

Professor Cathy Glaser Helps Bring the Story of a Legendary Nigerian Musician to Broadway

By LaToya Jordan

Fela!, the Tony Award-winning musical about the celebrated Nigerian musician and political activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, has been captivating audiences with its passionate choreography, move-your-feet rhythms, and gripping story since it opened on Broadway in November 2009. One of the people responsible for bringing Fela's story to the Great White Way is theater advocate and New York Law School Professor Cathy Glaser.

Professor Glaser and her husband Stephen Semlitz became co-producers of *Fela!* after being riveted by the show in its original format Off Broadway in 2008. "We were introduced to the amazing story of Fela Kuti and his music and figured that if it spoke to us, it would speak to others as well," she says.

The story is set in the 1970s at "the Shrine," Fela's popular nightclub in Lagos, Nigeria. People flocked from all over Nigeria to experience his Afrobeat rhythms, a style of music Fela created by fusing African music with jazz and funk. *Fela!* audience members become Shrine-goers, participating in the call-and-response style of Afrobeat music. Fela's character speaks to the audience directly, leads them in dance moves, and asks them to sing along. Through his music, the audience learns how Fela used lyrics to protest the corrupt Nigerian government and how he was beaten and arrested more than 200 times.

As co-producers, Professor Glaser and her husband helped raise money for the production and had input in marketing, theater design, and other creative areas. The couple also has a personal connection to the show; one of its creators (and lead producer), Stephen Hendel, is Semlitz's friend and business partner at Hess Energy Trading Company, where both are managing directors.

Fela!, also conceived by Bill T. Jones and Jim Lewis, had a month-long Off Broadway run, and based on its success was revamped for Broadway. "It's really interesting to be

involved in a show, to see its evolution," Professor Glaser says. "The show started Off Broadway and it was almost three hours long. It has changed quite a bit since then, but the music and the message are stronger than ever."

The show received rave reviews as well as 11 Tony Award nominations, including one for Best Musical. It won three awards: Best Choreography, Best Costume Design, and Best Sound Design. Professor Glaser and her husband were excited to be nominated and to attend the

star-studded award ceremony, along with their daughter, for the first time.

Of the awards and positive reviews, Professor Glaser says, "We're really thrilled. It's a wonderful feeling to be able to push the envelope and have people embrace that. . . . Broadway shows cost so much money these days; it's easier to go the safe route and hire a movie or TV star and put them in something that everybody already knows and likes. I don't think that's how good art gets made. We're interested in furthering the art form, pushing people to hear and think about new things in the theater."

Professor Glaser and her husband are also involved with the *Fela!* CD and U.S. road show. *Fela!* is scheduled to open in London in November 2010 and will hopefully travel to Lagos, Nigeria, and other cities.

The couple has also participated in other theater productions. In 2001, they co-produced the musical *tick, tick...BOOM*, written by Jonathan Larson of *Rent*. They were also investors in the musical *Legally Blonde*.

When she's not producing theater, Professor Glaser is busy co-directing the Writing Program and teaching legal writing at New York Law School. She is also the President of the Migraine Research Foundation, a nonprofit she founded with her husband to fund scientific research into causes and treatments of migraines. **f**

