

# The Most Happy *Fela!*



Steve Hendel is the Clark Kent of Broadway producers—a mild-mannered energy trader by day (he’s the founder and managing partner of Hess Energy Trading Company, LLC) and a glamorous Tony award-winning theatrical producer by night. Not only was he able to assemble a dream team of producers for his first musical, including two entertainment super couples, Beyoncé and Jay-Z and Will and Jada Pinkett Smith whose support moved the off-Broadway production to the Great White Way, but then his show *Fela!* went on to win three Tony awards of its 11 nominations.

*Fela!*, which stopped at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia during its national tour with Chicago, Boston and Houston among its many upcoming cities, tells the story of Nigerian composer and anti-government activist Fela Kuti who pioneered Afro Beat music, an eclectic mix of jazz, funk, psychedelic rock, Nigerian High-Life and traditional African beats and chants. He became a symbol of the violent repression of the Nigerian government when his commune, which he called the Kalakuta Republic, was attacked by 1,000 armed soldiers. He was severely beaten and his mother, a political activist, was fatally injured.

Hendel, the Jewish grandson of immigrants from Eastern Europe, has always been a music lover—during his days as an uptight student at Phillips Exeter Academy he found that music quelled his inner anxiety. He discovered the music of Kuti while browsing on Amazon one day.

“Kuti’s orchestrations were so sonically compelling that I began to read up on his life. He sacrificed his life so that he could speak out against social injustice. With his music being revered all over the world, he could have left Nigeria at any time. I realized how potent and inspiring the story is,” says Hendel, who lives with his family in Larchmont, New York.

*Fela!* had a relatively long gestation period. Not being able to get the music out of his head for three years, he finally talked

doing a show based on Fela’s life and music with his producer wife, Ruth, whose Broadway credits include productions as diverse as *In The Heights*, *Legally Blonde*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Golda’s Balcony*. Even then, it took three more years to get the rights.

“This story resonated with me. It is a universal story. When I was growing up, Jews were second-class citizens and outcasts. I was raised in the 1960s, when Jews stood side by side with blacks in the struggle for equality,” says Hendel.

Hendel secured renowned choreographer Bill T. Jones, recipient of a MacArthur “genius grant” and a Tony for *Spring Awakening* to direct and choreograph the show for an off-Broadway opening. And then the buzz started. Questlove of *The Roots*, the house band on Jimmy Fallon’s late night show, came to one of the first performances. When he got home that night, he banged out an email to his friends, which was essentially a call to arms for the black community to see *Fela!* He wrote, “I witnessed a miracle tonight and it is a MUST you read this. And when I say miracle you have to think on the level of Sam Jackson trying to convince John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* to acknowledge the miracle that just occurred (them escaping death by \*this\* much). I didn’t escape death tonight. I actually



believe I found life again.” He then ended his letter with a command: “Get off your ass and see *Fela!* now.”

Questlove’s stirring email made *Fela!* a must see for musical luminaries in the African-American community and beyond. Beyoncé, Jay-Z and the Smiths decided to become producers when the show moved to Broadway, where it deservedly gained crossover appeal. Madonna, Jesse Norman, Alicia Keys and Charlize Theron have all seen it.

Hendel, who with Ruth, was awarded the Jewish Theological Seminary’s 2011 Louis B. Marshall Award in part for using the theater to teach and inspire, cautions this is not your grandmother’s musical. “This is a transformative multi-media experience and phenomenon. The show takes you on a journey. The audience will be at the edge of their seats all night because they never know what will happen next,” he says with justifiable theatrics. —Laura Goldman

For tour dates, go to <http://www.felaonbroadway.com/tickets/>