Sacramento State presents ‘Zoot Suit’
Play’s author will attend performance

Zoot Suit, Sacramento State’s theater production for spring, weaves fact and fiction to present the story of a group of young Mexican Americans wrongfully charged with murder in 1942 Los Angeles.

The play is based on the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial that sparked the famous Zoot Suit Riots. Written by Luis Valdez with music and lyrics by Daniel Valdez and Lalo Guerrero, Zoot Suit will run 8 p.m. April 6, 7, 13, 14, 20 and 21; 2 p.m. April 8, 15 and 22; and 6:30 p.m. April 12 and 19 in the University Theatre.

Valdez will make a special appearance on campus Thursday, April 19. He will give a free, open lecture at 11 a.m. in the theater, then attend that night’s performance at 6:30 with a possible question-and-answer session to follow.

The director, Professor Manuel Pickett, describes the work as a play with music that is constructed to work with the audience rather than have them be passive observers. “It’s not just about dancing, singing and entertainment. There is also a strong political message, the main focus of the production,” Pickett says.

Pickett believes the zoot suits of the 1940s worn by young Mexican Americans, many of them 14 or 15 years old, were actually their father’s suits stylized to resemble a similar style worn across the country by young American boys including African Americans and Jews.

“It became very popular because they were trying to find an identity for themselves,” says Pickett. “So they created a sort of culture of the streets with their own language (Calo, Spanglish), dancing, and way of dressing.”

And looming over the story is “El Pachuco,” the personification of the gang’s spirit.

The story is still relevant today, says Pickett, to illustrate how groups of people are affected by racism. And today’s proliferation of political opinion on the Internet has parallels with what happened for the zoot-suiters as newspapers back then manipulated
public opinion against them. “They were tried in a kangaroo court that was set up by the press,” Pickett says.

Junior Jose Perales plays the lead character, Henry Reyna, who is trying to leave the gang, join the Navy, and change his ways.

Junior Kristen Sanchez plays his girlfriend, Della Barrios.

“She sees the good in me that other people don’t,” Perales says of Sanchez’s character. “Being the leader of the group I have to be tough all the time, but I can talk to her.”

“I’m kind of his moral core,” Sanchez says. “My parents don’t approve of him but I really don’t care.”

The two drew on the firsthand experiences of relatives.

“I interviewed my grandma because she lived in Ventura at that time,” Sanchez says.

“My grandfather was a zoot-suiter so I talked to him a lot,” Perales says.

Zoot Suit is part of Sacramento State’s Festival of the Arts, an eight-day focus on the University’s arts programs running April 14-21. Tickets for the 6:30 p.m. performances are $10 general admission and $7 for students under 12 years of age. Remaining performances are $15 general; $12 for students, seniors and Sac State employees; and $10 for children. There are group discount tickets as well. Tickets are available at the University Ticket Office, (916) 278-4323 or www.tickets.com.

For more information on the play and the Theatre and Dance Department, visit www.csus.edu/dram. For media assistance, call Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156.

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