

# ELLE

February 19, 2014


## IDINA MENZEL: BACK ON BROADWAY

Back on Broadway after a nine-year hiatus, stage darling Idina Menzel shows off a newly refined talent—and a lot of perspective.



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Culture Club  
February 19, 2014

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She dazzled in her 1996 Broadway debut as the performance artist Maureen in *Rent*; she blew the house down (and won a 2004 Tony) with her Valkyrie belting as the under-witch Elphaba in *Wicked*. But *If/Then*, the new musical with which Idina Menzel makes her return to Broadway this month, provides the powerhouse performer, now 42, with a different kind of challenge. She plays Elizabeth, a city planner emerging from a failed marriage. And she also plays Liz, a city planner emerging from a failed marriage. They're the same woman, of course; the show extrapolates her life in two different directions from one moment of choice. We spoke to Menzel about her own divergent paths as actress and mother; she has a four-year-old son, Walker, with her *Rent* costar Taye Diggs, from whom she recently separated.

*You have a reputation as a workhorse, which must be helpful in 'If/Then': You're onstage almost the whole show.*

*Has that changed, 18 years later?*

Now that I have a child, I'm less anal about my process and I take the pressure off myself to be perfect. If I want to tuck my son into bed and read him a story but that means I have to take a red-eye to get to a concert—which I would never think of doing otherwise—that's just the way it is. Even if I can't hit the note that night, I got to tuck my child in! And actually I usually have a better show.

*Do the songs in 'If/Then' exploit that pyrotechnical aspect of your voice?*

For me, it's nice that I'm not belting at the top of my lungs the whole time. There's a lot of intimate, personality-driven, sweet singing, and that's the kind I actually love the most, as close to how we speak as possible. I do get to do the crazy high notes, of course. But that's also a part of me. I'm full spectrum. A vulnerable side and a side that wants to kick ass.

*You've mostly created new roles. Has that been deliberate?*

It's been deliberate since *Wicked*, for sure. The best feeling in the world is to stand there with a composer who has a new song for you. Of course, it's really hard to do original musicals, and *If/Then* is really original. And an acting challenge I love. How do you define one person who goes two different ways?

*You've been doing that, in a way, from the beginning.  
Maureen, Elphaba...*

There has to be a balance between power and vulnerability. That's something I feel I have in my own life, something I struggle with and—on a good day—like about myself. Not to say I wouldn't play a crazy old mean bitch one day.

*Are there points in your life where you could have gone two very different ways?*

Anytime I was terrified to step into a room and audition but decided to do it anyway. And having a child. Saying I'm not going to worry about my career right now, and go off birth control, and not worry about getting fat, but just make a choice and go with that. I don't do too much looking back and regretting things—not that I haven't made tons of mistakes. But I do think people are in our lives so we can learn lessons and evolve as better human beings. I love that our show opens that conversation.

*You had a great arc on 'Glee' and recently a big movie hit with 'Frozen'. What's it like going back to Broadway?*

After *Rent* I tried to make a record and it didn't work out, and it was the Broadway community that welcomed me back. It's where I feel the most understood, most at home. But this is the very first time I'm above the title by myself, so yeah, it's a big deal! I feel responsibility, I want to sell tickets, I want the ensemble to have their jobs for a long time, I want people to like me, I want to get good reviews. It's bullshit to say you don't care about all that. Whether it will run like *Wicked*—I don't let myself have those expectations. I've already had lightning in a bottle more than once.