

## A Night at the Shrine of Fela

It's a story of hope amid tragedy, recounted, thrillingly, against an Afrobeat backdrop



BY JESSE OXFELD

**P**arochial Americans don't care much about Africa, and so parochial Americans don't know anything, or know very little, about Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the pioneering Nigerian musician and activist who in the 1960s and '70s created Afrobeat, a jazzy, funky genre, with hints of African rhythms and lots of horns. *Fela!*, the raucously fun Broadway musical that opened at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Monday night, aims to introduce us to the man.

Fela, as he was known, wasn't just the most famous musician in Africa; he was also a populist political lead-

er, leading a small army of followers—his fans, his band, his backup singers (who were also his wives)—to protest the oppressive rule of the military dictatorship that controlled Nigeria. His politics were inspired by the American Black Power movement—he'd picked that up, along with some musical influences, on a 1969 visit to the United States—and he dubbed the compound where he and his coterie lived and worked

the independent Kalakuta Republic. Across the street was his club, the Shrine, where he played all-night, free-form concerts-cum-consciousness-raising sessions. *Fela!* unfolds as a night at the Shrine, a concert played soon after Nigerian troops have invaded and destroyed the Kalakuta Republic, torturing many in Fela's entourage and throwing his beloved mother, a significant political activist, from a second-story window, killing her. As Fela considers leaving Nigeria, for his own safety, he tells us his story, plays his music and communes with the spirit of his murdered mother, who tells him to stay. He does.

The modern-dance giant Bill T. Jones has directed and choreographed. It is his first outing as a theater director and his second as a Broadway choreographer (following the hit repressed-German-teens-singing-indie-rock musical *Spring Awakening*). He creates a dizzying party onstage, giving his performers athletic, frenzied, propulsive and suggestively butt-centric dances. Catwalks extend into the orchestra seats, and dancers regularly head into the aisles. (Set designer Marina Draghici has extended the poster-covered corrugated steel that marks the walls of the Shrine into the house, too, turning the entire theater into the club.)

The actors Sahr Ngaujah and Kevin Mambo alternate in the demanding title role. Mr. Ngaujah, who won an Obie for playing Fela Off Broadway last year, performed at the preview I saw, and he was magnetic, a charismatic rock god with the audience in the palm of his hand. The orchestra—Fela's band—is Antiba-

las, a Brooklyn-based Afrobeat collective that I now very much want to go see the next time they're playing a New York gig.

The show's weakness is its book, by Mr. Jones and Jim Lewis. It's a straightforward recounting of Fela's life, integrated around his songs, but it never develops any characters other than Fela himself, not even his apparently sainted mother. (Played by Lillias White, Mama doesn't even have much to do, other than stand and walk and look matronly, until a late-second-act dream sequence.) It also seems to lack an ending, cutting off the story of Fela's life for no real reason except that two and a half hours are up. (He'd go on to die

in 1997, of an AIDS-related illness.)

But if the story isn't entirely satisfying, the evening is. With its '60s kids singing of revolution, its general Be-In feeling, even its dancers coming down the aisles, *Fela!* is sort of a funky-up, African *Hair*. And if it didn't quite make me want to read up on my Nigerian history—I know, I know, I should—I did make me go home and download a few of Fela's albums.

**S**arah Ruhl's new *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, which opened last week in a Lincoln Center Theater production at the Lyceum, is about orgasms—Victorian orgasms, administered therapeutically by a doctor.

"Pleasure, and pain all at one," exults his grateful patient, Mrs. Daldry. "Electrical current runs through my entire body. I see light, patterns of light, under my eyelids—and a kind of white-hot coal on my feet, and I shudder violently, as though struck by a terrible lightning—and then a darkness descends and I want to sleep."

Mrs. Givings, the doctor's wife, to whom Mrs. Daldry is confiding, is both intrigued and repulsed. "I never heard of anything so strange," she replies.

That is the basic joke of this very funny play: we modern, knowing libertines, entirely familiar with orgasms, watching repressed Victorians clinically discussing the heretofore unknown phenomenon they term a paroxysm, all thanks to Mr. Edison's wondrous new discovery, electricity. It's based on historical truth, as a note in the Playbill explains. At the turn of the last century, women (and, as in the play) some men suffering from what was called hysteria were treated for their malady by mechanically in-

duced orgasms.

It is also the basic tension of the story: While Dr. Givings is administering medicinal orgasms to his patients, all of the characters in the play are searching unsuccessfully for emotion, for connection, for love—most notably his wife, from whom he insists on propriety and who is so stunted that she cannot even produce milk for their newborn baby. The good doctor may give pleasure at work, but, at home, neither Givings is giving.

Michael Cerveris is delightfully deadpan as the doctor, and Maria Dizzia, as the hysteria patient, performs a more amusing female orgasm than even Meg Ryan. Laura Benanti, so wonderful in *Gypsy* two years ago, seems a touch out of place in this consciously old-fashioned production; her character is the one who hungers for change and emotion, but her line readings sound too modern, out of place amid all the Victoriana. Perhaps that's an intentional choice by director Les Waters—Mrs. Givings is the most modern of the characters, the one who talks when perhaps she shouldn't, who hungers for affection, who wants to connect and enjoy sex—but it's also anachronistic.

By the play's end, of course, modern self-fulfillment has triumphed over old-fashioned propriety; the walls of the Givings' house have disappeared, as have their multi-layered clothes, and they are finally connecting, exploring each other's bodies in the snow. It's a happy ending to a happy night at the theater—and if Ms. Ruhl's message is nothing more insightful than the idea that it's better to be in touch with your feelings and your body than to be ignorant, repressed and proper, well, who'd disagree with that?

editorial@observer.com

**Bill T. Jones creates a dizzying party onstage, giving his performers athletic, frenzied, propulsive and suggestively butt-centric dances.**

