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**Performance Review of *Un puto peón negro chueco*: A Mexican Play by a Spaniard, Directed by a Mexican, in Madrid**

**Timothy G. Compton**

For several years, Mexican director (and actor) Fernando Bonilla has collaborated with playwright David Desola, who hails from Cataluña, Spain. In 2013, Bonilla's theatre group, Puño de tierra, commissioned Desola to write a play. The result was the monologue, *Un puto peón negro chueco*. Bonilla prepared and simultaneously directed two versions of the play, one with a Spanish actor, premiered in Madrid on January 8, 2014, and one that premiered shortly thereafter in Mexico City with a Mexican actor. Desola actually wrote the play for Mexican audiences, with references to the PRI and a vocabulary peculiar to Mexico. So the version for Spain, ironically, was partially adapted to Spain.

Tarambana, a small theater, hosted the Madrid premiere. It specializes in comedy and houses many improvisational performances. It therefore seemed appropriate that the play's actor, Jorge Rueda, is a veteran improvisational actor. This play, however, constituted his first incursion into "traditional" theatre.

In the play, a black pawn told the story of how he was created with a defect, relegated to the chess board's most peripheral squares, where he was typically the first piece off the board. He was on a campaign to right the inequities of chess, in which pawns are placed in the greatest danger, make the biggest sacrifices, have the fewest options, and get the least benefits. The play presented in an exceptionally clever way the psychology and personalities of chess pieces. Powerless pawns don't revolt because they have the (remote) possibility of becoming nobility or royalty at the end of their row. The rook loves his pure, violent power. The horse is in it for a good time, with no loyalties to anyone. The bishop doesn't play straight, and is in

cahoots with the government. The king and the queen are cowards who hide behind the masses, and the king is downright dimwitted and powerless.

Several additional factors made this delightful theatre. First, Rueda toggled brilliantly between his basic role and those of the other pieces of chess. His background in improvisation was a clear advantage, as his transitions were instant, clear, and very funny. As a crooked, disabled pawn, he used a cane, but as he took on other roles he used that cane for other comic effects. And in this version, when he played the king, he sported mannerisms rather like Spain's King Juan Carlos and made several clear allusions to the king's public life. Since I saw both the premiere as well as the dress rehearsal a few days prior, I saw how Rueda drew upon his improvisational background, occasionally departing from Desola's text and interacting with the audience. Second, the pawn told a light-hearted yet serious story—the story of Bonilla and Desola engaging him in a chess match, whereupon Rueda took on the roles of both the playwright and director, although his embodiment of the playwright made Desola look like a little old man, which he is not. After all his frustrated efforts to get his fellow pawns to unite



Photo: Caroline Compton

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and garner concessions from the powerful, in this game the title character faced the crisis of becoming one himself. Finally, the set was a basic but effective large chess board, which Rueda negotiated beautifully, moving in accordance with the rules of chess and the character he was playing at the moment. The black box walls also had some whimsical chalk figures/art/writing, to which Rueda added during the play.

In short, *Un puto peón negro chueco* was excellent theatre, combining a charming yet thought-provoking text, superb staging, and first-rate acting to create a unique *mestizo* performance.

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