



# The New York Jewish Week

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## Jews On The Fringe (Festival)

*From day school grads-turned-college freshmen to spiritual seekers in Jerusalem to South African emigrés, annual fest includes several Jewish-themed plays.*

**Tuesday, August 10, 2010**

**Ted Merwin**

Special To The Jewish Week

In this summer's 14th Annual New York International Fringe Festival, which begins this weekend, three very different works by young female playwrights situate Jewish life in a multicultural context, in which the intersections among gender, religion, ethnicity and race come to the fore in striking new ways that illuminate the evolving relationships between Jews and other peoples.

Gabrielle Maisels' one-woman play, "Two Girls," takes place during the transition to democracy in South Africa that began in 1994, when the official dismantling of apartheid raised great hope for profound change, but failed to produce real liberation for most of the country's black population. Directed by Joey Brenneman, "Two Girls" is about the close friendship between Corinne, a Jewish girl in Johannesburg, and Lindiwe, the daughter of her family's black housekeeper. The play ends when Corinne, having moved to America and hired Lindiwe as her nanny, accompanies her to attend Barack Obama's presidential inauguration.

Maisels who grew up in Hershey, Pa., and then studied political theory at Harvard and Columbia, is the granddaughter of Israel

Aaron Maisels, the lawyer who successfully represented Nelson Mandela and dozens of others accused of treason for their political activities in the late 1950s. Maisels' parents left South Africa in the 1960s, as much of the country's Jewish population was also emigrating, out of a widespread feeling of despair that the demoralizing situation would ever improve.

In South Africa, Maisels said, you see the "discomfort, guilt and anxiety that white people feel during every interaction with black people. Everyone is riven by conflict all the time in a bizarre and painful way." A Passover seder in Johannesburg, is, Maisels noted, "the biggest irony ever," as Jews celebrate escaping from slavery while being served by people who are still tremendously oppressed.

After the end of apartheid, "everyone wanted to feel that a great miracle had happened, but the black community remained decimated and traumatized."

While South Africa, which Maisels calls "breathtakingly beautiful," has been dubbed a "tragic paradise," it is also, for Maisels, a place where it is impossible to live an authentic life. "There's no way to live in a society that's so unjust and unequal," she said.

All three playwrights highlight the role of women in bridging differences between people. By breaking down the boundaries that divide Jews from other groups, at least in the realm of art, they forge new connections and spark new insights that have the potential to expand Jewish life beyond its traditional confines.

*The 14th Annual New York International Fringe Festival runs from Aug. 13 to Aug. 29. Plays are presented at a number of locations, and on an irregular schedule. For tickets, \$15 (\$18 at the door), call (866) 468-7619 or visit [www.fringenyc.org](http://www.fringenyc.org). There are additional shows of Jewish interest this year, including Rachel Evans' "Jew Wish," about a single Jewish woman and her online dating escapades, and Yehuda Hyman's "The Mad 7," about an office worker who goes off on a chasidic quest inspired by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.*

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