

November 26 – December 2, 2009

Reviews

Fela!

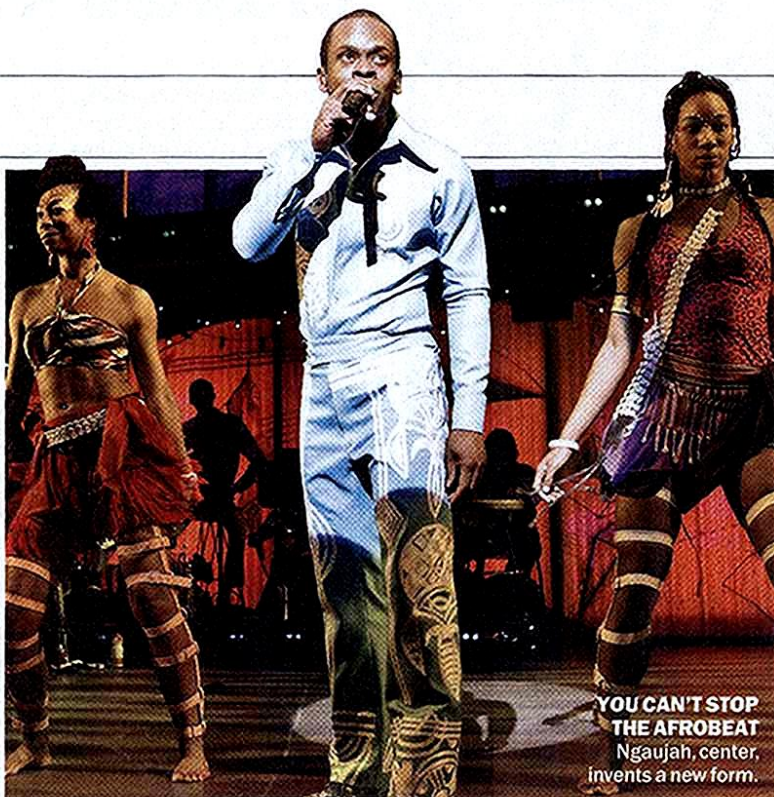
★★★★★

Eugene O'Neill Theatre

(see Broadway). Book by Jim Lewis and Bill T. Jones. Music and lyrics by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Choreographed and directed by Jones. With Sahr Ngaujah, Lillias White. 2hrs 30mins. One intermission.

I don't recall smoking a fat joint during the intermission of *Fela!*, but in the second act, the show got very, very freaky. Our swaggering, sax-blasting bandleader, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (Ngaujah), smears ivory paint on his face to commune with his dead mother (White) through the intercession of Yoruban gods. The onstage band, Antibalas, kicks off a wall-of-sound jam as a chorus of deities whirls on, their white fringe skirts and fluorescent makeup blazing under black light. They execute a high-energy, shake-and-jump number, blazingly directed and choreographed by Bill T. Jones. In a musical that has already had about a dozen climaxes, this 11th-hour extravaganza will truly blow what's left of your mind.

Although Jones proved in 2006's *Spring Awakening* that he could play the Broadway game, adapting his modern-dance aesthetic to musical storytelling (and garnering a Tony), who knew he was this much of a showman? Working with book



YOU CAN'T STOP THE AFROBEAT
Ngaujah, center, invents a new form.

corps and the sexy, commanding Ngaujah, Jones has orchestrated a soul-scorching mash-up of pounding African dance, political protest and intoxicating Afrobeat—the style Kuti pioneered, which mixes funk, jazz and drumming. *Fela!* is more than a musical; it's an ecstatic phenomenon.

The piece is also more than the sum of its overlapping genres: dance party, musical bioplay, agitprop rally, tribute concert. Between rabble-rousing anthems savaging the oppressive 1970s Nigerian

government, we learn of Fela's musical education, his "marriage" to 27 women (his dancing, singing "queens") and his complex relationship with his mother, a feminist agitator who was brutalized by police goons. This last element could have been explored more, but *Fela!* is too energetic to settle down for traditional dramatic narrative. And that's perfectly fine, since the beat—at once enthralling and liberating—demands your full attention.

—David Cote

Critics' picks



Dreamgirls ▲

See Off Broadway
Moya Angela and Chester Gregory rock the Apollo in a revival of this beloved R&B musical.

Fela!

See Broadway
Shake your fist (and other body parts) at this Afrobeat-rich spectacular.

Idiot Savant

See Off Broadway
A giant duck and a riveting Willem Dafoe are just two highlights of Richard Foreman's newest whirligig.

In the Next Room or the vibrator play

See Broadway
Repressed Victorians get full release in Sarah Ruhl's smart, frisky comedy.

The Royal Family

See Broadway
Jan Maxwell and Rosemary Harris swank majestically in a loving tribute to theater people.

The Starry Messenger

See Off Broadway
A heavenly new Kenneth Lonergan comedy-drama comes to earth with Matthew Broderick.