational conversations and connections between the trailblazers of the Chicano movement and the Chicana/o youth of today. Toward this end, I highlight the common threads running through the Chicano theater of the past, the Latina/o theater of the present, and possible Latinx futures.

Throughout the process it struck me that many youth of today see their styles and behaviors dismissed in much the same way as the early zoot suit-wearing pachucos were marginalized in the 1940s. Luis Valdez provided an inspiring sartorial analogy when he described the play as having “the same relationship to a normal realistic play as a zoot suit has to a normal suit.” He said that the play was “different” because “the lengths are longer. There's more fabric. But it's very cool! And I think that's part of the appeal” (Ito 2017). Valdez sees excess not as extravagant or self-indulgent, but as innovative and productive. I aspired to emulate this inversion of dominant paradigms in my curricular design.

By accepting the commission to write educational materials, I hoped to enable students to, as the director of the CTG Arts Education Initiatives put it, “enter the world of the play and the world of theatre.”<sup>3</sup> Part of the commission involved my participation in the Student Matinee Program (SMP), an initiative that brings thousands of local students to selected main-stage CTG performances to help them make connections between art and their lives. My responsibility in the SMP included documenting and facilitating a two-day retreat for teaching artists. I then began researching and writing educational materials for high school students and teachers that reflected the themes discussed at the retreat and in consultations with the lead teaching artists. I also compiled a list of accessible resources on the play, including websites, books, movies, and other materials, for a print and electronic bibliography. Another innovative aspect of this project was

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a collaboration with CTG staff on writing content for an online platform directed to general audiences.

The commission included researching, organizing, and writing three separate sets of *Zoot Suit*-themed packets. The first was a Discovery Guide for high school students from schools participating in CTG's Student Matinee Program. Discovery Guides, which CTG produces for many of its works, aid teachers in the pre- and post-show teaching of a given play. According to a February 21, 2017, press release, the SMP brought nearly 3,000 students and educators to performances, including sixty-three school groups from grades 9–12. Of these schools, forty-two were classified as Title I, with many students from low-income families (Center Theatre Group 2017d). As a testament to the play's resonance, thirty-five schools joined the waiting list in hope of being able to see the play through the SMP. The final draft of the Discovery Guide included short features on the life of Luis Valdez and the history of El Teatro Campesino; brief historical background on the 1942 court case, *People v. Zammora*, or the "Sleepy Lagoon murder trial," as the press would later christen it; a glossary of youth slang used in the play; and notes on 1940s youth culture and fashion.<sup>4</sup>

The second packet consisted of dramaturgical materials specifically prepared for and distributed to teachers. This material contained strategies on how to teach the play in disciplines outside of theater. The idea was that teachers could then use the material to understand the who, what, when, where, and why of taking their classes to see *Zoot Suit*. It also offered a unique model for integrating the themes in *Zoot Suit* into the classroom, not only for a single class after the performance, but throughout the year. The last packet included the text for a dedicated interactive *Zoot Suit* web page for CTG donors who could experience the show through a dynamic online platform. In short, all the educational material aimed to enhance and enrich the play's accessibility so that students who received the Discovery Guide would benefit from thought-provoking questions and dramaturgical information about CTG and theater in general.

## Changing the Pattern

One of the most exciting elements of the commission was the expanded scope of the community outreach vision for this production. Having previously written Discovery Guides for Teatro de los Andes's *En un Sol Amarillo* (2007) and Culture Clash's *Palestine, New Mexico* (2009), I was struck by the elevated level of attention, resources, and excitement that

this anniversary staging of *Zoot Suit* generated among staff in various departments at CTG.<sup>5</sup> The way Michael Ritchie, artistic director of Center Theatre Group, articulated the play's effect was apt: "You can feel the buzz" (Ito 2017). In its inaugural run at CTG in 1978, the play set single-day ticket sales records. It then enjoyed a sold-out run at the Mark Taper Forum and the Aquarius Theater in Hollywood for eleven months before becoming the first Chicana/o play to make it onto Broadway's Great White Way, eventually launching the careers of actors such as Edward James Olmos, Lupe Ontiveros, and Rose Portillo. Adorned with such historical trimmings, how could it not cause a buzz?

Outreach for the revival went beyond the education materials. On November 18, 2016, CTG celebrated the return of *Zoot Suit* and first day of ticket sales with a grand communal happening on the Music Center Plaza in downtown Los Angeles. Spanish-language television channel Univision and newspaper *Hoy* sponsored the event, which invited Los Angeles's Spanish-speaking population to weave themselves into the fabric of Los Angeles theater. Over 500 people participated, and ticket sales broke the record for single-day box office at the Mark Taper Forum, with revenues totaling \$90,000 (Center Theatre Group 2017d). In a nod to the show's title and El Pachuco, the play's iconic lead character, the event featured zoot suit-wearing dancers, live music, and lowriders, and it was broadcast live on two Los Angeles radio stations.<sup>6</sup>

A series of Community Conversations, free and open to the public, were held across the city to supplement the show's run (Center Theatre Group 2017a). These conversations featured local thought leaders in dialogue about the issues and ideas contained in *Zoot Suit*, including youth activism, Chicano art, fashion and politics, the music of Lalo Guerrero, as well as bias in the American media. CTG thus used the show to stimulate conversations among people who live, on a daily basis, the issues explored in the play—among youth above all. The Community Conversations kicked off on February 8, 2017, with an event titled "#YouthPower: Young Artists Keep Changing the World." This featured a panel discussing the power of groups of young people across the globe to unite and make themselves seen and heard (Center Theatre Group 2017a). Examples of this "youth power" range from swing-dancing teenagers who defied the Nazis in 1930s Germany to the Arab Spring activists who used social media to resist oppression in the twenty-first century. These conversations highlighted the ways in which Mexican American pachuco youth of the 1940s resonate with many groups in our contemporary world, showing

that our youth are part of a long and significant tradition that continues to have an important impact today.

It was important to document students' reactions to the play and thereby weigh the play's relevance to modern-day young audiences. As part of the strategy to gauge the impact, if any, that it had on youth beyond the play's aesthetic elements, *Zoot Suit* actor and educator Raul Cardona designed and administered a short post-show questionnaire.<sup>7</sup> It asked students the following questions:

1. How does this play inspire you as agents of social change?
2. How does it inspire you to further your education in or out of college?
3. Describe a moment in the play that had an impact on you at a deep or personal level.

The overall results confirmed the show's positive impact on youth, and a small sampling of the students' responses illustrates ways in which the show spoke to young audiences. For example, a high school student named Lorraine, from the Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) charter school system, wrote in her post-show evaluation that the moment in the play that most affected her was Hank Reyna's false imprisonment, because, as she put it, "I have [witnessed] something like what happened [to him]." Lorraine's reactions, and those of many other youth who have lived through some of the injustices portrayed in the play, are an excellent example of how the play empowers people who live the issues explored in the play.<sup>8</sup>

By conducting interviews, archival research, and going back to screen interview footage and documentaries about *Zoot Suit* with the players who made it happen, I hoped to find connections between the significations the play had in the 1970s and its meaning today. It was clear from the outset that even the most cursory of looks into the historical, cultural, and political impact of the 1970s production would yield stories of icons who were greatly influenced by *Zoot Suit*, like César Chávez, co-founder of the United Farm Workers, and Jerry Garcia, lead guitarist and vocalist of the Grateful Dead.<sup>9</sup> Scholars too regard the play as a touchstone. Denise Sandoval, professor of Chicana/o studies at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), who was a child when *Zoot Suit* premiered, remembers her parents telling her about the show; later she saw a plane advertising it with skywriting above her grandparents' home in Lincoln Heights. And then there is playwright and actress Evelina Fernández, a founding member of Los Angeles's Latino Theater Company, who stated of the play, "I'm not being overly dramatic when I say, 'It changed my life.' It set me on the



path of making theatre my life's work" (Center Theatre Group 2017b). It is tempting to think that *Zoot Suit* may have the same impact on today's generation of young theater makers, who saw the play acted by people who look like them on Los Angeles's premier stage in the fortieth-anniversary run. Only time will tell whether this staging was simply the latest enactment of a "Latin number" (Herrera 2015, 4) or a more long-lasting manifestation of Chicana/o identity.

As a lecturer in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at CSUN, I have had many conversations with young people in the classroom about the play and its present-day influence and relevance. These conversations reinforced the need to construct academic materials that account for today's Chicana/os and the new patterns they are tracing. In conducting my research I amassed more information than would fit into the CTG deliverables. Much of the excised material was controversial, either because it involved the protests held during the play's premiere run or because it delved into the minutiae of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial.<sup>10</sup> To take just one example, we have the archival material that Valdez used to write "Baby Zoot," the first draft of the play that would become *Zoot Suit*. These materials included prison letters from the defendants as well as court transcripts from *People v. Zammora*. In one fascinating difference between the two versions, the father figure goes from a vocal and active anarchist in "Baby Zoot" to a passive and ruminative veteran of the Mexican Revolution in *Zoot Suit*. These changes seem to point to a watering down of the play's polemic and militant roots. Of the political content left in the play, Valdez states, "I didn't invent that stuff. That wasn't agitprop" (Ito 2017). Here Valdez seems to want to validate his aesthetic choices through their historical facticity, a move that protects the play from the many accusations that it is hyperbolic. Taken together, this bounty of material on *Zoot Suit* speaks not only to the play's historical and continued impact on Chicana/o communities but also to its success grappling with the fundamental issues of racism, war, and xenophobia—issues that are still entangled in a Gordian knot that the play is helping new generations of youth to cleave.

## The Slash and Spread

CTG's restaging of *Zoot Suit* coincided with the run of *Hamilton*, the most critically acclaimed and financially successful Latina/o play to date.<sup>11</sup> This offered an opportunity to reflect on how each work benefited from and informed the other. For a time, I considered dedicating a section of the

educational materials to outlining the parallels between the plays in order to highlight the way *Zoot Suit* resonates today. Space limitations excluded this theoretically rich research, but as a brief overview, here are some of the parallels. Both plays are historiographical and biographical dramatic sketches of historical events. They tactically employ similar aesthetic techniques to work with and against the American Dream. Both plays feature immigrants as protagonists. Both plays are narrated by an antagonist and embrace a historical period as the unifying narrative thread of the story. Both plays are primarily set during wartime and feature main characters that to one degree or another view service to country and family as a badge of honor. But of all the parallels, the most significant is that both plays strive to tell the story of immigrants and how they strengthen the fabric of the United States of America. All this makes one think that perhaps *Zoot Suit* could be, in some small but important way, credited with laying the foundation for the excitement that *In the Heights* (which opened in 2008) and then *Hamilton* (which opened in 2015) have inspired. Were it not for the success of these two musicals in New York, there might not have been enough incentive for Los Angeles to rush to costume storage and darn its collection of forty-year-old zoot suits.

The research for this project also highlighted the trajectory that *el movimiento* took from its apex in the 1970s to its present-day disorientation. This trajectory calls to mind Yolanda Broyles-González's controversial claim that if Chicana/o teatro is not as strong as it once was, that is due at least in part to the "human transformation" that occurs when some people of color receive token privilege, only to then use it to reinforce dominant interests, thereby overlooking or flat-out rejecting the needs and interests of the community they came from (2006, 217). Perhaps it is Broyles-González's animadversion that inspired the stellar commitment of the fortieth-anniversary staging of *Zoot Suit* to the Chicana/o population. Furthermore, according to Broyles-González, *Zoot Suit*'s world premiere was ironic because it marked the Teatro Campesino's separation from the community that gave it birth. As she puts it, the 1978 production was "a radical departure from what had been El Teatro Campesino's performance philosophy since 1965" (171); it manifested the commercialization of El Teatro Campesino and set in motion the group's eventual disbanding. *Zoot Suit*'s premiere on a stage of privilege marked Chicano theater's comfort with and eventual embrace of neoliberalism's siren call. Its shift toward seeking legitimacy and profit from the mainstream Anglo entertainment industry compelled it to turn away from the sympathetic audiences who



needed it most. The anniversary staging, then, represented a long overdue loop back to Chicano teatro's early commitment to *la raza*. The remnants of the Chicano movement looked back at its trajectory and opted to restage the play that may have contributed to hewing the movement from its roots. Paradoxically, this same play represented the best start toward reestablishing a Chicana/o identity. Only time will tell whether this urge to connect to future generations of Chicana/os will remain or fade, like the fabric of so many protest banners.

As I researched the Chicano movement's foundational texts, it was clear that many of them contained a commitment to youth, their education, and their empowerment. This is true of two early documents that could be called the first intellectual articulations of the Chicano movement: El Plan de Santa Bárbara and El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán. In reviewing them as source material for the guide, I was struck by the centrality of youth in these key writings. Even in its infancy, the movement understood that the only Chicana/o group capable of the sacrifice necessary for liberation would be the youth. An often-overlooked aspect of the early movement is that young people were a focus, in large part because so many of the leaders and members of the burgeoning movement were young themselves. El Plan de Santa Bárbara was drafted with the input of more than a hundred participants, including community delegates and young Chicana and Chicano students, who met in Santa Barbara, California, specifically to be "away from the sensationalism of the mass media, and from the alarms of self-seeking politicians" and to formulate a more authentic "Chicano plan for higher education" (Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education 1971, 10). The best-known authors of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán were Alberto Baltazar Urista Heredia, a twenty-two-year-old Mexican national calling himself Alurista, and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, who was in his early thirties when he penned the seminal poem "I Am Joaquín" (Gonzales and Urista 1969). What these foundational texts indicate, as compromised or uncritical as their polemic tone may seem to us today, is that to one extent or another, youth were the *axis mundi* of the Chicano movement's birth, progress, and survival.

## Basting Stitches

Young Chicana/os in the 1960s were understood to be the leaders of a revolution that would eventually realize the founding of a new people in the ancestral land of Aztlán. Unfortunately, as David G. Gutiérrez (1993) has

theorized, the Chicano movement emerged as a moment of radical potential that regrettably never engendered a revolution and eventually lapsed into complacency. If Gutiérrez is correct, part of the reason for this complacency has to do with the movement disremembering that when neoliberalism gives you a suit, it is only to take you to the cleaners later. Many scholars have addressed the issue of early Chicano activists and scholars moving away from their origins. For example, José F. Aranda Jr. writes, "Chicana/o Studies is, and has been, moving in directions that are decidedly at odds from its origins in the Chicano/a Movement" (2002, 127). Aranda suggests that Chicana/os have managed, perhaps unintentionally, to become alienated from one another and that they must work collectively to recover from their alienation. This part of my research led me to make editorial decisions to ensure the longevity of the outreach; I wanted instructors to be able to use the material independently of a live staging of the play. To fail in the task of making *Zoot Suit*'s lessons relevant beyond the present is to advance the movement's gradual unraveling.

If Aranda and Gutiérrez resort to hyperbole with these claims, it is only by inches. No one can creditably deny that for "many Mexican Americans coming of age since the mid-1980s being identified as Chicano or Chicana has lost its magic" (Aranda 2002, 128). Nor can one say that Chicana/os do not suffer from "a widening gap between the rich and the poor, between the long settled and the recently arrived, and between an increasingly visible intellectual elite and a growing underclass of poorly educated Chicano/a youth" (129). The fact that President Trump secured more than 20 percent of the "Hispanic" vote in the 2016 presidential election illustrates this hole on the seam of the Chicano movement all too clearly. These splits and their mending is why *Zoot Suit* is so valuable, specifically to Chicana/o theater and to present-day *chicanismo* in general. It affords the older generation of Chicana/os an opportunity to share with the next generation an artifact that was essential to the early days of Chicana/o subject formation.

The reaction of youth to the restaging of *Zoot Suit* was uppermost in the minds of many key players involved with the production. Demián Bichir, the Mexican-born, Oscar-nominated actor who played El Pachuco, mused in a *Los Angeles Times* interview about how "a new generation" would respond to the play. This new generation had to wait a long time to see with their own eyes the play that defined their Chicana/o parents' generation. Sensitive to the play's legacy, Bichir noted, "This is a play that should not take 40 years to be re-staged" (Miller 2017). The student surveys validate Bichir's gentle admonition that the forty-year wait to see *Zoot Suit*

back on stage was too long. One student wrote that *Zoot Suit* “lets me see the past and now I can affect my future.” There are far too few moments of concrete cultural validation for our youth on our nation’s stages, but when such moments do manifest, we are all the richer for it.

The fortieth-anniversary staging of *Zoot Suit* drew much of its vigor from the pronounced connection it made with the Chicana/o population and its youth in particular. Valdez himself said as much in an article titled “How ‘Zoot Suit’ Changed Theatre Forever.” He expressed his eagerness to introduce *Zoot Suit* to a “new generation of Angelenos—many of whom [would] be returning with their parents and grandparents, who saw the show the first time around” (Center Theatre Group 2017b). CTG was able to use the play and its legacy as a teaching tool to address an economic reality: the future of conventional theater depends on attracting the youth of ethnic communities to live performances. Viewed in this way, CTG’s expansion of the educational materials for *Zoot Suit* is a tangible example of the significant shifts happening in theaters across the country.

The anniversary staging reminds us of the importance of youth in the process of transferring memories from the past to the future and situating these memories within historical lineages. To paraphrase Corky Gonzales, we must fight and win this struggle for our children, and they must know from us who we are. The rips in the fabric of contemporary American culture caused by neoliberalism are not beyond mending. Many young people expressed the same sentiments as Karla, another of the surveyed students, who wrote that *Zoot Suit* “inspired me to be a part of things that make a change.” Chicana/os have many resources with which to meet at least some of the challenges expressed by our youth. If *Zoot Suit* showed that a play can inspire a generation to recognize their own power and worth, then the beneficiaries of that recognition can invent new and better ways to empower subsequent generations. This means initiating an imperative conversation not only about what we have fought against in the past but also about what we plan to work on together as we march toward the future. It was my goal in the research, design, and writing of the material to investigate *Zoot Suit*’s significance to the next generation of young people and to shed light on the countless unexplored historiographies. Pursuing this goal made me realize that Chicana/o history is so expansive and its influence so pronounced that no single tapestry of text is large enough to fully cover its span.

C/S.



## Notes

1. Founded in 1967, Center Theatre Group, a nonprofit organization, is one of the largest theater companies in the nation, with year-round programming on three major stages: the Ahmanson Theatre and Mark Taper Forum in downtown Los Angeles and Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City.
2. *Chicanismo* is here understood as a robust form of ethnic pride performed by Chicana/os.
3. Traci Kwon, e-mail to author, September 20, 2016.
4. For news stories using the phrase "Sleepy Lagoon murder trial," see, for example, Belcher (1983) and Trombetta (1981).
5. Reflecting this heightened attention, my two previous Discovery Guides were about 2,000 words each, while the *Zoot Suit* materials came to 7,500 words.
6. KTNQ 1020AM and KRCD Recuerdo 103.9FM/98.3 FM.
7. Raul Cardona played Smiley and understudied the role of El Pachuco.
8. Student quotes in this essay are from post-show questionnaires administered on March 23, 2017. Questionnaires were administered at six performances; 168 students were surveyed overall, and fifty of them were Cardona's students. His students had studied *Zoot Suit* and the two central historical events in the play, namely the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and the Zoot Suit Riots. The idea behind the survey was to see whether there was a difference between students' appreciation of the play before and after attending a performance.
9. Garcia is said to have seen *Zoot Suit* twenty-two times.
10. The eight surviving defendants of *People v. Zamora* filed suit in 1979 against Luis Valdez and others after seeing *Zoot Suit*. See Broyles-González 2006, 183, citing Trombetta (1981).
11. *Hamilton* won eleven Tony Awards, a Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album, and the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

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