

## Zoot Suit Unit Plan

- Note: This unit plan is designed for sophomore students. These students studied coming of age, including the archetype of the fall, the previous year, and elements of this unit are designed to build on that understanding. Other literature in this unit includes Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The skills focus is on process analysis writing.

### Introductory activities

#### Essential Questions:

- ★ What are characteristics of the coming of age experience? How is seeing, experiencing, and/or facing larger systems of oppression a component of coming of age?
- ★ How might one's sense of identity be shaped by outside forces: social and cultural norms, stereotypes and racism, the media?
- ★ What does it mean to be masculine? What does it mean to be feminine?
- ★ What's the difference between fact and truth? How might we understand "truth" as having multiple aspects?

#### Anticipatory Guide:

Students position themselves physically in different corners of the room for each statement: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree.

1. My clothes help define who I am.
2. Our legal system may have flaws, but overall it works and should be trusted.
3. Journalists have a responsibility to tell the truth. A press free of bias, political pressure, and commercial influence is essential to our democracy.
4. Adults don't understand teenagers and often unfairly judge them.
5. It's important for immigrants to this country to acculturate and assimilate, to blend in with the dominant culture as much as possible.
6. Gang violence is a problem in our city. Suspected gang members should be locked up for the general safety of the public.

#### Background Research/information:

- A. Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino
  - a. Students will independently review a Powerpoint presentation (under construction). Topics will include:
    - i. Luis Valdez (background as a migrant worker, introduction to theater, beliefs about the role of theatre in social activism, career)
    - ii. El Teatro Campesino (origins, including actos, grape boycott and work with César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, foundational principles)
    - iii. Zoot Suit (production history, significance)
  - b. Students will come to class ready to discuss the following questions:

- i. What are some of the important accomplishments and achievements of Luis Valdez? Explain why are these significant. How might he be considered a pioneer and the “grandfather of Chicano theater”?
- ii. What are the key elements of the work of El Teatro Campesino?
- iii. How does this company use theatre to address issues of injustice and oppression?

B. Theatre workshop Day

- a. Review the concept of *actos*
- b. Introduce principles of El Teatro Campesino:
  - i. IN LAK'ECH: you are my other me (mutual respect)
  - ii. HUINIK 'LIL: (cosmic root vibrates; grounded in earth and radiates out; job to unlock others' cosmic root)
  - iii. NAUHI OLLIN: power of four; unlock body's potential for expression
  - iv. THEATRE OF THE SPHERE: theatre of play, natural (earth, sun, moon--essential to universe), ensemble work--non-hierarchical, encounter obstacles and keep rolling)
- c. Warm ups and movement in space, connections with others
  - i. Jaguar legs
  - ii. Serpent spine
  - iii. Eagle arms
  - iv. Hurricane hips
- d. Still life photos: group of people, landscape, action
- e. Power over vs. power with

C. Jigsaw (small group) background research for *Zoot Suit*. Students will research one topic with their group partners and be prepared to share the information with their classmates at appropriate points in the reading. Source: *Zoot Suit Discovery Guide*

(<http://research.pomona.edu/zootsuit/>)

- a. LA in the Zoot Suit Era (immigration, WWII, music)
- b. Sleepy Lagoon trial
- c. Zoot Suit riots  
(<http://californiahistoricalsociety.blogspot.com/2017/06/remembering-zoot-suit-riots.html>)

## Reading the play

### Guided Reading and Reflection Questions for *Zoot Suit*

Before reading” Review the “Caló Glossary: Terms and Phrases in Zoot Suit.” Practice pronouncing these words out loud.

- ★ Presentation on LA in the Zoot Suit Era

### Setting

1. Draw a rough sketch of the setting. How does Valdez set up themes and ideas at the beginning of this play through the set design? What do the images make you think about, wonder about?

*Act 1: Prologue*

1. "A switchblade plunges through the newspaper" (25). Discuss the significance of this image. What might we associate with the switchblade? The newspaper? El Pachuco emerging from the slit? What might be the relationship between these three things?
2. What is the effect of Pachuco starting his lines in Spanish and the Caló patois? Why might Valdez have chosen to start the play this way?
3. What words are used to describe "the Pachuco" and "the Pachuco style"? Which words seem positive? Why? Which words seem negative? What does it mean that he is "existential"? How does this opening prologue speak to the role of the Pachuco in society and the various ways different groups of people might regard him?

*Act 1: Scenes 1-4*

1. Who escapes when the police raid the dance? Who do the police let leave? Why?
2. How do the various headlines characterize the youth and the situation? Does it seem factual or sensational? Why?
3. "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de Porciúncula" (28) is the original name for Los Angeles. Why might Pachuco interrupt the Press with this line?
4. Why does Pachuco say that the police are holding Henry despite the fact that he hasn't broken any laws? What is Pachuco's advice to Henry? Is this good advice? Does it seem to help Henry in his situation with the police?
5. This play is set during WWII. How is the larger context of the war significant? How do both Pachuco and the Lieutenant use the context of the war to advance their arguments?
6. Compare and contrast the zoot suit with the Navy suit. What kind of ideals and values does each represent?

*Act 1: Scenes 5-9*

★ Presentation on Sleepy Lagoon Trial

1. What facts do we learn about the Sleepy Lagoon event, the 38th Street Gang, and Henry Reyna? What stereotypes and biased assumptions do we see?
2. Who is George and how/why does he become involved in this case? Why don't the boys trust him?
3. Review the various accounts of what happened at the dance and then later at the Sleepy Lagoon on August 1, 1942. Outline the process by which a conflict arose, escalated, and ended in murder.
4. Complete an "Open Mind" activity on Alice Bloomfield. What information has she learned regarding Henry Reyna and the 38th Street Gang, the press, and the trial? How does she feel about the various people involved and how the case is unfolding? How might her own experiences--or lack of experiences--shape her views?
5. How is the courtroom and the judge's bench/throne created? What does this description communicate?

6. Why is this trial still considered one of the “most egregious miscarriages of justice in the United States”? Give examples and the sequence of events.
7. Upon what warrants does the Prosecution/Press base its argument for a guilty verdict? Upon what warrants does George base his argument for an innocent verdict? Why is it significant that the prosecution is played by the Press?

*Act 2: Prologue through scene 5*

1. How has Alice Bloomfield been working for the cause of the 38th Street Gang members while they are imprisoned? How is she able to earn the trust of most of the boys?
2. What does incorrigible mean (70)?
3. Complete an “Open Mind” activity for both Henry and Alice. What might each be thinking and feeling, but not expressing?
4. Do you think it is a “coincidence” that George gets drafted? What reasons--and evidence?-- might you use to support both Henry’s and George’s positions?
5. Is the Pachuca helpful or hurtful to Henry in his time of isolation? Why? How might we understand this period of isolation as key to Henry’s development of identity?

*Act 2: Scenes 6 - 9*

★ Presentation on the Zoot Suit riots

1. How does Pachuco define the zoot suit? How does he claim the press and the public distort this definition? How does racism color the public’s perception of the zoot suiters?
2. “[Henry] absorbs the impact of what he has seen and falls to his knees at center stage” (81). What does he see? (literal) What does it mean? (inferential) What does it matter? What is the impact of what he has seen? (theme)
3. What allows Henry to finally feel hope? (85)
4. In the end, Henry must choose between Della and Alice. What are the various implications of each choice? Why do you think he ultimately makes the choice that he does.
5. Pachuco notes that the play could have ended happily with everything resolved (88). Instead, the play ends with quite a bit of ambiguity. Why might Valdez have chosen to end the play this way?

**Final discussion questions:**

1. El Pachuco assumes many roles throughout this play, including that of an unreliable narrator. What is the effect of Pachuco’s presence throughout the play--on Henry as well as the audience?
2. What does this play suggest about gender and gender identity? How does the zoot suit become a costume of masculinity that both helps and hinders various characters? What other costumes of masculinity (or gender?) does the play contain?

3. What role does the press and “yellow journalism” play? How does the press cause harm? Does the play seem to suggest any kinds of antidotes to yellow journalism and fake news?
4. El Teatro Campesino bases its plays in (1) actos (2) documentary events (3) indigenous mythology and (4) history. The company has goals of (1) protest, (2) advocacy, (3) service, (4) cultural production. How does *Zoot Suit* demonstrate and achieve this mission and purpose? Do you think the play is primarily valuable as a historic or cultural piece or as a more general expression of human experience? Why?

### **Process Analysis Writing**

1. Using the information from the initial background research as well as the play, write a guide on how to be a Pachuco/Pachuca.
2. Both Henry and Alice undergo some changes and development throughout the course of the play. Choose one of these characters and create a character flowchart demonstrating the character’s traits and beliefs at the beginning of the play, and then add key events and insights that occur in the course of the story that cause him/her to change. Use specific evidence from the text to support your interpretation.