



Bongani

FringeNYC Festival Review

[August Schulenburg](#) · August 18, 2011

Bongani, a one-woman show written and performed by Gabrielle Maisels, explores the fall of apartheid in South Africa through the relationship of Corinne Levitt, a white Jewish girl growing up in suburban Johannesburg, and Bongani Dhlamini, the son of the Levitts' black housekeeper. In this moving coming-of-age story, the possibilities of the post-apartheid era confront the stubborn prejudices and inequalities that remain.

The play's prologue is all confusion: someone has broken into the Levitt household, as Maisels leaps dizzyingly between the frightened family members and the medic who arrives to help. The following scene jumps thirteen years into the past, where we find Bongani and Corrine as children, eager to light the Shabbat candles. How these characters journey from the peace of the second scene to the violence of the first is the central action of the play.

In 1989, some minor restrictions of apartheid were lifted, allowing Bongani to at last stay with his mother at the Levitts' home in Johannesburg. This seemingly positive development begins the play's precise dissection of the vicissitudes of apartheid. For while his presence at the Levitts' gives Bongani the best education to be found in South Africa, it also stirs in him expectations of equality the white elite is in no way ready to grant. When these expectations go unmet, both Bongani's life, and his increasingly close relationship to Corrine, begin to unravel.

It is to Maisels's great credit that this piercingly political play never sacrifices the characters' complexity or agency in exposing the rottenness of the apartheid system. While Corrine and Bongani are inevitably shaped by its racist structures, their fate is ultimately the result of several key choices that very well could have gone a better way.

Bongani could've resisted fighting back against the racist taunting of his classmates, and so avoided expulsion. Corrine could've chosen to stand up to the intimidating insults of an angry woman in Soweto. Bongani could've kept the job Corrine fought to find him. Corrine could've not broken away from Bongani's kiss.

But the currents of injustice are difficult to swim against for long, and both of them inevitably give in, falling towards the paths their cultures expect of them. This heartache is leavened by a moment of grace between Corrine and Bongani at the end of the play; a gift that unites the violence and peace of the first and second scenes.

This lovingly detailed yet epic story somehow fits in Maisels's single body. As she continues to work on the play, the transitions between the many characters she embodies will hopefully grow sharper; as there are times, particularly in the silent moments, where the exchanges are unclear. Maisels and director Kate Holland may also want to explore more precise blocking, as much of the staging had a wandering quality that sapped the play's considerable energies, and further muddied those transitions.

Don't let that quibble stop you from seeing *Bongani*. This bracingly unsentimental play does justice to the complexities of love and identity under the pressures of injustice. Like Bongani himself at the end of the play, Maisels has a difficult and necessary grace to give us, so please, hold out your hand.

Opened: August 18, 2011

Closed: August 28, 2011

Artists Involved

- **Director:** Kate Holland
- **Producer:** Gabrielle Maisels
- **Written and Performed By:** Gabrielle Maisels