

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

# 'Fela!' fails on story

## Fela!



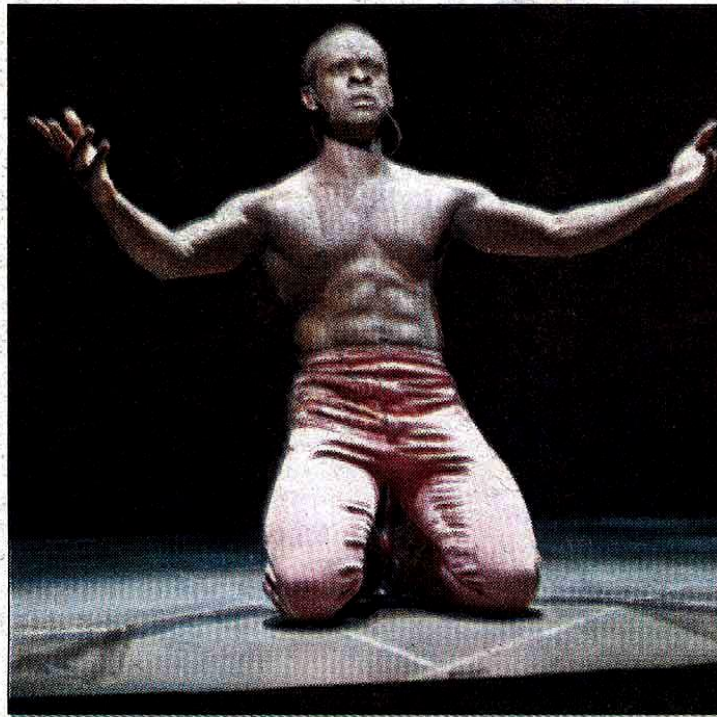
BY MATT WINDMAN  
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It's hard to imagine a place more lively than Broadway's Eugene O'Neill Theater, where the new musical "Fela!" just opened following a successful Off-Broadway run.

In fact, the theater has been transformed into the hotspot nightclub of Lagos, Nigeria. As the audience enters, the band is already playing. Soon enough, a modelesque tribe engages in free-form dance, followed by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, their leader.

Fela gained fame in the late 20th century as a Nigerian political rebel and bandleader. The musical is imagined as a 1977 concert intended to be his farewell to Nigeria before moving to a safer area due to attacks from government soldiers.

With that concert feel,



Sahr Ngaujah performs as Fela Kuti in Bill T. Jones' "Fela!"

the story suffers. In fact, "Fela!" has absolutely no storyline besides some vague biographical details and quickly turns into a repetitive bore.

The musical primarily is

a celebration of Afrobeat, Fela's style of music that mixes jazz, funk and African rhythms. Director-choreographer Bill T. Jones has staged seemingly untamed, vibrant choreography that

### ON STAGE

'Fela!' has an open run at the Eugene O'Neill Theater.

■ 230 W. 49th St.,  
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perfectly matches the percussive music.

Sahr Ngaujah, who plays Fela along with Kevin Mambo on alternating nights, almost never leaves the stage. Ngaujah displays a muscular, animalistic presence, along with the charisma to command a loyal army of followers.

It plays like a one-man show with backup dancers and singers giving off explosive energy.

The show's producers took a huge risk bringing a show with a relatively narrow niche appeal to Broadway. Despite its overflowing theatricality, "Fela!" falls short of providing a solid night of drama.