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Fela=Fantastic, Exhilarating, Life-Altering

By LINDA ARMSTRONG

Special to the AmNews

When I first saw "Fela!" as an off-Broadway production I was blown away by the power of this piece. And that power is definitely vivid on the Broadway stage at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on West 49th Street. The musical is powerful because of the truth behind the piece, which tells of the horrors that Fela Anikulapo-Kuti—the composer, performer and father of Afrobeat—faced growing up in Lagos, Nigeria, a place where the people were very poor, the government was very corrupt and the murders and injustices inflicted upon people were very regular and rampant—and those doing the acts went unpunished. Fela shares his personal tragedies and his views about what his people had to suffer at the hands of the mosquitoes (soldiers) and the corrupt government.

The book by Jim Lewis and Bill T. Jones based on Fela's life and the story, which is conceived by Jones, Lewis and Stephen Hendel, allow the audience to meet Fela at the roughest moment in his life: He is facing a great transition, a great decision. He must decide if he will leave Lagos, and abandon his club, The Shrine, because he realizes how dangerous Nigeria has become, especially after his



Sahr Ngaujah as Fela Kuti and the Broadway cast of "Fela!"

(Monique Carboni photo)

mother is viciously murdered by soldiers. Fela is searching his soul as he entertains the audience who has joined him at The Shrine for his final performance. As he struggles with what he will do next, the spirit of his mother and the ancestors help to guide him to his final decision.

As you sit and listen to his story, you find yourself outraged by what the colonial powers did to this African land when they came. You find yourself outraged by people having to live with a corrupt govern-

ment, where defiance was greeted by death. If you didn't agree with the government your life would be the price you paid, and that price was exacted from anyone, including stu-

dents. It's wonderful to watch the way that Fela developed a consciousness about what was going on around him. He had grown up with a very accomplished and politically active

Casting Pearls

"Fela!" is stupendous, unique, extraordinary

By MISANI

Special to the AmNews

A stupendous spectacle! "Fela!" is a magnificent, daring, impressive, elaborately fierce theatrical production that has re-invented the old American musical. This bril-

liant, new, avant-garde framework transcends the same age-old genres, dated formulas and worn-out conventions to become a triumphant model that is a hybrid of diversified, enriching, cross-cultural education.

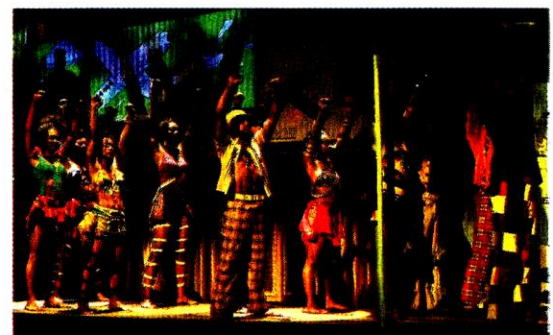
As such, "Fela!" is glorious! "Fela!" is liberating! "Fela!" is a pure, clever, theatrical, experience on a global level.

The musical has a tight book by Jim Lewis and Bill T.

mother, Funmilayo, who always tried to get him to look at and react to the plight of his people. He finally realized what he should focus on musically after coming to the United States in the late '60s and being introduced to the Black Power movement.

Fela's girlfriend, Sandra, a sister very much involved with the Black Power movement, inspired Fela to use his music as a way of protesting the injustices going on with his own people back home. Once Fela was on that path he found himself in the headlines. He was labeled a rabble-rouser and was targeted by the government for arrest and harassment.

Fela's journey is told with exciting intertwining of his story while recalling how he created Afrobeat. He also has the audience interact with him through words and dance moves. I'll say no more. But just know that it's fun and it will get you thrusting
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"Fela!" Broadway ensemble

(Monique Carboni photos)

Jones, and on top of that, there's the hot, infectious Afrobeat music and lyrics of the legendary African composer, performer and activist, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti that's performed by Antibalas under the direction of Aaron Johnson. Clearly, "Fela!" has all the right ingredients to be recognized as one of the greatest musicals of our times, both on an artistic

White plays Fela's mother, Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti; and the talented Saycon Sengbloh is cast in the role of Sandra, Fela's African-American love interest.

The dynamic company also includes Corey Baker, Hettie Vyrine Barnhill, Lauren DeVeaux, Nicole Chantal DeWeever, Elasea Douglas, Rujeko Dunbutshena,
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Fela!

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and shaking your hips. What's so great about this show is it gives the audience exposure to the terrific and exhilarating Afrobeat music and lyrics of Fela.

Fela is portrayed by Sahr Ngaujah, who also played the role off-Broadway. Ngaujah

seems to channel Fela's spirit onstage. He is completely absorbed in his phenomenal, energized, sexy and powerful delivery of this man.

Tony Award-winner Lillias White plays Funmilayo, and she is absolutely wonderful. White handles the role with a quiet grace and dignity. And her voice, as always, is extraordinary—whether she is

singing a few words as she walks across the stage or performing an entire song, her voice is so distinctive and beautifully suited for this role.

As Sandra, Saycon Sengbloh is very impressive, as she gets Fela to focus on the plight of his people. She is passionate about the Black Power movement and her goal of pointing this talented artist in the right

direction.

Now, of course, "Fela!"—choreographed and directed by Jones—is packed with amazing African dance. These dancers are shaking, thrusting, tapping—they are doing African dance moves that will stay with you well after the curtain has gone down.

"Fela!" has several producers, including Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, Will Smith and Jada

Pinkett Smith. It officially opened last Monday night, November 16.

This is a musical that will have you dancing, singing, laughing, upset and uplifted because one sees not only what the human spirit can endure, but also what it can triumph over. "Fela!" is a must-see!

For tickets, call (212) 239-6200.

Pearls

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Catherine Foster, Rasaan-Elijah "Talu" Green, Shaneeka Harrell, Chanon Judson, Abena Koomson, Ismael Kouyate, Gelan Lambert, Farai Malianga, Shakira Marshall, Afri McClendon, Adesola Osakalumi, Jeffrey Page, Daniel Soto, Jill M. Vallery, J.L. Williams, Iris Wilson and Aimee Graham Woodborer.

The setting for "Fela!" is the Afrika Shrine, the renowned Lagos, Nigeria, nightclub that Fela Kuti created in the 1970s. The band is already on stage, and various characters interact with each other and a few lucky members of the audience. It's just another night at the Shrine, and Sahr as Fela Kuti is in top form as he narrates his character's story. Various posters of Fela's ancestors, heroes and she-roses dominate the walls, in addition to which some really cool graffiti serve to give information about the period.

A show-stopping production number sets up the energetic show, which never stops but

keeps building on this strong foundation, layer upon layer. Awesome dancers mesmerize the audience, dancing in the aisles and climbing on to poles and extended ladders to get to the balcony above the stage. Everything in the theater serves a purpose and a function.

And the colorful costumes are really hot—both the tight, skimpy, fun ones and the elaborate, exquisite traditional African garments, as well as the chic, natural hairstyles, which also depict the Black Pride era. All of it was magic, including the images on the walls taking on a life of their own, the spirits sharing the space. The story, setting, costumes, talent and the believable magical realism was all too fabulous an experience for words.

So, it is with the close of the curtain that the "Casting Pearls" series, which focuses on identifying outstanding talent of stage and screen, in collaboration with the New York Amsterdam News Centennial Anniversary Group, and our special guest, the legendary Mr. Geoffrey Holder, the first director to win two Tony

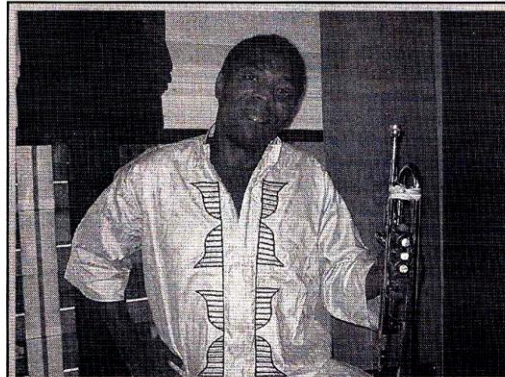
awards—as director and costume designer for "The Wiz"—are extremely pleased to announce the Casting Pearls Awards for the cast of "Fela!"

These awards are presented to Sahr Ngaujah (we plan to see Kevin Mambo in this role soon), Lillias White and Saycon Sengbloh. In addition, we would also like to present a Casting Pearl Ensemble Award to the rest of the "Fela!" company for their outstanding work.

In addition, we would also like to acknowledge the creative team by presenting Mr. Bill T. Jones with a Casting Pearls Lifetime Achievement Award for his multiple roles as director/choreographer/co-writer/co-conceiver and for his exceptional body of work and contribution to the arts. Another Casting Pearls is awarded to the gifted Mr. Jim Lewis, co-writer/co-conceiver, and a final one to the visionary Mr. Stephen Hendel, co-conceiver of "Fela!"

As Fela Kuti would say, "Everybody say, 'Ye-Ye! Ye-Ye.'" Bravo! Bravo!

To contact the "Casting Pearls" series team, please e-mail us at lovepeace2005@aol.com.



Femi Kuti

(Misari photo)

The following is from a June 9, 2009, interview with Femi Kuti, the son of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who was our esteemed "Africa Sings!" Cycle 2 host this summer.

"I am very happy about "Fela!" on Broadway. The more they talk about Fela, especially in the struggle, the better. I was happy to hear it ["Fela!" off-Broadway] was doing well and got so many [good] reviews and will be going to Broadway. When it was off-Broadway, they

were sending these reviews to Lagos, and it was really exciting. I met the actor [Sahr Ngaujah]. He was at the celebration. We had a big celebration in Lagos in October [2008] celebrating the life and times of Fela. We had between 10,000 and 15,000 people coming to the event. He [Sahr] was there...To me Fela...I just saw him as my father who I love so...and my grandmother [Funmilayo]...it was through her influence that Fela became who he was."