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## Plenty of Afro-heat

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

THERE'S enough energy in the first act of "Fela!" to short-circuit Con Ed. It spills over from the stage and into the

### THEATER REVIEW

FELA!

★★★

Eugene O'Neill Theatre, 230 W. 49th St.; 212-239-6200.

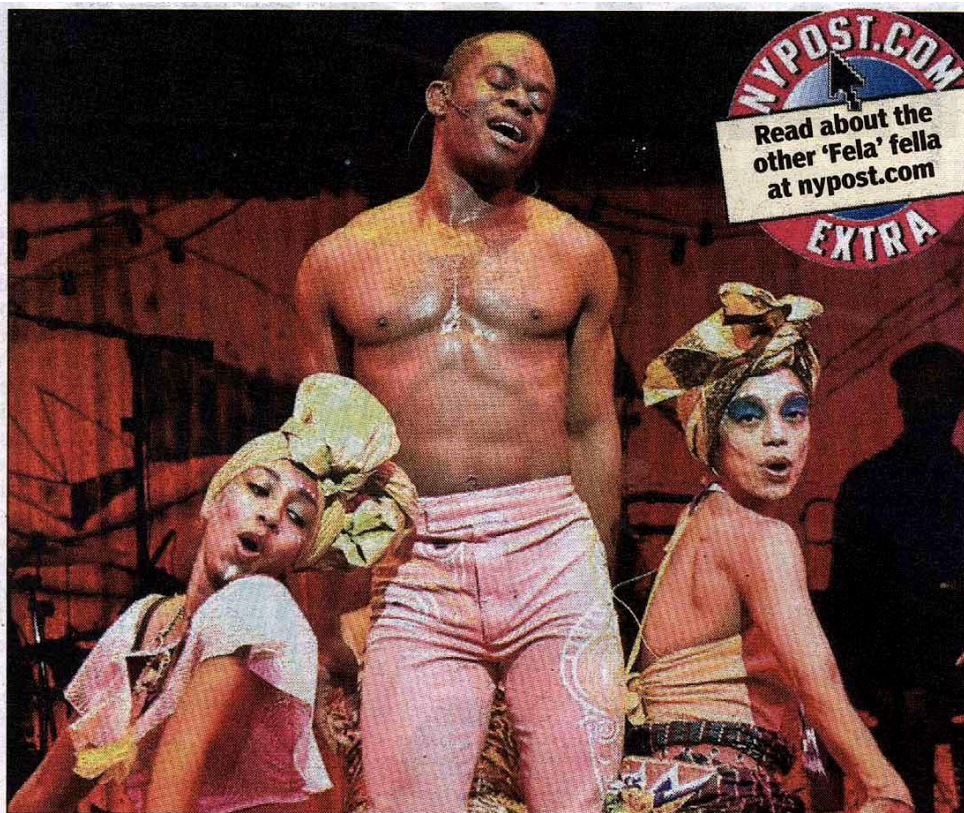
orchestra seats, boundless and joyous: This is as close as Broadway gets to fully immersive theater.

For starters, the O'Neill has been decorated like a Nigerian club in the '70s, with corrugated iron and a

giant disco ball, slogans and African paintings. The onstage band (the real-life New York ensemble Antibalas) is pumping out turbo-charged Afrobeat music. Dancers cavort down the aisles and on runways jutting into the audience.

In the middle of this maelstrom stands our ringmaster: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. (The role is so demanding that Sahr Ngaujah — who created it off-Broadway — and Kevin Mambo alternate performances.)

The conceit is that we're watching the late musician-revolutionary, who died in 1997, perform at his Lagos club, the Shrine. The year is 1978, a tumultuous one for Fela as he clashed with corrupt Nigerian offi-



Sahr Ngaujah, one of two feisty Felas, with Catherine Foster (left) and Nicole de Weever.

cial as his fame spread around the world. With the help of Marina Draghici's exuberant set and costumes and Peter Nigrini's omnipresent projections,

we're far from 2009 New York.

Directed and choreographed by Bill T. Jones, the biography is at its most thrilling when it blurs the

line between life and art, performers and viewers. A pedagogical deconstruction of Afrobeat's musical components turns into a party, and the show is so

cocky that it doesn't even save a big audience-participation number for the finale: It comes half an hour in.

It's a tough act to keep up, and "Fela!" does struggle after intermission.

In the second act, the pretense of being at a concert falls by the wayside, and a dream sequence involving Fela's mother, Funmilayo (Lillias White), drags on forever. She gets the only new number, "Rain," but that ballad co-exists uneasily with the other songs — all of them actual Fela hits.

For such a boundary-busting project, it's oddly conventional in the way it glosses over the cause of Fela's death (of AIDS) and smoothes out his misogyny — his embrace of polygamy wasn't nearly as endearing as it's portrayed.

But then, the intensely charismatic Ngaujah played the lead when I saw the show. Whipping his band and followers into a frenzy, he's fully aware of his power — and you finally understand how an entertainer can be a human weapon.

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