

FREE MANDELA
Draft one Paul Stebbings and Phil Smith
Synopsis of the long/Full version.
Please note there will be changes in rehearsal.

The play begins in the village of Nelson Mandela's birth, where a dispute over livestock is resolved by calling on the idea of "ubuntu"; the tribal principle of communal generosity and shared humanity. The older Nelson comments that he always relied on this principle learned as a young child of the Madiba clan in the Xhosa tribe.

Nelson's future wife, Winnie, comments on how Nelson will combine the qualities of a Xhosa warrior with the wisdom of Ubuntu in order to change South Africa and the world; she wishes that sometimes he had been less wise and more warrior.

The young Nelson sees how his father, on his death bed, is dispossessed of his rights as a chief of the Xhosa by an official of the British Empire.

At the Mission School, Nelson is taught that it is his duty to serve the British monarchy, and he is obedient to this idea until he is deeply affected by a different viewpoint expressed by Xhosa Chief Meligqili, at a prize-giving ceremony at the school. The Chief laments how the clever black children before him will end up in humiliating poverty so that whites can live in comfort: "among these young men are chiefs who will never rule because we have no power to govern ourselves; soldiers who will never fight for we have no weapons to fight with; scholars who will never teach because we have no place for them to study."

Winnie, the narrator, is thrown off the stage by a Boer; and the stage is swamped by a crowd of Boers, singing in Afrikaans as they gather around a radio set to hear that the National Afrikaans Party has won control of the Parliament. The Boer scolds the audience for any critical thoughts they might have about the Boers, claiming that he is just as African as any black. As Boers chant in Afrikaans "keep kaffirs in their place" the National Afrikaans Party leader, Malan, announces the introduction of Apartheid; the institutional separation (and favouring) of whites from (and over) all other races, .

We see racial identity checks on blacks, including Nelson, by a white policeman. Nelson joins a queue to get into the offices of Oliver Tambo, a radical black lawyer and gets a job there after a testing interview with Tambo.

Tambo introduces Nelson to Winnie at a dance. They go on anti-apartheid demonstrations together. At a checkpoint Nelson objects to a white policeman's racist language and is arrested; Winnie has lost her 'date'; she complains that she has lost half of herself to a man who is destined to be a prisoner.

In prison, Nelson exercises and gets strong. But Tambo pays bail to have him released; Nelson and Winnie are free to be together; they marry. But they are not together for long; as Nelson resists the South African state in the courts, and is subject to a banning order; and when he protests he is again arrested. In the black townships demonstrations against the apartheid laws are growing; one Sharpeville is attacked by the police with tear gas and then machine gun fire. Many protesters are killed.

Winnie visits Nelson in prison to tell him of the massacre and to try to persuade him to give up non-violence. Nelson is found not-guilty in court, but Winnie still does not have her husband back, as he goes underground with the African National Congress (ANC) to avoid re-arrest.

In her Soweto home Winnie and her and Nelson's daughter are harassed, and threatened by police looking for Nelson. Winnie is taken by an African National Congress agent to see Nelson in hiding on a farm, but they are betrayed to police by one of the ANC guards. While Winnie tries to persuade Nelson to abandon non-violence, she recognizes a Soweto informer among the ANC guards and bundles Nelson into a car and he escapes.

In hiding Nelson trains with guns for the first time. Among the black majority population, he is gaining a reputation as the 'Black Pimpernel', always evading the authorities. But Winnie is not so lucky, she is taken into police custody and brutally tortured.

At a meeting of its leadership the African National Congress abandons the principle of non-violence. Nelson has been convinced by the massacre at Sharpeville; the apartheid regime will not relent even when exposed to international condemnation; the regime is not

open to compromise like the British Empire when faced with mass non-violent resistance in India led by Ghandi.

On the run in an ANC car, Nelson laments his unhappiness at always being separated from Winnie; a separation that is about to get worse as the car is stopped by police and Nelson is arrested, found guilty and almost executed. But instead he is imprisoned for life. In fact, for twenty seven years.

Nelson, in prison on Robben Island endures hardships and forced labour. Outside the movement against apartheid grows stronger, particularly in the Soweto township, despite its destructive criminal sub-culture and ubiquitous police spies. The leading figure in Soweto is Winnie Mandela.

Both Winnie and Nelson suffer oppression and imprisonment, but on top of that there is separation from each other.

Winnie works in a shoe shop. She sends her daughters away, so they can be safe. As she says: "I cannot live a normal life behind invisible bars. I cannot be a normal wife when my husband is behind real bars. The struggle has chosen me, I have not chosen the struggle. So now, let's work out how to mobilise the young people of Soweto to join the ANC and to break the bars, visible and invisible..."

The police arrest Winnie under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. For seventeen months she is kept in an icy cage, in solitary confinement.

While on Robben Island, understandings between warders and prisoners develop. A prison guard asks Nelson for legal help.

While Nelson is developing ideas for how to get the Boers to trust the ANC as negotiators, Winnie is being tortured in jail. Nelson is helped to survive an assassination attempt by one of his white guard. No sooner is Winnie released from prison, after 200 days, than she is re-arrested and internally exiled to a rural town where she experiences further isolation.

As the ANC leadership in prison mellows, outside the struggle intensifies. The radical Stephen Biko, a friend of Winnie's, is killed in police custody. Winnie wants revenge on her white oppressors. Once every six months she is allowed a visit to Nelson, for 30 minutes – "no touching. No talk of politics. No news of anything except health, family

and ...sport." On this visit, Winnie tells Nelson that after seven years of exile she is to be allowed to return to Soweto. Nelson sees this as a sign of hope, Winnie as a sign of the white government's fear of what the black masses might do without their leadership.

The police have recruited Winnie's driver, Joshua, as an informer. He has been coerced with the threat of losing his job, and the incentive of feeding his two families. At the same time he knows that if the ANC find out he will be killed by them; a car tyre placed around his neck, petrol poured in and ignited. He is caught...

The authorities try another approach; gathering evidence of Winnie's love affair with a black lawyer to put pressure on Nelson. Offers of money can shift neither Nelson nor Winnie from their struggle. Among the white rulers, even among the torturers, there are now doubts as to whether the apartheid system can be sustained; Winnie's torturer has a mental breakdown at a barbecue. The barbecue is attacked by black militants; a bomb is set off. There are casualties, a white child is killed.

Nelson is called into the prison governor's office and offered his freedom if he will renounce violence on behalf of the ANC and in his own name. Nelson refuses. So, then the governor offers Nelson a negotiation with the President of the Republic of South Africa. Nelson insists that there be no conditions placed on the talks; that they should discuss equal rights for black and white citizens. This is agreed.

President De Clerk announces negotiations with the ANC with a view to drawing up a new constitution. In this period of instability and decision-making both Nelson and Winnie are vulnerable to assassination by right-wing whites.

Then a suspected police informer, Stompie, is murdered by members, or a member, of Winnie's security group; and Winnie is accused of being involved. There is witness testimony against Winnie, but it may come from people in the pay of the police. The suspicion hovering around Winnie alienates Nelson from her; he does not believe that she is responsible but has handled the situation badly and demands that Winnie disband her security guard. Winnie retorts that the boys in her security guard protect her because her husband is not able to. Nelson is broken by this, feeling that he has failed Winnie when she most needed him. Winnie wants some revenge for all the killing of

blacks by whites, and revenge on black informers. Nelson wants reconciliation and racial harmony to build a new and prosperous South Africa.

Just as Nelson is on the point of leading a new South Africa the security forces show him love letters from his wife to a young lawyer. Nelson recognizes the cruelty of marrying and then deserting his wife for the struggle; but he cannot quite accept this. As apartheid is dismantled, and Nelson is poised to be released and become President, he asks Winnie to come to him in prison, but she will only walk with him once he is outside the prison, she will not stay the night with him. For Winnie, Nelson's release is bittersweet. Her husband is free, but after years of learning to stand alone she must now stand in his shadow once again.

With Winnie at his side, Nelson emerges from 27 years in prison and commits the remaining years of his life to serving the people of South Africa.

As the crowd and media hail Nelson, Winnie is left alone, feeling as if she elsewhere, not "a dignified wife in spotless cotton but a dignified soldier in muddy uniform. No wonder they call out for him! Those Boers, those Afrikaans shake his black hand. They will keep their farms, their swimming pools, their fine wines and steak on their barbecues. And we will be free, free to be poor..."

Winnie's torturer walks across the stage, he clutches a supermarket bag and carries a box of barbecue charcoal in his hand. Winnie and the torturer do not notice each other.

"...and my torturer will walk by in the supermarket and nod to me as if he had been a dentist and I were a half forgotten client. O, Africa...Who is free?"

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