

Document Citation

Title	The silent enemy
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	4/20/1981
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The silent enemy, Burden, William Douglas, 1930

Monday April 20 , 1981

Images of Native Americans in the Cinema

Introduction by Professor Gerald Vizenor

Silent Enemy and Dreamspeaker 7:30

Silent Enemy

The Silent Enemy, "rediscovered" and preserved by David Shepard at Blackhawk Pictures, is the subject of an essay in Kevin Brownlow's book, "The War, The West and the Wilderness," which begins: "The title refers to hunger. The film is an impeccable reconstruction in story form of Ojibway Indian life as it was before the white man came. Conceived and produced in full awareness that the Indian and the wilderness were both rapidly vanishing, it was made 45 years ago for the purpose of leaving a visual record for the America that was to come of the America that used to be.

"Douglas Burden, a young explorer, had been painfully impressed by the Merian C. Cooper-Ernest Schoedsack film *Chang*, and with his partner William Chanler, director H.P. Carver and a team of Hollywood professionals, independently financed and produced the picture for release by Paramount."

- Directed by H.P. Carver. Produced by Douglas Burden, William Chanler, and H.P. Carver. Screenplay by Richard Carver. With Chief Yellow Robe, Baluk, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. (1930, 67 mins, silent with musical score, Print from PFA Collection)

much to *Jailhouse Rock* (the choreographer is Pat Birch of *Grease*) as it does to the Andrews Sisters, who sing their 1942 hit, "Zoot Suit for My Sunday Gal." What the film lacks, at times, in technical prowess, it makes up for in sheer passion and energy. Valdez' *Zoot Suit* is one of the freshest directorial debuts in years. It also revives a kind of protest art on film, but does so in a way that never loses sight of high entertainment values.

"The experience of Chicano gangs could easily be explained away by socioeconomic and political interpretations," says Valdez. "But that kind of explanation robs the gang of its humanity. We're all put into cubbyholes and stereotypes, and I'm trying to explode through those limits. The truth is, there is a kind of heroism that is very natural to adolescents, and unless there's a war going on, they have to find another way to fight. Young men are inclined to be warriors, whether on street corners, in military service or on the football field."

Universal is justly proud of the film and of the fact that Valdez delivered it on a fourteen-day shooting schedule for less than \$3 million. Such Hollywood luminaries as Barbra Streisand, Billy Friedkin and Cheech Marin have all trooped in to see private screenings of *Zoot Suit*—and to see how Valdez did it for so little. After one recent screening on the Universal lot, the seasoned projectionist took it upon himself to beam into the voice box, "Hey, you got yourselves a nice picture there."

Did Cesar Chavez ever figure Luis Valdez to end up in Hollywood? "Not in my wildest dreams."

Steve Lambreck—"Zonker" in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—has known Valdez since their college days in San Jose, when Valdez, who had recently returned from Cuba, transformed himself "from a straight little Mexican guy in student government" to a political radical dressed all in black, including a black beret. Later they hopped on what became an aborted caravan, with the idea of transporting jeeps to Latin American revolutionaries. "It's interesting to see a person do it the way Valdez has," says Lambreck. "So many artists whore themselves out. Luis is not one of those. But for a person who has as much artistic and social integrity as he does, he also knows how to land on his feet."

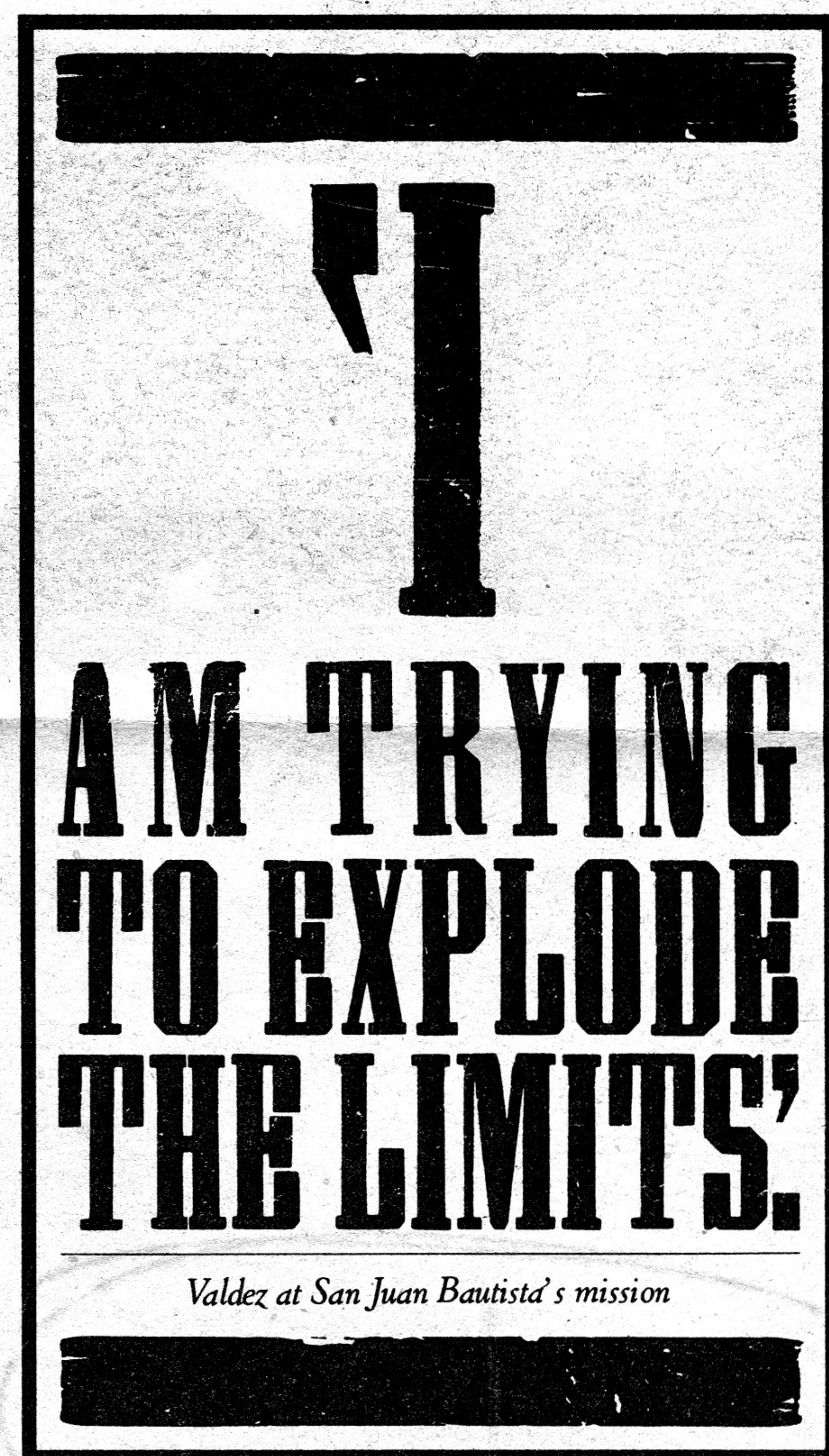
That he does. On a recent afternoon, Valdez was sitting in Steven Spielberg's rarely used office on the Universal lot—a big, cushy space filled with *Jaws* mementos and a huge electric chicken. Listening to him recount his childhood in migrant camps and the East-L.A. barrio, I was struck by how much he seemed like the little boy in Fellini's movies who is mesmerized by the circus come to town. Valdez loved old movie serials, and he and his older brother, who is now a nuclear physicist, were devout fans of radio shows like the *Green Hornet* and *Straight Arrow*. He saw his first play in the fourth grade—*Snow White*, with real dwarfs. "The dwarfs came into town in an open car," recalls Valdez. "I was blown away by the effect."

By that time, he was already making puppets, after being zapped by the muse at age six, when a teacher took his brown lunch bag and used it as part of a papier-mâché monkey mask for the Christmas play. Valdez was thrilled when she told him he could be a monkey ("My costume was better than my own clothes"). Unfortunately, his father got his broken-down truck fixed before Valdez could make his debut. The family moved on, but inside Valdez, the magic of the theater had taken hold.

Today, he has established his own financially self-sustaining theater, with fifteen members, in a permanent home. El Teatro Campesino is housed in a converted packing shed in the beautiful little California mission town of San Juan Bautista, south of San Jose. The town is also home to Valdez' family—his wife, Lupe, and their three sons. A few years ago, Valdez might have been run out of San Juan Bautista by goons hired by growers, but now, El Teatro belongs to the town's chamber of commerce. And last Christmas, Valdez

used its mission as a dramatic backdrop for a vibrant performance of a sixteenth-century morality play that the mission padres had staged for the Indians in Mexico.

Zoot Suit is a far cry from *Gang*, Universal's 1979 "Mex-ploitation" film, which was hastily retitled *Walk Proud* after gang violence broke out when a film with a similar theme, *The Warriors*, first played in California. At one point during *Walk Proud*'s shooting, production had to be halted when leading man Robby Benson scratched his blue eye with the brown contact lens he was wearing to make him look more Latin. Now, what Universal is hoping—and working hard to achieve through special marketing techniques in the Chicano community—is that *Zoot Suit* will be the first in a series of films tailored to this country's Hispanic market: 20 million, and growing. (Special Spanish-soundtrack versions of both *Su-*



perman II and *The Empire Strikes Back* have already been successfully tested.) *Zoot Suit*, which has an English soundtrack but is riddled with Chicano slang, might even cross over to a hip Anglo audience.

That, of course, is what Valdez hopes. But *Zoot Suit* had trouble crossing over before. In 1978, the play opened to rave reviews at the prestigious Mark Taper Forum; it was an instant hit and had an eventual nine-month run in Hollywood's Aquarius Theater. Film-industry biggies flocked to Valdez, and there was talk of a \$10 million movie at Paramount. Jane Fonda said she'd like to play one of the major roles on film, and Lou Adler, producer of *Up in Smoke*, put up money of his own to help take the play to Broadway, in hopes of producing the movie.

Then, the bubble burst. In early 1979, *Zoot Suit* flopped

before a New York audience unfamiliar with the history and cultural context of the play. In addition, it was presented at the Winter Garden Theater, with a big proscenium-arch stage that robbed the production of its intimacy and its contact with the audience. Without preparing the public first, *Zoot Suit* was trying to compete with lavish cotton-candy musicals like *Annie*, and it lost. Eastern critics did not seem to understand the significance of the Sleepy Lagoon case in Chicano history. Some even went so far as to suggest—because of the bilingual production—that English was Valdez' second language.

Their criticism stung the director. "I was confronted with the deepest, most enraging hurt of my life," says Valdez. "Nobody in my adult life has ever criticized my ability to write or speak English. It's bad enough to be insulted, but to have your intelligence questioned is a basic kick in the privates."

Valdez' first response was to try to mount a national touring company of *Zoot Suit* to prove the play had a wide audience. But that was too costly. Various film producers came and went. Paramount bowed out. Then, out of the blue, in April of 1980, Universal story editor John Humphreys told Valdez that the studio's president, Ned Tanen, had seen the play and was interested in making a videotape of the production that would be converted to 35-mm film. The original budget was \$750,000 and called for a three-day shoot.

When the quality of videotape conversion didn't satisfy either Valdez or the studio, Tanen gave the go-ahead for a film of *Zoot Suit* to be shot at the Aquarius Theater. Valdez would have a top-notch crew, and David Meyers, who shot George Lucas' first film, *THX 1138*, as well as Martin Scorsese's *Last Waltz*, would be the cinematographer. (MCA would also release a soundtrack album.)

For a former Sixties radical like Valdez, having his first feature film distributed by a major studio like Universal is not without unintentional ironies. For marketing help with the Hispanic community, Universal has hired a Texas ad agency, one of whose partners had done in-depth market research for Coors Beer on the Chicano consumer. For years, the Farmworkers union has boycotted Coors, charging that its nonunion hiring practices specifically discriminated against Chicanos and other minorities.

If *Zoot Suit* succeeds, Valdez is almost assured of directing another film. He wants it to be based on the play he's currently writing for El Teatro about Tiburcio Vasquez, a notorious and dashing nineteenth-century Mexican-born California outlaw. From the mythology of the pachuco and gangs, he will go on to attack the archetype of the Frito Bandito. "It's very important to get the true meaning of these stereotypes across," says Valdez. "During the Sixties, we talked a lot about acculturation and the melting pot. We were very afraid that Chicanos were going to be absorbed and turned into gringos. Individuals will, of course—they always are. But what's happening in this country is that the thrust of the Chicano is not disassociated or disconnected from Mexico or the rest of Latin America. There are 600 million of us, so the question becomes, who will eventually absorb whom?"

Valdez' idol in the theater is Bertolt Brecht. What Valdez seems to have learned from the iconoclastic German is that art and politics are never very far from each other, and that it's easier to pack a visceral wallop if a play's meaning is coated with spectacle and entertainment. Outside a Los Angeles theater one night where *Zoot Suit* had previewed, a group of young avant-garde Chicano artists were complaining that the film was too safe. What they seemed to have forgotten is how far it truly is from Delano to Hollywood, and that, because of Valdez, it would be easier for their own work to go forward.

"We can't move politically," says Valdez, "until we have artists who can express what the people are thinking and feeling." And that's why Valdez will be chronicling the Latinos among us for a long time to come. "When Neil Simon stops writing about New Yorkers," says Luis Valdez, "I'll stop writing about Chicanos."