

At the Boulder International Fringe Festival, *Pedro and the Captain* explores the futility of evil

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Two men in a room together: the torturer and the tortured. This is Uruguay in the early 1970s, and the victim is Pedro, a member of the revolutionary Tupamaros. The man who controls the torture — though he doesn't administer it personally — is a colonel in the fascist country's military, who admits only to being a captain.



Aaron Jennejahn defies his torturer in *Pedro and the Captain*.

Details:

Presented by Maya Productions through August 20; the Boulder International Fringe Festival runs through August 25. Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut Street, Boulder, 720-563-9950, www.boulderfringe.com.

The script is straightforward, almost simple; there is no subtext. The Captain needs Pedro to betray his friends because that's the only way he can justify the work he does. He has many weapons at his disposal in the battle of wills: sleep deprivation, hunger and thirst, and the infliction of all kinds of physical agony, including electroshock and waterboarding. He can even order the arrest and rape of Pedro's wife and the brutalization of his child. Pedro's task is to hold on to his integrity and sense of self, and the only weapons he possesses are his own heart and mind. The play is divided into relatively short interrogation scenes. Each time Pedro enters, hooded and staggering, he's in worse shape than the time before. His fingers drip blood because his nails have been torn out. He shakes and vomits. And yet he is not entirely powerless in the

relationship. By the play's end, the Captain will be on his knees, begging for any scrap of information.

The script of *Pedro and the Captain* may be simple, but it is anything but simplistic. Author Mario Benedetti is interested in all the complexities and ramifications of his topic. He shows us the odd intimacy between the torturer and the tortured, and the longings for a normal, loving family life that unite the two. "Why am I confiding in you?" the Captain asks at one point. Pedro smiles. "Who else can you confide in?"

As I watched, I remembered an article by an Englishman, Eric Lomax, who had been horribly tortured by the Japanese during World War II. Like all torture victims, he never fully recovered from the experience. But eventually he learned that his interrogator, Nagase Takashi, was still alive, and had devoted himself to works of reconciliation; Takashi, too, had never recovered from the things he had done. Lomax and Takashi met in 1998, now old men, and although Lomax was intensely skeptical at first, eventually the two became friends. "Some time the hating has to stop," Lomax wrote of the experience.

But Benedetti is not suggesting any kind of moral equivalence between his two characters. He makes it clear that one is engaged in an act of absolute evil, while the other is guilty of nothing but resistance. Though his work often breaks the torturer even as it does the tortured, the torturer's suffering is not redemptive.

Confrontations like this are occurring today in various manifestations all over the world, including America's own prisons — those we know about at Bagram, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and those that remain hidden, black holes into which human beings have fallen and from which many will never emerge. But though the techniques used on Pedro are common in Guantanamo, there's one highly significant difference. Pedro is indeed a revolutionary; he must have known when he joined the Tupamaros that torture, mutilation and death were likely. We now know that most of those held by American forces are not combatants of any kind, but farmers, cab drivers, doctors, people betrayed by neighbors, sold for the fee the military offered for militants, or swept up in the random madness of war. They have nothing to tell. They do not possess the one thing Pedro uses to maintain his sanity: volition.

This harrowing production is part of the Boulder International Fringe Festival, a celebration of artistic expression in all its forms — subversive, sexual, beautiful or ugly. Most of the shows continue through this weekend, including Kath Burlinson's mythic and sometimes mystifying [*The Mother's Bones*](#), but it's hard to imagine anything more important than *Pedro and the Captain*. Ami Dayan directs with a strong, sure hand, and his actors — Aaron Jennejahn as Pedro and Mark Read, who plays the Captain and also translated the text — turn in performances of unflinching honesty. You'll be mesmerized; you'll understand some things about how human beings behave in extremis that you may not have understood before; you'll find yourself asking questions that desperately need to be asked. And the play's images will remain in your mind for a long time.