

Feel it Like Fela

A Broadway musical on the life of a legendary Nigerian musician is resonating with New York's diaspora community, writes Daniel Morris

There is a moment in the new show about the life of the late iconic Nigerian musician Fela Kuti when he encounters an African-American woman named Sandra on a visit to Los Angeles. As they share their respective experiences – she as a child of the American civil rights movement, he as an activist against his country's military dictatorship – their flirtatious, politically-charged banter heats up. Soon they look admiringly at one another with the same realisation: "We have a lot to learn from each other!"

To a New York audience including many Africans and African Americans, the scene was sublime. After the laughs subsided one could almost hear the smiles.

The new play, titled simply *Fela!*, is full of such moments. During the course of a free-flowing two hours and 20 minutes, the audience is treated to an innovative mix of biography, music and dance. The stage, set

up as an approximation of the Shrine, his Lagos nightclub and community centre, is where Fela – who is played by two actors – narrates his journeys to far away lands both geographical and spiritual.

Fela's journey to the spiritual world was particularly enjoyable for Kunle Ade, a Nigerian musician and fashion designer based in New York's hip Fort Greene neighbourhood.

"When Fela chants, it is really spiritual and deep. The producers knew what they were doing, and respected the material enough to guide it a certain way," he says.

At other times the performers and the renowned Brooklyn-based afro-beat band, Antibalas, join Fela in electrifying renditions

of his hits. In one memorable number, the audience is treated to an interactive lesson into the mechanics of 'breaking it down'. For those not familiar with performing concentrated pelvic movements, Fela explains that it is no more complicated than trying to feel the beat.

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The original Shrine was closed soon after his death in 1997, but the play's director and choreographer, the renowned Bill T Jones, does an extraordinary job of crafting an immersive experience. As the performers by

turns sit, interact and walk about the stage before the performance and during its intermission, one imagines that is exactly what the Shrine was like in its heyday: a place to



Moshood's owners are inspired by Fela Kuti's blend of styles



Wahala Temi feels Fela was a feminist

hang out and share ideas.

One of those ideas was the vital role women play as both mothers and labourers in Nigerian society. As the play narrates, Fela's mother Funmilayo, even after her death at the hands of the country's military government, played a critical role in her son's life. His wives, or 'queens', as he refers to them, are depicted as regal, dignified companions.

Still, others have criticised the play for this. Fela, in fact, married 27 women in 1978 before he adopted a rotating system of 12 wives. In the play, he is able to explain his life choices, but the women are silent.

The *New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood has taken the show to task for presenting Fela's wives as "largely festive window dressing".

But for Wahala Temi, a female visual artist based in the New York borough of Staten Island, Fela's gender consciousness was well-represented. "Fela was a feminist," she says. "His mother was a freedom fighter, and his intention was to keep his wives safe."

Other points of controversy in the musician's hard-partying life are glossed over. Copious drug use is rendered as an unequivocal moral right. There is no mention of him describing condoms as "un-African" and calling Aids a "white man's disease", even though it tragically took his life. Fela's contentious views were opportunities to offer the viewer a more well-rounded view of his character, yet the show unfortunately misses them amidst the feel-good atmosphere.

To be sure, the play appeared to have long odds at success. Even with the endorsement of celebrity producers Sean 'Jay-Z' Carter, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett-Smith, Broadway is a notoriously brutal place for new musicals – especially one with no big stars in the cast and no widely known pop hits.

Yetsinceit began its run on Broadway in November, the show has thrived. Kevin Mambo, one of the actors who plays Fela (owing to the demands of the role, he alternates performances with Sierra Leonean-American actor Sahr Ngaujah), says: "The response has been more overwhelmingly positive than I could have expected." He tells the story of the time he saw an octogenarian couple walking out of the show crying. Mambo went over to ask after the couple. The man responded: "Everything is fine, but we have been going to the theatre for 40 or 50 years, and that was one of the most important things we've seen."

The show, and Fela's life, has also resonated with Mambo himself. As a Zimbabwean-Canadian, who is both globally aware but also proudly African, Mambo thinks of Fela and himself as 'Afropolitans'. "To have this

artist here whose success is built on the hybridisation of funk and jazz sounds from Africa and the diaspora made a lot of sense to me in terms of my own experience."

Judging by the show's audiences, the legendary Nigerian's sound is making sense to many others as well. Mambo says: "Audience members have come from everywhere, including Uganda, Zimbabwe, and of course, Nigeria – some have even flown in from London – and their response has been sheer and utter pride. They see themselves on stage." Ade, the fashion designer, agrees: "The play is authentic. The concept is so original for Broadway, to see the true story about an African life." He says he has seen the show four times, and, "as an artist, each time I learned and appreciated something new".

As the son of Nigerian *juju* music legend, King Sunny Ade, and himself a practising musician, Kunle has long counted Fela as one of his foremost creative inspirations. But he says the Nigerian musician also sparks his fashion sense as well.

Moshood, the store Kunle runs with his brother on a busy street in Fort Greene, showcases their latest takes on contemporary African pieces, including *dashikis* or drawstring pants, and traditional *buba* tops. Much like the play showed how Fela incorporated the Western music styles of James Brown into his music, Moshood draws on the creative energy of Lagos. "Here nobody is waiting for somebody to help them, so we make our clothing easier for people to understand by giving it a little blend with the Western world."

Temi, the visual artist, says the play has renewed her creative drive. Indeed, on a visit to her basement studio, among her works that are not hanging in New York art galleries one may find an original vinyl Fela Kuti album and a picture of her mother dancing on stage with him at the Shrine. "Like Fela, I'm using art to advocate against our lack of cultural awareness," she says. "I felt energised after the play."

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Despite being a notoriously difficult environment for new musicals, the play is enjoying success on Broadway