

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

What's the story with 'Fela!'?

The Afrobeat pulses, but it doesn't tell the rebel's tale

BY LINDA WINER

linda.winer@newsday.com

I know I should feel hard-wired to enjoy — no, to love — “Fela!” the biography/concert/spectacle/collage about Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the late Nigerian politico, rebel, hedonist and galvanic center of the fusion ethno-pop music known as Afrobeat.

The show — a multicultural hipster magnet during its celebrated tryout Off-Broadway last year — would seem to push some of my most closely held buttons. The nonlinear form and music are meant to take Broadway into unconventional places. The worldview is humanist, anti-colonial and, despite the setting — 1978 in Lagos, Nigeria — brutally timely. And the ersatz-African dances, which snake down the aisles and up a side runway, are electric.

But I am untouched by “Fela!” on Broadway (“presented” now by Jay-Z, Will Smith and Jada

WHAT “Fela!”
WHERE Eugene O'Neill Theatre, 230 W. 49th St.
INFO \$27-\$122; 212-239-6200; felaonbroadway.com
BOTTOM LINE More innovative than interesting

Pinkett Smith), much as I was last year when the show was about a half-hour longer but just as hyper-energized, repetitious and static. The songs, with Fela's potent pidgin-poetry in subtitles, are a jubilant, subtle mixture of Afro-Caribbean rhythm, jazz brass, Yoruban chant and R&B. But they were never meant to carry a story on their back, and they do not.

Director-choreographer Bill T. Jones, the modern-dance master who won a Tony for his snaky, enchanting movement for “Spring Awakening,” creates an ebullient party atmosphere for the mass-market mythmaking of Fela, a charismatic, obviously influential artist, provocateur and narcis-

sist who had 27 “wives” and died, at 58, of AIDS in 1997.

Sahr Ngaujah has the oversized presence to overcome the more incoherent parts of his story, which he tells, back and forth in time, as the host of his club, the Shrine (designed as artifact-and-headline infused environment by Marina Draghici, who also created the dazzlingly erotic warrior-women costumes).

The dance, mostly for a gorgeous group of women, activates the room with the push-pull limbs and jackknife spines in a sexualization of African dance. But I'm confused — not to mention put off — by the jarring juxtaposition of a too-cool-for-you veneer and a condescending hokeypokey dance-karaoke lesson to teach theatergoers to circle our hips around the imaginary numbers of a clock. Broadway regulars may also wonder why Fela is considered so exhausting that Ngaujah can only do five performances a week. Kevin Mambo will do the other three. Both just pretend to play the sax.

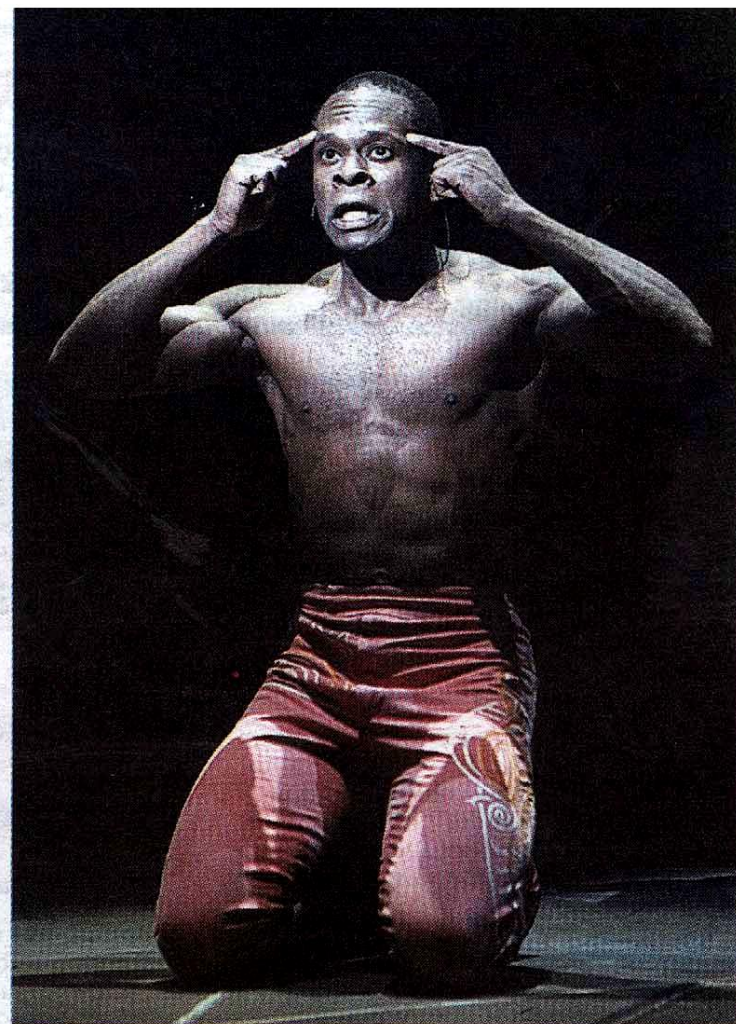


PHOTO BY ARI MINTZ

Sahr Ngaujah portrays African composer and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in “Fela!”