

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

# 'Fela!': Afrobeat

From Page F-1

jokes, plays the saxophone and creates a vivid, oversized portrait of the swaggering leading character.

Fela, who created Afrobeat by adding jazz, funk and pop to African rhythms, studied music in London and then acquired an education in radical politics in the United States in the late 1960s.

Returning home, he became a persistent, outspoken and fearless critic of Nigeria's brutal military dictatorships. (He died in 1997, at the age of 58, of an AIDS-related illness.)

But even in a show that's a tribute to Fela, Ngaujah, in a rich portrayal, suggests the considerable egotism that was also a part of his personality.

He established a separate nation at his compound in Lagos, with himself as ruler, and, on one heady occasion, married 27 women simultaneously.

While soaring on its musical numbers, the show's chief problem off-Broadway was a rambling book.

For Broadway, the story's been trimmed and is more tightly focused, but it remains the lesser part of the evening.

It's understandable that much book time is devoted to Fela's politics. That's who he was and what many of his songs, such as the hit "Zombie," were vibrantly about.

After a while, though, the generalized condemnations of oppression and exploitation become repetitious. We feel the heat, but there's not much light.

In the show's move to a big Broadway house, there have been design and staging changes aimed at maintaining, as much as possi-

ble, the cozy, club feeling of the off-Broadway space.

The walls of the theater have been hung with photos, political posters and African masks.

And seats have been removed in an orchestra row, allowing the dancers, who cavort in the aisles, to pass between the customers.

There's also a renewed emphasis on encouraging audience participation. Ticket buyers are urged to their feet and asked to imitate the dancers, who've just pointed to the positions of the hours on a clock through the awesome thrusting of their backsides.

Many tried; none, that I could see, succeeded.

Additionally, we were commanded, at various times, to participate verbally. ("Everybody say, 'Yeah, yeah! Yeah, yeah!' ")

I'm not a big fan of audience involvement on demand. I'd rather have performers provoke my response by what they're doing on the stage. But it's not a big deal.

Besides Fela, there are only two — lightly characterized — specific individuals in the show. One is his remarkable mother (Lillias White), who led the Nigerian women's movement, and who died of injuries suffered when soldiers threw her from a second-story window. The other is the American woman (Saycon Sengbloh) who turned him on to black liberation politics.

All of that, though, is Broadway-musical trimmings. Go to "Fela!" anticipating a super-stimulating, world-class song-and-dance concert, led by a remarkable performer, and you won't be disappointed.

E-mail: feldberg@northjersey.com