



Life, Family and Filmmaking with Luis Valdez

Interview by Stacie Seifrit-Griffin

In the summer of 2021, I spent a few hours on the phone with the legendary filmmaker Luis Valdez. Luis currently has three films on the National Film Registry; “I am Joaquin,” added in 2010, “La Bamba” added in 2017, and “Zoot Suit” added in 2019.

I was excited to meet Luis, because in addition to a love for film, we also share an admiration for Cesar Chavez and the farm workers movement. My father-in-law was the President of the Service Employees International Union in Chicago, and worked side by side with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, including being chained to the produce section of a grocery store in protest of the grape strike. I knew Luis was much closer to Cesar and the movement, but I didn’t realize how close until he shared his story.

In this interview, you will meet a thoughtful artist and filmmaker who is proud of his family history and heritage and is dedicated to giving back to the theater and community he loves.

On CESAR CHAVEZ and the beginning of the EL TEATRO CAMPESINO

Let's start with how you met Cesar Chavez because that relationship really put you on a huge path to starting your theater company and your film career.

Well, as it turns out, I knew Cesar my whole life. I was born in 1940 in Delano, California in the labor camp where my grandmother lived on the west side of Chinatown. My grandmother lived there because her sister and her daughter had acquired two little cabins. They were living in one cabin and renting the other. In 1946, a family arrived from Arizona with two teenage boys. These teenage boys helped to outfit the two cabins with electric wiring.

I learned this from my aunt who still lived in the cabins in 1993. We stayed at her house for Cesar's funeral, and she told me the story about the teenage boys and showed me the wiring that Richard and Cesar Chavez put into the house back in the '40s.

So, by no coincidence, I met Cesar when I was six years old because we all lived in Delano, and we were all farm workers. In the mid-40s, around 1946 or '47, I had an older cousin, Billy Miranda, who became a zoot suitor or a "pachuco." He was the running partner of Cesar Chavez. Billy lived with my family from time to time and on some occasions his friends would come over, and I was exposed to these pachucos. I didn't really know who they were. They seemed like magical beings to me, but it was Cesar, his brother, and my cousin.

Again, all of this came to light many years later. My mother reinforced the details, and I discussed them with Cesar when I volunteered to join the grape strike in 1965. To Cesar, I was like family, and I was related to one of his running partners from way back in the 1940s. My cousin Billy did not survive the 1950s. He was knifed to death in Phoenix in a violent death. He didn't deserve it. Regardless, Cesar went on.

Another memorable event in the 1940s was when Cesar had gone off to the Navy and came back. I guess he was dating Helen by then and they went to the movies in Delano. There was only one movie theater, and it was segregated. The Mexicans couldn't sit in the orchestra section. We had to sit on the side with the Black people, and the Filipinos and the Japanese were kind of in between.

When Cesar came back - his name was CC at the time, so I only knew him as CC – he went to the movies and refused to sit on the side. He sat in the middle in the orchestra section with Helen as his date. He figured because he was serving his country, he had a right to sit there. The usher came and complained, but CC wouldn't move. They got the manager; he still wouldn't move. So, they called the police, and they took him to the police station and grilled him for a couple hours. It turns out there was no law. He wasn't breaking any law, so they tried to intimidate him and threaten him. After a couple hours, the police released him hoping that the intimidation had done it, but of course it didn't. The next weekend all his friends came to the movie theater and sat in the middle section. It was then they desegregated the movie theater in Delano. I remember this quite vividly. I remember the discrimination and then the sudden change.

Now, I didn't really know who this person was. To me, he was CC, and he was a pachuco and he was mysterious, but when I went to volunteer to join the grape strike, my mother said, "You're going to work with CC?" I said, "Is he still around?" She said, "I thought you knew; CC is Cesar Chavez."

Later I had conversations with Richard and Cesar comparing notes. It turns out because we all followed the migrant path, we were inevitably in the same places at different times. He was older, but we worked on the same ranches for the same growers.

There are other stories that connect to that, but more specifically we lived in the same neighborhood in east San Jose, Sal Si Pedes, where he started to organize. Father McDonald, who essentially organized them, was also the priest that married my older sister. I used to catch the bus to go to high school just a block or so from where Cesar lived in the 1950s. Coming back to Delano years later was like a homecoming for me. Many of the founding members of the union were in my family, and some of them are still active.

It's always been a very personal family affair and that gave me the strength to do what I wanted to do. I think in some ways it was made possible because Cesar put a lot of validity into these kinds of connections, especially family and long-time contacts. So, we became friends as adults. I was quite happy to follow him as our leader. All of this is part of my personal life, but it is also social history.

I really hope that the stories of Cesar Chavez and this movement will continue to be told in our schools. It's so important that we honor the farm workers, especially for everything they went through and continue to do for our country.

We all have something to contribute. As humble as the farm worker may seem, the philosophies behind the career of Cesar Chavez and his role as a social leader are very deep. I mean, he had a profound understanding of human nature, and he was able to share this compassion with others. He often took it upon himself to absorb as much of the negativity as possible.

In my book "Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being," I mentioned how the Teatro evolved out of a farm workers movement, but what we've got here is a certain amount of historical impulse. America must come to know America. We cannot ignore the original people that were here, and it's quite easy to get stuck in our own time. We're all from this same moment, but we look at each other in different ways, and often in very superficial ways. We all have long histories, and our roots are very deep. The Native American, I think, still has to be given his or her due.

You once said that the picket line became the stage to start your theater company. Tell me about that.

When I went back to Delano in the third week of the grape strike, I was working in San Francisco with the San Francisco Mime Group. I was working as an actor, but learning *comedia*, the Latino techniques, and adjusting to the fact that I will basically be performing in public parks.

I went to Delano to march and serve on the picket line for a few hours, but I also really wanted to talk to Cesar. I wanted to pitch him an idea that I had about a theater for farm workers. I was reluctant to interrupt him because there were more important issues happening. So, I waited until very late at night and finally I pitched him the idea. He listened attentively and he eventually said, in his own characteristic way, "I like the idea, but I want to be honest with you, there's no money to do theater in Delano. There are no actors. There's no stage. There's not even a place to rehearse. We're on the picket line day and night, do you still want to do it?"

I said, “Absolutely!” What an opportunity. So, it is true that the “El Teatro Campesino” started on the picket line. There was no other way. This gave our work a very specific purpose which was to help bring the workers out of the field or at least to distract them so that they wouldn't work as hard. We used whatever we had. There was an old paddle truck with a nice steady roof, and we'd climb up there with bull horns and signs.

I joined in late October, and by the beginning of November, I was elected as a Captain of the picket line. It was already going into winter, so the crops were changing. It was cold and fog was starting to come in, so I used theater techniques to keep people warm, to enliven the picket line, and to make a point.

This change of seasons gave us time to develop the material. I created acting categories: the growers and the contractors, the scabs, and different kinds of strikers. Cesar held weekly meetings on Fridays and would give us 10-15 minutes at the end of the meeting to rehearse and perform. This also became a way for Cesar to entice people to stay at the meetings. He'd say, “The theater is going to perform, so don't go away.” People would stay and they loved the humor. It was a counterpoint to all the bad news we were getting. Things were getting desperate. We were literally running out of food, and we had to appeal to our supporters to bring food caravans. It was cold, too, so the Teatro provided some laughter, song, and fun.

You brought some relief and maybe even hope.

Yes, it made light of something that was heavy. It helped to get us through that first winter and through the spring. During that time, the grapes are in the growing stage, and nobody could work in the field, so Cesar decided that we would all march to Sacramento. We had a planning meeting, and it was decided by the union leadership that the Teatro would essentially conduct the rallies. They lent us a flatbed truck, all the banners that we needed, the sound equipment, and lights to help as it got dark at the end of the day.

For 25 nights in a row, we performed all the way across the San Joaquin Valley, and by the time we got to Sacramento there were 10,000 people on the march.



Wow, what a wonderful community event, and great incentive for new people to join.

Totally. It became an event. People would come during the week and on the weekends, and a lot from the Bay Area, Southern California, and other states. They would march for a day or two then go back, and others would replace them. It was a very exciting experience and totally unique. Highway 99, which is right up the spine of the San Joaquin Valley, was this big intimidating highway full of trucks and traffic, but we turned it into a path. Trucks were literally weaving by. Here we were with our red flags and our musical instruments marching along the side of the freeway. It felt like we were claiming the San Joaquin Valley by saying “we are here, we're not going away, and we demand justice.”

Music certainly played an important part of the movement.

That was one of the initial contributions of the Teatro itself, and the music also became very important to us. We found that there were no movement songs to support the grape strike. So, one of the first things we did was began to translate songs from the civil rights era into the labor movement. “We Shall Overcome” became “Lo Venceremos.”

And “Solidarity Forever!”

Yes, exactly! “Solidaridad para siempre.” We sang these at the strike and on the picket line and we also began to compose our own songs. Later my brother Daniel joined us in the second year, and he also became a composer. We worked out a whole repertory of songs that are still part of the movement. One of the amazing things is that when you're in a position of danger and you're being threatened by goons with physical violence, and this happened a lot, the idea that people are singing in the face of these threats, in the face of violence, not only gives people courage, but it also dissipates the possibility that you will be attacked.

I felt that in the film “Fighting for Our Lives.” There were some very uncomfortable scenes where the workers are being dragged off the road, choked and beaten, and then you see two people singing “Solidarity Forever.”

Yes, Glen Percy was the filmmaker, and he did a wonderful job of integrating the songs of the Teatro into the footage. That's why he was nominated for an Academy Award, and the fact he was selling a very powerful story through the footage. The songs and the music arose from the moment and from need, so there is an honesty and forthrightness to these songs that persists to this day.

I AM JOAQUIN

I see some of that same use of music, slides, and poetry in your film “I Am Joaquin.” That film was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2010 for being “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant.” Tell me about making that film.

In 1967, we embarked on our first national tour with the Teatro, and it was in support of the grape boycott. It was in the summer of '67, and that was the summer of love in San Francisco, but contrary to that emotion, the whole country was burning. There were riots everywhere and we encountered violence everywhere we went.

Pete Seeger invited us to the Newport Folk Festival, and they were willing to pay expenses and put us up, so we couldn't resist. We used that as the start of this tour. After Newport, we performed in all the major cities. We performed in New York City and filmed in Central Park for PBS. We performed in Washington D.C. at Howard University, and in the Senate Courtyard of the U.S. Senate building.

Robert Kennedy and Ted Kennedy both sponsored our appearance before their staffs and others in the Senate. Robert Kennedy had been to Delano a few months before and he invited us to come to Washington. That was a wonderful experience. I don't know how many other theatre companies have been invited there, but we performed inside the Senate courtyard, in the Capitol building.



Then, we went on to Chicago. We were going to Detroit but couldn't get into Detroit because the National Guard was blocking all traffic on the major freeways. There were riots and killings that day in Detroit. So, we went on to Chicago and performed on the south side. It was amazing that with the racial tension as high as it was, we had white *and* black supporters of the United

Farm Workers come to a school on the south side and attend the performance of El Teatro Campesino. Looking back, it was very special, because the next night there were more riots and buildings were burned.

Anyway, on our way back to California we stopped in Denver. It was there I met Corky Gonzales for the first time. He was a poet and a playwright. We had double billing with Corky at a movie theater where his team did their play, and we did our Teatro. It was a lively beautiful event in the Denver community.

As we were leaving, Corky handed me a manuscript of a poem that he had written; it was "I Am Joaquin." It was a long poem, and it wasn't even published yet. I thanked him and read it on the way back, and I was quite impressed. When we got back to California, I called him and said, "I love your poem, and I'd like to do it as a reading during our shows. We can project slides to tell a story." He gave me permission to do that. In December of '67, we performed "I Am Joaquin" for the first time as a slideshow with live musical accompaniment.

I had a friend, George Ballis, who was a wonderful photographer and one of the early photographers of the union, and editor of the Valley Labor Citizen in Fresno. He provided the slides that we needed. Later, George bought a 16-millimeter Bolex camera, and said, "Why don't we put the slideshow on film?" I said, "Can we do that?"

So, George auctioned off one of his cars for \$5,000 to produce our film. We shot it in a kitchen in Fresno. He put an old kitchen window on the middle of the kitchen table, and frosted it over. We put the slide projector on one end of the table and mounted the Bolex camera on its own swivel on the other side of the table. We were able to go shot by shot, slide by slide and eventually ended up with a 22-minute film, and that's "I Am Joaquin."



We didn't have any filmmaking equipment, so it was learning the filmmaking process from the ground up. We basically used this old 16-millimeter projector to roll the film back and forth. We would take the footage, project it, and then stop the machine, roll it back, and do it again. I learned the basics of editing on this rudimentary equipment.

Once we had the final cut, we rented a studio in Los Angeles to record the soundtrack. The projector was inside the sound booth, and it was projecting to the window into the studio. The musicians were in the studio looking at the screen.

Wow, that's so innovative.

Yeah, its element is no different than what filmmaking is, but it took time. It was 1970 when we finally finished this 22-minute film.

By this time the Teatro was in Fresno, and we now had a storefront cultural center by the city college. We had our art on the walls, and a traveling exhibit had come from San Francisco. As a part of our contribution, we screened the film, and it blew the roof off. It was an amazing experience. It validated all our ideas and hard work, and the Chicano movement was suddenly there on the big screen.

The imagery and cinematography were George Ballis, and the music was composed by my brother, but I had the vision. I directed this movie without really knowing I was directing. It's amazing what can be done with very basic materials if the heart is in the right place.

LUIS VALDEZ on life purpose and family

What advice would you give a young filmmaker, especially someone who feels that they have a racial or socioeconomic barrier?

I think that everybody must take possession of themselves. Don't alienate yourself by going with somebody else's point of view regardless of who you are. You have to know that you've already been given what you need to achieve what you want.

The El Teatro Campesino has been described as a theater of necessity because it was necessary. We had to exist to allow other things to happen.

The same thing goes for the Farm Workers Union, and Dolores Huerta and Cesar's leadership. It had to be because it was needed. We all need to balance each other out whatever the movement is and whatever injustices we are struggling. I choose to be an optimist, but obviously, it is not a straight line. It's more of a spiral with up and downs.

What made you want to be a filmmaker or be in the theater?

I was a math and physics major before I switched and became an English major with an emphasis on playwrighting. My interest and appreciation of the sciences, especially physics, did

not come out of nowhere, it came out of a long continuum. My ancestors, like those of many other people, were at one point or another scientists and mathematicians.

I graduated from high school in 1958. This is just after Sputnik, so the emphasis in the nation was engineering. America needed engineers and I love math and science, so I majored in math and physics at San Jose State. I was smart enough and should have gone to Stanford, but there was no way for me to get there in 1958. So, I went to San Jose State, and I was a straight-A student in the sciences, but I just couldn't stay away from the drama building. I was drawn to the world of theater, and I felt a little guilty about switching majors, especially coming from a farm working family. I thought I needed to do something else, something more.

Anyway, I made the leap, and thought at the very least, I can be an English teacher. I also decided to devote myself to the arts and then arts activism. It was the 1960s and we all got political. It's all part of the universal experience that everybody can find their own path in life.

It seems your path has come full circle, because you are now living in the town where you grew up.

I was raised in Delano, and when my family left the valley in 1953, I never envisioned that I would come back, but there came a point in my life where I needed to be back in Delano. I saw the need. On the one hand, any bad feeling that I had about being a farm worker had to be dissipated by social action, and there was no shame in being a farm worker. It just happened to be a condition of employment and I wanted to contribute what I could. That's what I feel about life. You go where you're needed, you do what you have to do to get the job done, and opportunity will come to you.

The Earth is a globe and what goes around comes around. Anything that someone does will influence others, so we need to find that balance in work, in feelings, and in our ideas.

I've oddly been attracted to places where the opportunities are not as great. This is one of the reasons that we're still in San Juan Bautista because San Benito County is one of the poorest counties in the state and it needs us. It's a lovely little town and it's a mission town. It's been here since 1797. George Washington was still president when the mission was established here, so there is a long history. There is also an Indian village that has been here for a millennia before that, but there are no great job opportunities here. There's a lot of farm work because there are a lot of farms. People might come here on the weekends as an outing, but they couldn't live here, even though we are only 45 minutes from Silicon Valley.

You and the Teatro have certainly created new opportunities in that community.

My mother used to call me the "Abre El Camino," the road opener, the Pathfinder, and she says that's what I do. If you look at the work that I've done, essentially, I have opened the path for others and I'm quite happy to have done that. The Teatro opened a path and possibility for others, and people followed quite naturally because they're all artists too and they wanted to go that way.

That, in a sense, is the way that I understand my own life and my own purpose. I'm quite happy to do that and to serve others. Cesar was absolutely right that the meaning of life consists of service toward others in the continuum.



In both "Zoot Suit" and "La Bamba," you focus very much on the families, and their roots, traditions, and dynamics. You're a very good storyteller in that way.

My whole life experience has been shaped by family. I came from a large family. There was 10 of us. Five brothers and five sisters, and we should have been 13, but three did not survive. Of those that did survive, I was son number three.

Where was Daniel?

Daniel is nine years younger than I am. He was my little brother. I took care of him. I wanted to keep him out of trouble. I had an older brother who passed away a couple of years ago who became an engineer. He became an electrical engineer in Silicon Valley, and I owe a great debt of gratitude to him for taking us out of poverty and into education. He was very conservative and a Republican. My activism caused him trouble because he worked with a lot of government contracts and the FBI came to see him on a couple occasions saying, "Well, your brother's pretty active over here."

He couldn't talk to me or have contact with me because of his job. It's kind of sad in that regard. He eventually came around and was in one of the documentaries talking about our life experiences. I think that family is what defines us and it's also the foundation of society. If we can't love and respect the members of our own family, then we got problems.

LA BAMBA

You really captured the complex family dynamic in “La Bamba.” In one scene, Ritchie Valens and his brother are beating each other up, and the next moment, Ritchie calls his brother to make peace.

That is a true story. I’ll tell you the story of how “La Bamba” came to be.

We opened “Zoot Suit,” the play, on Broadway at the Winter Garden Theater in New York City. The Winter Garden is like the mothership of Broadway. It's in the middle of the block and it is between Broadway and 7th Avenue, so it straddles the whole block.

I was in my brother's dressing room on the 7th Avenue side, and I was making the rounds on opening night wishing everybody luck, and I walked into his dressing room feeling excited.

We'd come a long way together. We were feeling nostalgic and emotional, and started talking about what we could do next. At that moment we heard music coming from outside and we looked out the window. We're on the second floor and down on 7th Avenue in the street there was a mariachi group playing. They had been sent by the President of Mexico to serenade us on opening night. The song that they were playing was “La Bamba,” and it seemed to answer the question of what we needed to do next. My brother and I looked at each other and said, “that’s it.” That became the clue for the next project.

We didn't know at the time that it would take five years to make, but we took it on. Daniel was the one that pursued looking for Ritchie's family. We couldn't find them in Los Angeles, and they were long gone from Pacoima. Other than a couple of old newspaper articles about Ritchie and “the day the music died,” there was no information on the family. We had almost given up hope after five years of looking.

We were living in San Juan Bautista when someone said to Daniel, "You're looking for Ritchie's brother Bob, right? Well, he's in the local bar over here." It turns out that Bob lived in Watsonville about 15 miles from our house. From there, Daniel met Bob, and eventually we met Ritchie’s mother, Consuelo, and the rest of the family.

It seems that you were guided to this, and so fortunate that they were in your neighborhood.

Yes, it was incredible that they were so close. I made sure that we interviewed them on video, so I could see their facial expressions as they told the story. The movie is based on four basic interviews; Ritchie’s brother Bob Morales, his mom "Concha" Consuelo Valenzuela, his manager Bob Keane, and Donna Ludwig, Ritchie’s girlfriend and who the song “Donna” is about.

Based on what they told me, I was able to put the story together. Bob shared about the competition that existed between the brothers. He was quite generous in saying, “I was a drunk and gave Ritchie a lot of troubles, but I still loved him.”

He told me about the fight they had before Ritchie left for his tour, and said, "Ritchie called me the night before he died, and we made up." That dynamic between the brothers was real. You see all of that in the movie.

I'm so grateful that you got these stories, and especially from his mother.

Absolutely. Concha had heart disease and she was on her way out that summer of 1986, but she came back to life because of the movie. She was on the set every day and got to see the movie being made. She got to see Ritchie's story finally told. Then in 1987, she passed away peacefully. She was buried in the same grave with Ritchie.

Although Ritchie's career wasn't very long, he had a big impact on music. "La Bamba" and "Donna" we're huge songs, and of course, his death was so widely publicized. In the film though, your stars were basically unknown. Lou Diamond Phillips and Elizabeth Pena were new to the big screen.

Elizabeth Pena had done other films and television as well, but "La Bamba" was probably her most known work. She was quite a performer, quite an actor, and she had a very special quality that I think endures in the movie.

And it's that way with Lou Diamond Phillips. He was in his mid-20s and had been doing Christian films. He was very innocent, but also had a fierceness about him. That's part of his power as an actor. He's half Filipino and half Anglo. His father was an American sailor who met his mother in the Philippines.



Was that risky not having a Chicano play Ritchie Valens?

Well, I'll tell you. Given my background, I desperately wanted a Chicano but could not find one. We literally looked at over 500 people and I could not find the right person. They were either too old or inexperienced, or they were overacting and couldn't handle the film technique. It was something that had to be done very very carefully. I was also operating with reality. I don't really address it in the movie, but back in 1958 and '59, if you were in rock and roll, then you were either black or white. That's basically it. The black musicians, some of the greatest rock and roll artists, were covered by white musicians and white singers. It's funny to hear Pat Boone singing Little Richard songs, but there were no Latinos per se.

Originally my brother Daniel wanted to play Ritchie Valens, but by the time we got it together, he was too old. He didn't look like a teenager anymore. He would have been incorrect anyway because he didn't look like Ritchie. Ricardo Valenzuela, Ritchie Valens, was this big boisterous kid, very light skin with Indian features like his mother. He wore a crew cut and he looked more Italian than Mexican.

Even Donna's father wasn't sure. He asked if Ritchie was Italian.

Exactly.



Lou Diamond Phillips did have that bone structure and charming innocence, especially in contrast to Ritchie's brother, played by Esai Morales.

Well, Esai is tremendous. It's really interesting their different approaches. Esai is very spontaneous. He would give me 20 takes and each take was different. He varied it. Lou was very consistent. He gave me the same thing over and over unless I changed it. He was very reliable in that sense. I knew what I was getting from Lou all the time. With Esai, I wasn't sure. I had to choose, which made it exciting in the editing room. I had all these possibilities with the Bob character. Esai gave a tremendous performance with a raw earthiness that came through.

I felt like he was Bob. Flying off the handle one minute, and a loving supportive brother the next. I think the whole film was well cast.

Ritchie's mother kept saying "How did you find him? He is Bob. That's how Bob was."



Let's talk about the music because that is so important for this film.

Well again, it's part of the community. We had known Los Lobos since the '70s when they were getting started. When we were doing the play "Zoot Suit" in Los Angeles, we had a birthday party for my brother, and Los Lobos came and played the birthday party. They were one of many groups out of East LA but weren't professional yet. I was very impressed.

They were on their way to greatness when they got their first number one hit with "La Bamba" from the movie. They weren't necessarily happy about that, but they've accepted it. They are a tremendous original group with a style of their own, and I think they've done wonders with the material they're working with. They are very versatile. David Hidalgo [lead singer of Los Lobos] sang the parts of Ritchie in the movie.

ZOOT SUIT

You certainly have an eye for finding talent. I can't imagine anyone other than Eddie Olmos playing the Pachuco in "Zoot Suit."

Eddie is a very special person. I mean, he's got what I call the killer instinct, sort of like Lou Diamond Phillips and Elizabeth Pena. These actors come from within themselves and aren't afraid to go for it without overacting. Eddie's very special in that regard. He has been very conscious of his role in the community. I think he should be celebrated for that. The Mexican community needed him, and I needed him to be the Pachuco. He really created that character.



That character seems to be combination of our conscious and a gangster. Maybe we all have that gangster part in us, which is why it is relatable. At times, Henry Reyna was vulnerable and other times he was the Pachuco.

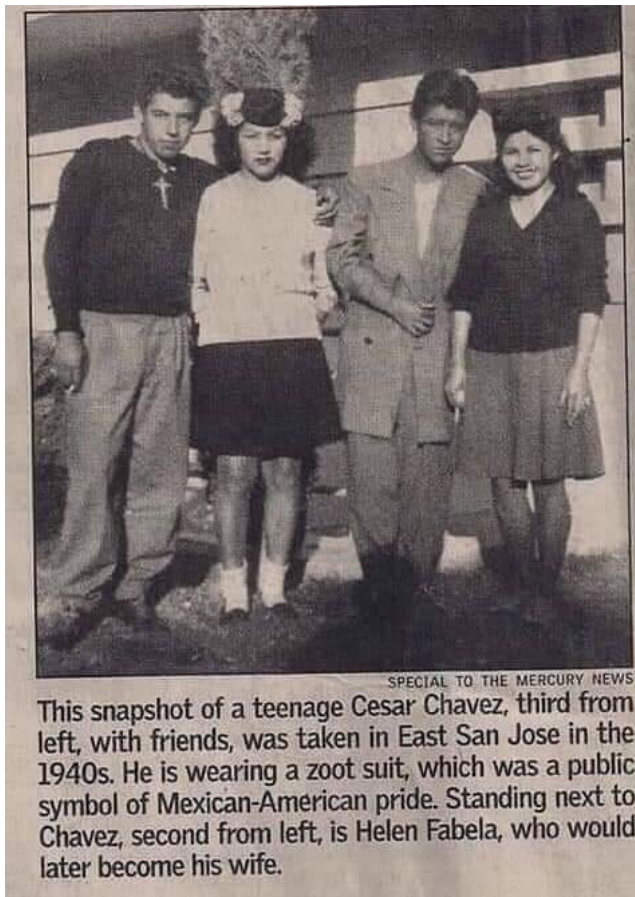
That's the point. Henry is playing to a spirit that only he can perceive. The internal authority, the super-ego or whatever you want to call it, is in all of us. It's our own role model that we carry inside.

The symbolism goes way deep. The colors of the red and black are profound, they go back to the origins of human consciousness. The Pachuco is what I call the "Jaguar Night Son," and in Mayan mythology, it's the creature of the night. He's feline, he's the jaguar, he's dangerous, and yet he's one of the Gods. So, in that sense, the Pachuco cannot be defeated because the Pachuco is a mythical figure, he's larger than life. They exist in all cultures. He's the trickster. He's a devil for some people, but he's also an angel for others.

I can't imagine Cesar Chavez as a real-life pachuco.

There is a picture of Cesar in a zoot suit somewhere, so I hope you can find it. "Zoot Suit" itself goes back to my early experiences as a kid. Delano wasn't just farm workers. Even going all the way back to the 1930s and '40s, people were using whatever they could to keep themselves active. Drugs came in early, marijuana was there. Delano was a trading post of not just human labor but also everything that human beings needed to keep laboring, including prostitution. There were about 15 houses of ill-repute in Delano, a town of 10,000 people, and I was aware of this as a kid.

I saw pachucos as these dangerous but very fascinating figures. It seemed to me that they had a certain kind of power that was missing in other people. The farmworkers were basically submissive, they did what they were told and did not complain, but the pachucos were rebels. I became very interested.



Then, I read Carey McWilliam's book, "North from Mexico" in 1958 and I discovered the Sleepy Lagoon case. When I began to do research for the play, one of the first things that I did was get to New York to interview Carey McWilliams. He was across the street from Columbia University and had been the editor of "The Nation" magazine for about 20 years. It was an honor for me. He was in his late 70s, and starting to get ill, but he gave me a couple of hours. He's the one that recommended that I talked to Alice McGrath who had been the Executive Secretary of the Sleepy Lagoon defense committee, and that's how I met Alice.

The role of Alice was played by Tyne Daly in the movie.

Exactly. So that's how I got to know Alice and she took me to meet Henry's family. Henry was dead but she took me over to East LA and introduced me to the parents and the children. We had a wonderful family event.

They wanted to honor Henry, and they gave me all the support that I needed to tell the story. Another thing that I was pursuing was the real story behind this "pachuco-ism." What is it and why? It goes deeper than just juvenile delinquency, it's a cultural thing that goes back to our Mayan and Aztec Roots.

I'm surprised that Hollywood understood and embraced this concept.

At one point, I had another concept in mind. This was way before Batman was revived, I had this idea of the Pachuco as this magical East L.A. creature in the 1940s. He could appear and disappear, and it required some special effects. When I went around trying to pitch this, it was rejected. One studio said, "You're talking about a 20-million-dollar movie here and it's not gonna happen." I told them I would scale it down and work within the limits they gave me. Ned Tanen, president of Universal, took a personal interest in helping me make the movie, but he wanted me to shoot on videotape, and I was against it.

Little by little we negotiated a 1.2 million-dollar budget with a 13-day shoot. The idea of having three videotape cameras tape the whole play on the stage evolved into three 35-millimeter camera units. We kept the movie very close to the play, and it was an unusual concept. It's theater, but it's also a movie. It's a movie within a movie and a play within a movie. If we had gone for special effects, the whole movie would have been dated by now. It would've been terrible because the special effects would have been cheap. As it is, there are no special effects, and the final look is the way it was shot and edited.

There's the scene with Eddie Olmos and it's red like the sun, so lighting became important.

Tom John did the production design, and at first, we didn't have a set. The first time we did this scene on the stage, it was in black space. Later, Tom designed a set that was tremendous. Yvonne Wood helped us with the costume design. I didn't know who Yvonne Wood was, and it turns out that she was a highly respected costume designer, especially in the '40s. The zoot suits were a given, but she made the ladies' dresses spot-on as well.

And, the music of Lalo Guerrero goes without saying.

Talk about inevitability. Lalo Guerrero was my dad's cousin, so I had known him all my life. He's a giant in Chicano culture and has been called "the father of Chicano music." Pat Birch, the choreographer, is so wonderful, and Bud Smith was a technical advisor and the supervising editor, advising me as we went along. So even though it was a baptism by fire, I was able to adjust. Peter Burrell was our producer and very hands-on. I'm working with Peter again on a new movie based on my latest play, "Valley of the Heart."

I was going to ask what's next for you.

"Valley of the Heart" is a play that premiered at the Mark Taper's Center Theater Group a couple of years ago and had a tremendous run. It's a screenplay now, and Peter Burrell and others are involved in trying to get all the elements together to produce it. It's a love story between a Mexican American sharecropper and the daughter of a Japanese American farmer set in World War II. It is again part of my personal history because my dad took over the farm of his Japanese American employer way back to World War II.

Fascinating! I think you have so much more to tell and I'm excited to see this come together. Even if it ended today, your career is extraordinary. As of today, you have three films inducted into the National Film Registry for their "cultural, historic, and aesthetic" importance. The Librarian can only select 25 films each year, so it says a lot about your work.

I'm very pleased and honored to be on the National Film Registry. In some ways those thoughts of my life have been to emphasize my presence and the presence of Chicanos in the American scheme. I mean we're all Americans. To be acknowledged in the National Film Registry is an acknowledgement of that, and I'm very grateful. I realize it doesn't come easily. There are a lot of people out there struggling to be recognized. I'm very amazed and very pleased. I hope that it serves to inspire others to continue to do what they do.

The views expressed are those of Luis Valdez and the interviewer, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress. To learn more about these films and to read more interviews, visit www.loc.gov/film.

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