American Pachuco: The Legend of Luis Valdez
Production Notes
By Michael Joshua Rowin

"Ladies and gentlemen," intones a mysterious, honey-voiced narrator, "it has come to my attention that some of you don't know the story of Luis Valdez—the man is a living legend." With this enticing introduction, *American Pachuco* recreates the sense of excitement and discovery David Alvarado felt when he first learned about Valdez's brilliant, trailblazing career as a theater and film director. Alvarado was a junior at University of North Texas in 2005-2006 when he won a Hispanic Scholarship Award that allowed him to attend a lecture by Valdez. In his talk, Valdez discussed his role in the California farm workers strikes of the mid-1960s, where as the founder of El Teatro Campesino he led a series of galvanizing agitprop productions in support of the laborers, as well as his two most famous works, *Zoot Suit* (both the landmark 1978 play and 1981 film adaptation) and the hit Richie Valens biopic *La Bamba* (1987). "Through the course of that lecture I saw a picture of a Latino that was making art, being successful. He was still working on things, and I was impressed. At the time I was trying to become a filmmaker, so for me as a Mexican-American to see somebody like that, I was like, maybe this is possible. Maybe I could do this."

But the idea to make a documentary about Valdez didn't emerge until 2021, when Alvarado and his family were largely confined to his New York City apartment during the pandemic. "There was a lot of time for reflection. I was thinking about how I got to where I was, and I remembered meeting Luis and how that was such a big part of my early career. And so I just reached out to him to see, you know, is this guy still alive? Has anybody made a film about him? Turns out he was very much alive. He was still working—but nobody had made a film about him." By this time Alvarado had become an award-winning documentary director and a co-founder of Structure Films, a production company specializing in documentary features about science and technology. In order to make a more personal picture about one of his artistic heroes, Alvarado pitched a documentary about Valdez to Insignia Films, a production company with a focus on historical documentaries. Alvarado's wife, Lauren DeFilippo, is one of Insignia's partners and produced the film along with Everett Katigbak and Amanda Pollak. The film would eventually be produced in association with PBS and American Masters Pictures. "Before I met Luis, I approached American Masters with Insignia Films. Not only did Michael Kantor at American Masters know who Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino were, but he knew their program well and so for him, this was a perfect project for his series."

Filming for *American Pachuco* started in 2022. Over the course of interviewing Valdez, his family, and some of his closest collaborators and admirers, Alvarado and his team revisited aspects of Valdez's career as well as moments in American history where politics and art powerfully converged. "I remember in elementary school reading about the [1965] grape strike. That was in some textbook that I had in middle school. I remember seeing photos of [labor leader] Dolores Huerta, but I'd never heard about Luis's role in the strikes until Luis spoke about it. And as an artist, that's interesting to me. The history textbooks and schools didn't think to put that in there, that theater can actually play an important role [in history]." The film traces Valdez's early, formative

experiences as the son of laborers who constantly traveled California's central valleys in search of harvesting work. The challenges they faced as nomadic Chicanos living on the borderline of poverty would fuel Valdez's interest in a brand of guerilla theater that combined a critique of America's social and economic inequalities with the festival atmosphere of commedia dell'arte.

In this sense, a crucial component of the film is its archival footage, especially the "behind the scenes" footage that captures Valdez rehearsing his experimental El Teatro Campesino productions. Alvarado's team discovered this footage in El Teatro Campesino's own collection, which contains copious documents of the troupe's various projects. Says Alavarado, "We helped rescue that. We transferred over 80,000 feet of celluloid that was just sitting in canisters—some of the stuff is more than fifty years old, and film deteriorates at a rate where it wasn't going to be much longer before nobody could view it again." Through a partnership with University of California, Santa Barbara and George Blood LP, a transfer house that preserves celluloid film, Alvarado and Insignia were able to digitize thirty terabytes of 4K media that would have soon become unviewable. The footage will eventually be made available to the public through the Internet Archive and UC Santa Barbara. In the meantime, *American Pachuco* uses the footage to provide a rousing audio-visual record of Valdez and his company realizing their fearless vision of a theater that could not only reflect but also foment social change. Watching direct documentation of Valdez contributing to a flashpoint of political and artistic revolution is to do no less than watch history in action.

Among other discovered documentation was a record of Valdez's reunion with his older brother Frank in the late-70s or early-80s. Unlike Luis, Frank had deemphasized his Chicano identity over the preceding decades so that he could better fit into mainstream American culture: he changed his name (from Francisco), married a white woman, became a contractor for the U.S. military, and attempted to find happiness by achieving wealth and status. Luis and Frank had drifted apart due their opposed social aspirations and political attitudes, but when they reunited Frank confessed to regretting the abandonment of his roots. Finding footage of this painful yet healing conversation confirmed for Alvarado that he was on the right track in making Luis's relationship with Frank one of the documentary's major threads. "For me, the film's about identity and belonging in America. The nature of being a Chicano in America is something that people struggle with: how do I identify? Do I belong in America if I act and talk like I do? Or do I change America so that America fits me? These are the questions that Luis has grappled with in his art. And not only is it expressed in his art, but also in how his family lived, that struggle between him and his brother, who tried to become something else so that he could fit in, so that he could obtain the American dream."

Another significant element in *American Pachuco* is its unconventional voiceover narration. Documentaries typically employ anonymous "voice of god" narrators, or else the filmmaker or documentary subject him or herself guides the viewer through the action. But *American Pachuco* is narrated by the aforementioned mysterious man with a seductive baritone: an archetypal "El Pachuco" character as originally performed by Edward James Olmos in Valdez's *Zoot Suit*. A pachuco is a type of Chicano hipster that emerged in the United States in the 1930s, a swaggering macho who donned flashy zoot suits while dancing to jazz and swing music and thus defied mainstream American culture by refusing to remain ethnically invisible or socially docile. Alvarado

was inspired to make El Pachuco the film's narrator in order to infuse the very form of *American Pachuco* with the meta-magic of Valdez's unique brand of theater as well as the rebellious Chicano spirit: as Alvarado puts it, El Pachuco is "the voice of a whole community in a way that speaks to us at a time when it needs to be heard." As a member of that community, El Pachuco (as once more performed by Olmos) narrates Valdez's life story while often speaking to the audience directly, personally. "The narrator is actually in the story, looking up at the viewer, saying, 'Oh, I see you, let me walk you through this space,'" Alvarado elaborates. "And the narrator evolves through the course of the film. The phrase he uses to address the viewer at the beginning is 'ese,' which is a very colloquial way of saying 'dude' or 'man.' But as you get to know the pachuco, and he starts to reveal who he really is and what his role is, he starts to call the viewer 'carnal': 'brother.'"

Alvarado envisions different types of "brothers" who will relate to *American Pachuco*. "I view this film as having two audiences—one in the front row and one in the second row. The front row audience is Chicanos and Latinos and other people from immigrant backgrounds. For us—for people like me, whose father came from Mexico and who had to try to understand from an early age how and where I belong in this country—the story is that the question is all wrong. It's not *do we belong here?* It's *how do we get other people to understand that we belong here?* Luis has been doing that his whole life. Latinos are part indigenous people of this land, and there couldn't be anyone more American than indigenous people. America itself is an amalgamation of so many different things clashing together, so to be a Latino or mixed American from many different places and genetic and cultural backgrounds is the essence of America. It's absurd to think that it's us who have to prove our belonging here. But for the audience in the second row, my hope is that the film is something joyful—just the joy of making art and expressing yourself and knowing that, yes, life around you is tough, both in family life, as with Luis's brother, and also in political life, like the forces pushing against Luis's goals. But at the end of the day, life can be lived in art, and that can be joyful and happy. That's the main thing I want people to take away: that performance and storytelling can be acts of great happiness and joy, and that we can celebrate American freedoms and the grand American experiment—the promise of the American dream to all those who live here."