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**Review: Kalakuta Republik, Barbican**

[Gus Mitchell](https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/author/gusmitchell/)

June 6, 2019

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Taking inspiration from the life and work of [Fela Kuti](http://www.ayoungertheatre.com/edinburgh-fringe-review-expensive-shit-traverse-theatre/), magnetic musician, Afrobeat pioneer and unwavering political activist, *Kalakuta Republik* – receiving its UK premiere at the Barbican – unwinds itself in 90 minutes of dance of gripping power. The piece, created by Serge Aimé Coulibalywith his Faso Danse Théâtre also explores ideas of power itself – the struggle to be free from constraints both political and physical, the need and nature of bravery in facing this struggle, the energising and terrifying possibilities of rebellion. It dawns wonderfully as the work progresses that dance and the body’s power is a medium more naturally fitted to these themes than perhaps any other.

*Kalakuta Republik* is split into two distinct halves: the first half, dubbed ‘Without A Story We Would Go Mad’ unfolds gradually, moving from mood-piece, meditative, repetitive beginnings to the high-octane. It seemed to examine themes of frustration, the recognition of the effects and restrictions of power on oneself as encapsulated in a shaking, dishevelled, pulsing, struggling body during dance. For Coulibaly, the piece “tried to understand the mechanisms that turned that man into a rebellious, politically-engaged artist”. One could almost call this first “act” a kind of careening, veering, chaotic political awakening set to music. It left one exhausted, wondering what progress could be made.

Yvan Talbot’s musical work is infectious, and while interpolations (and video clips) of Fela are everywhere, this never feels like an old-fashioned *homage* or retro-fitted piece. The music never feels less than urgent and dynamic, centring on Afrobeat with a constant, bubbling infusion of jazz influences. The mythical figure of Fela feels always present but never oppressive. For something to dream of though, one can only imagine what a live band could add to the atmosphere here. The dancing styles borrow shades and splodges from all over, just like Fela’s music. A sense of cool, rhythmic funk will suddenly give way to a bold, often brutal, hip-hop-feeling move that ratchets up the stakes.

In the second half, ‘You Always Need A Poet’, the stakes are raised all round, from the chaotic chair-strewn stage to the blood-red lighting and the shifting screen projections, all of which play a subtle second-fiddle to the beautiful, furious precision of the mood. *Kalakuta Republik* is named after the semi-autonomous compound Fela Kuti attempted to maintain from Lagos beginning in the 1970s, during a time of great political turmoil. The air of violent possibilities and political revolution that must have swirled around Kuti and his creation are present here too, and it is not hard to mentally summon up an image of this extraordinary time and place as the unfolding swarming and climbing of the dancers seems to only ratchet up its energy. The final set-piece is a thing of strange and lasting beauty.

Whether one has a clue about the history of the extraordinary Fela or not, *Kalakuta Republik* should provide food for thought, barrels of inspiration and fierce, fresh political energy. All of these things are healthy for us now – hopefully you can take them all at once.

*Kalakuta Republic played the Barbican until 1 June. For more information, see the* [*Barbican*](http://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2019/event/serge-aime-coulibaly-kalakuta-republik) *website.*

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