

November 27 – December 4, 2009

Stage



A MOST HAPPY FELA! Mambo surrounded by his many female followers

THE PRODUCERS



JADA PINKETT SMITH AND WILL SMITH



JAY-Z

Fela!

BROADWAY

By Thom Geier

TO THE LIST of classic stage-musical narrators—the Leading Player in *Pippin*, the M.C. in *Cabaret*—we can now add Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. This real-life pioneer of Afrobeat is an outside personality and the compelling center of the most unusual jukebox musical ever to hit Broadway—and not just because its producers include Jay-Z and Will and Jada Pinkett Smith. As embodied by Sahr Ngaujah (who rotates with Kevin Mambo in the role), Fela is a master showman in brightly hued Elvis jumpsuits. Presiding over a slightly saggy series of impressionistic vignettes set to Fela's hits, he touches on modern Nigerian history (bloodshed and corruption), Afrobeat's evolution (a combo of Yoruba drums, Cuban jazz, and American

funk), and his own awakening as an artist and political force (as well as his affection for his twin muses, women and marijuana).

Like a true impresario, Fela radiates joy as he oversees the action on stage. But his players, from his activist mother (Lillias White) to a chorus of dancers gyrating to Bill T. Jones' muscular choreography, seem more self-possessed, holding the audience at a distance. Even as Fela urges us to stand up for a lesson in booty shaking, it's clear that this is no Africa-set *Hair*. Far from letting the sunshine in, *Fela!* explores humanity's darker side, particularly in a visually stunning descent into the underworld that makes the most of Marina Draghici's sets and costumes and Peter Nigrini's projections. Part biography, part music lesson, part dance party, *Fela!* is a unique theatrical experience, and Fela himself is its beating heart and soul. (Tickets: 800-432-7250)