

What's Jewish About Fela!?

WE WERE WALKING along West 37th Street, leaving the theatre where the Off-Broadway production of *Fela!* just played its opening night performance. Rujeko Dumbutshena, a beautiful Zimbabwean dancer and *Fela!* cast member, haltingly asked me, “Why you, Ruth? Why would you be interested in producing a musical about Fela Kuti, a Nigerian?”

I was startled by the question. The only thing I could say was, “because I’m Jewish.”

Looking at me, she saw a pale white woman. Why would I care about what happened to a Nigerian activist who ferociously defended his country until it killed him? All I knew was that Judaism had always informed me about who I am and what I care about most: family, community, humanity, and social justice. Fela Kuti and I have a lot in common when it comes to our priorities.

You might think that my family would be worlds away from Fela Kuti and his family. However, over the years, as my husband and I conceived and produced a musical about his life, we’ve gotten to know Fela’s sons and daughters. We all agree that by introducing people to Fela’s legacy, we can inspire them to do *tsedakah*—good deeds. With twenty-seven wives and a serious marijuana habit, Fela might not be your typical hero, but we fell in love with his music and the precepts he stood for: honesty, fortitude, compassion, and *rachmones* for his fellow countrymen. You could actually say he followed the basic principles of Judaism.

Being a producer means you have to be three things: optimistic, fierce, and *mashugana*. As can happen with powerful pieces of theatre, seeing *Fela!* often gave people a new perspective on their own beliefs, their morals, and

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the codes and principles by which they choose to live. Audience members felt inspired by what Fela tried to achieve for his country. Maybe those people will turn around and try, like Fela, to practice *tikkum olam*—to heal the world. He might not have had a *kippah* on his head, but Fela motivated people to do the kind of work our Rabbis inspire us to do.

Before opening night on Broadway (yes, the show made it to Broadway!), a Nigerian Yoruban priest blessed our show. To me, it was a Nigerian *Shehecheyanu*, with palm wine instead of Manischewitz. There's a scene where Fela is taken to the underworld by the Orishas (Yoruban deities of nature). He has a one-on-one spiritual connection with these gods, speaking with them directly. It has been suggested to us by a Jewish scholar that this mirrors how our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, communicated with G-d. I was amazed again and again by the way Fela's seemingly contrasting life story brought me closer to my own Jewish spirituality.

The types of people who made up our audience ran the gamut: Jay-Z, Beyonce, Will and Jada Smith, Denzel Washington, Sting, Kofi Annan, Janet Napolitano, Bruce Springsteen, and even the First Lady Michelle Obama; clergy members, both Jew and gentile; international tourists to New York, and young high school students, who would say to us, "if Fela can do that, I can, too." Our audience, despite their different walks of life, entered through the theatre doors together. There, they were united as one, sharing an experience that entertained and enlightened them. Even if it was produced by an unlikely team:

Two *Yiddles* from Connecticut.

L'chaim!