

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

African pop bursts onto B'way

Not every Broadway musical set in Africa comes with perky puppets and syrupy ballads.

Just like Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the Nigerian artist-rebel whose life and music it celebrates, "Fela!" is as rowdy as it is rousing.

The show, seen last year Off-Broadway, blends irresistibly catchy music, explosive dance and a dramatic personal journey to tell the story of a songwriter and political activist who died at age 58 in 1997.

Since its run at 37 Arts, writers Jim Lewis and Bill T. Jones, who also directed and choreographed, trimmed about 15 minutes but have kept its ferociously infectious spirit intact.

And, wisely, the same dazzling actor Sahr Ngaujah, who makes a big, bold and ridiculously sexy Broadway debut as Fela (as he came to be called). He alternates the demanding role with Kevin Mambo ("Ruined," "Guiding Light").

In the 1970s, Fela pioneered Afrobeat, a juicy cocktail of African rhythms, funk, jazz and blazing horns. It became music of rebellion. In songs like "Zombie" and



'Fela!'

Eugene O'Neill Theatre,
230 W. 49th St. Tickets:
\$27-\$122; (212) 239-6200



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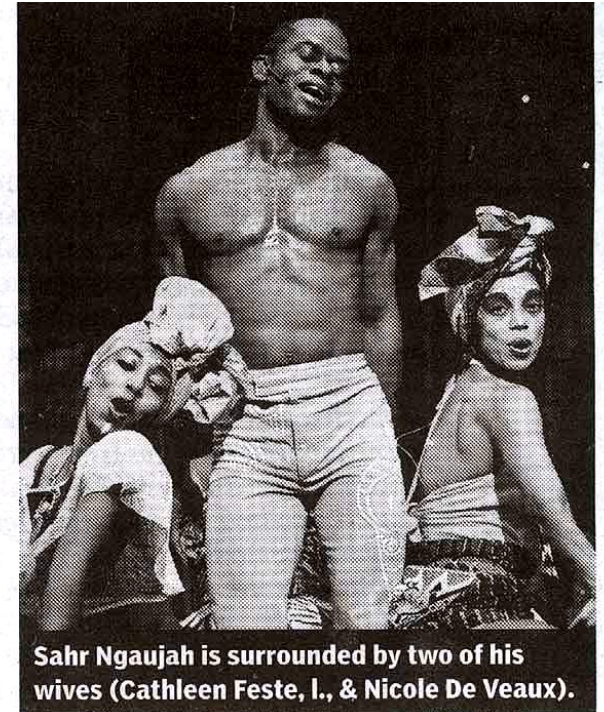
"International Thief Thief," Fela blasted the corrupt West African government, which brought him fame, fortune, fans and high-ranking enemies. His mother was killed in a raid by soldiers in 1977.

The show is set six months after that incident

at a Nigerian club, where Fela's giving a goodbye concert with his 10-piece band and 20 dancers. The spot, called the Shrine, is re-created in rustic detail with string lights, colorful primitive murals, masks and and photos of Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali and the singer's mother, brought to life through eerie lighting effects.

"Fela!" doesn't unfold in a neat, linear narrative. It's more free-form, like Afrobeat itself. When Fela's not blowing his sax, shaking his hips or caressing one of his undulating "queens" (he believed in polygamy and pot) or commanding you to groove (you will obey), he discusses his life, including his dilemma about leaving Africa for good.

Recollections are spliced between two dozen songs, which erupt into sensual



Sahr Ngaujah is surrounded by two of his wives (Cathleen Feste, l., & Nicole De Veaux).

dance that spills into theater aisles. Jones won a Tony for his choreography for "Spring Awakening," and the movement here has the same wonderful wildness.

New to the cast is Lillias White, a Tony winner for "The Life." She plays Fela's mother, who haunts her son and joins him for a dreamy sequence that makes for a strange and ecstatic ending.

"Fela!" is one of the most original and exciting shows to come around in a long while. It deserves its berth on Broadway – and that exclamation point.

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