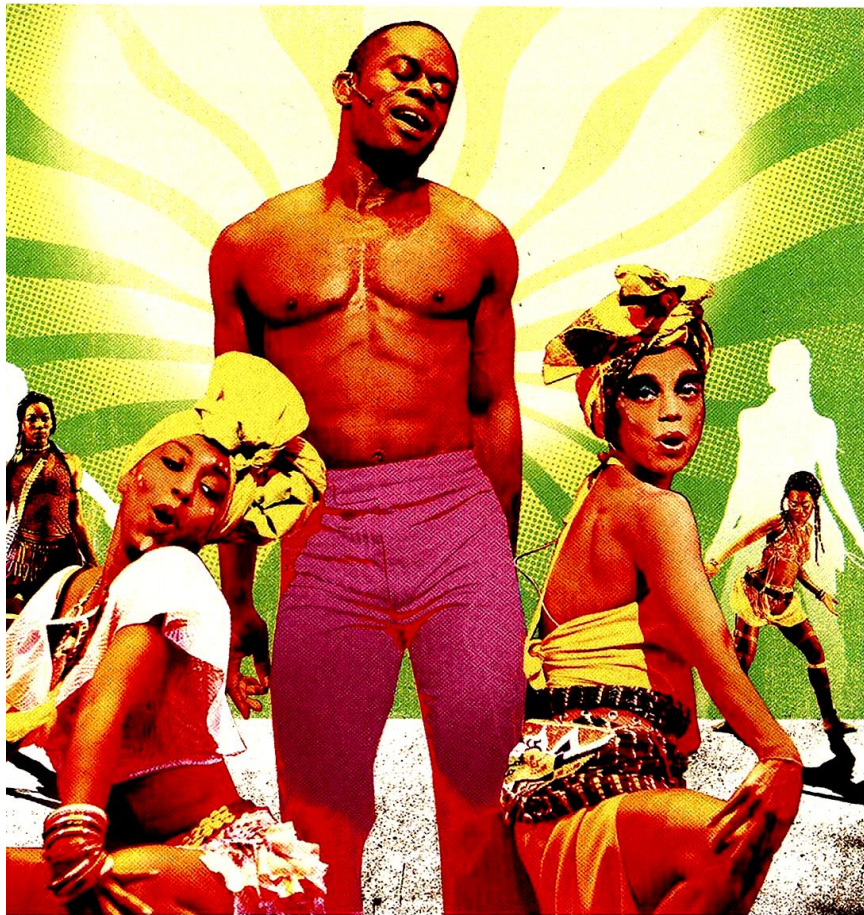


# NEW YORK

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## THEATER

### Dancing With the Stars *Fela!* can get even a staid Broadway audience shaking its hips. Plus: Kenneth Lonergan's midlife crisis.

BY DAN KOIS AND SCOTT BROWN

**S**URE, THERE ARE things wrong with *Fela!*, the musical directed by Bill T. Jones about the life of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the Afrobeat pioneer. It doesn't have much of a plot: All we hear is that we're in the Afrika Shrine, his Lagos performance space, in 1978, as Fela—repeatedly beaten and jailed by the government—performs what he claims will be his final show in Nigeria. The book barely develops its secondary characters, and glosses over Kuti's character flaws: his rages, his alienation of his band, his assertions that real men don't wear condoms (and his death from AIDS). Even last fall's thrilling Off Broadway production of *Fela!* had its longeurs, and the cavernous Eugene O'Neill Theatre isn't kind to those slow spots.

But, seriously, who cares? As an evening's entertainment, *Fela!* is without peer: two and a half hours of electrifying music, astonishing dancing, and virtuosic stagecraft, anchored by a star turn as charismatic, and as taxing, as I've ever seen on Broadway. How charismatic? Fela's a ringmaster, a bandleader, and the cult guru of the Shrine. And how taxing? He rarely leaves the stage, singing and dancing and joking like a demon—oh, and visiting his dead mother in the underworld. It's draining enough that two actors alternate the role.

Which Fela should you see? Kevin Mambo, new to the show, is stern

and at times bitter, commanding the stage with a kind of arrogant majesty. Sahr Ngaujah, who starred Off Broadway, is fun-loving and celebratory, his anger running deep beneath the born-showman's surface. They're both terrific, but Ngaujah's rapport with his band and co-stars brings the show fully alive, and his transformation in the show's second act is more profound.

Jones's choreography is fluid and gorgeous, mixing traditional African moves with modern expressiveness and a dose of booty-shaking. (Seriously, if you don't spend a portion of *Fela!* staring at the amazing asses onstage, you're just not doing your job.) His management of the show's technical demands is remarkable; fascinating video projections pepper the ramshackle set, and Robert Wierzel's lighting illuminates a smoky club, the glowing underworld, and Marina Draghici's wild costumes vividly. The music, by the Brooklyn ensemble Antibalas, is as tight as Fela's abs.

*Fela!* is so inventive, in fact, that I wish the producers had found a way to be more innovative in its presentation. The best vibes in the audience come from the dancing, screaming kids in the standing-room balconies to either side of the house. Given the concert conceit of *Fela!*, and the audience participation that its stars encourage, I wish they'd just ripped the first ten rows out of the orchestra and sold those spots for ten bucks a pop to music lovers. It probably would've violated a fire code or some union contract, but it also might've helped the energy in the crowd match the exceptional energy onstage. D.K.

KENNETH LONERGAN's finest work (1996's *This Is Our Youth* and the 2000 indie-film masterpiece *You Can Count On Me*) is, like the universe itself, mostly empty space: between people, between moments, between lives that ache for a saving touch. So is his new play, *The Starry Messenger*. But it's the most overcrowded empty space you've ever visited—packed with sentimental feints, false starts, and a shockingly miscalculated Hail Mary near the end. We follow Mark, an enervated planetarium lecturer (Matthew Broderick, trying manfully to hold this dust cloud together), as he embarks on an extramarital affair with nursing student Angela (*Maria Full of Grace*'s Catalina Sandino Moreno), his made-to-order metaphysical opposite. Their affair (secular humanist meets intuitive Catholic earth mother) is neither convincing nor compelling, and with no gravitational center, *Starry* drifts. Large swaths of dialogue become mere yammering. Lonergan, who also directed, refuses to trust his own silences, as if he's just not sure anymore that there's anything waiting out there in the "dark mass." S.B.

**FELA!**  
CHOREOGRAPHED  
BY BILL T. JONES.  
EUGENE O'NEILL  
THEATRE.

**THE STARRY  
MESSENGER**  
BY KENNETH  
LONERGAN.  
ACORN THEATRE.  
THROUGH  
DECEMBER 12.