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Frozen SONGSTRESS

IDINA MENZEL

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MOMPREENEUR

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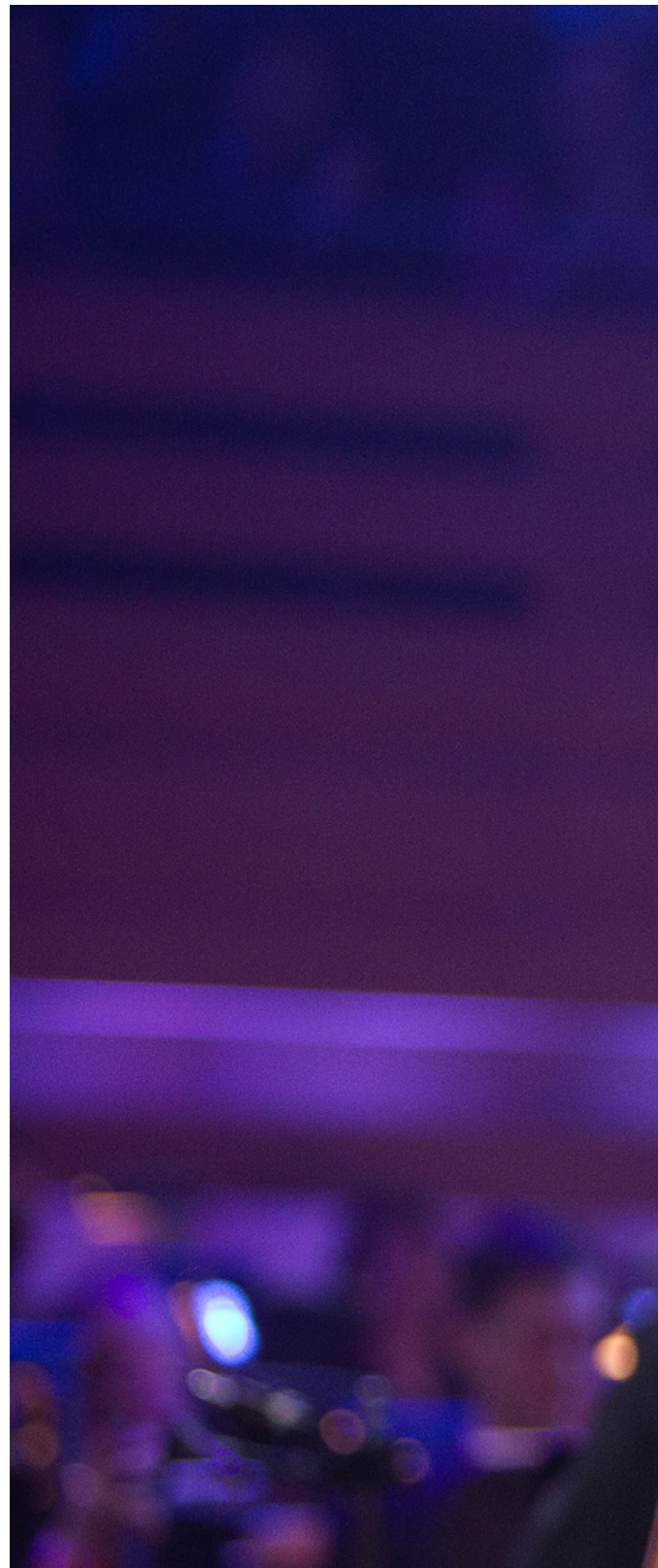


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On the heels of *Frozen's* success,
IDINA MENZEL's
professional life is in the fast lane.
At home, life with her son
takes another pace.

By Nila Do Simon





Robin Wong

Idina on family, fame, Frozen and the future

It's the morning of Idina Menzel's 43rd birthday, and she's prepping for an interview with *Muses & Visionaries*. It's not how most people would imagine Menzel—the supremely talented Broadway performer, Tony Award winner, and powerful voice behind mega-hit song “Let It Go” from Disney's *Frozen*—spending her birthday. For a performer who recently hit the fame jackpot, it's only apropos. Between being a mother to 4-year-old son Walker, her intense eight-shows-a-week Broadway schedule, and the natural demands of her newfound stardom, pinning down this generation's Barbra Streisand for an interview hasn't been without compromise.

Menzel has carved an elite spot on the theater stage. *Frozen*, the highest grossing animated movie of all time, and John Travolta's slip up at this year's Academy Awards, pronouncing Menzel's name as Adele Dazeem, only propelled her career further and into an audience of millions. “Let It Go” won Best Original Song at the Oscars, awarded to songwriters Bobby Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez. To equate it simply, Menzel is Broadway royalty. She joins the ranks of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Marvin Hamlisch and Stephen Sondheim as Broadway's best and most indelible contributors. With her performances as Maureen in Broadway's *Rent* (later reprising that role in the 2005 film version), a Tony Award-winning role as Elphaba in *Wicked*, as well as

prominent roles in *Hair* and *Aida*, Menzel is one of theater's most sought-after performers. She is currently the lead in the musical *Iff Then*, a coming-of-age show about a woman on the verge of 40 who embarks on a new life in New York City. Menzel was nominated this year for a Tony Award for best leading actress in a musical for her role in *Iff Then*.

But it wasn't until she was cast as the voice of Elsa, the complicated but likable antagonist in *Frozen*, that she became a household voice—and every child's singing hero—at the age of 42. “When I signed on for the role, I was just really stoked to be in a Disney-animated film with music,” Menzel says. “I had no idea it would be the juggernaut that it is now. I love the fact that [the movie] is breaking rules and is unconventional in the Disney sense. It's not about a prince but about sisters, and the villain is not really a villain.”



Menzel as a child

Menzel's parents named their eldest daughter Idina after the Hebrew word meaning “gentle,” a word her mother loved. As if a precursor to Travolta's pronunciation snafu heard around the world, Menzel remembers her first and last name (originally Mentzel) mispronounced as a child. Her mother, Helene, would constantly correct others: “It's ‘Idina’ with a short ‘i.’” Eventually, after countless mispronunciations, Menzel dropped the “t” in her family name.

“My dad [recently] asked me where my talent came from? Sometimes there's untapped talent in your parents, so they had the foresight to get me involved in [music],” says Menzel, who was born in Queens, New Jersey, and grew up in Long Island. ►

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—Idina Menzel



Her parents, who were a therapist and a pajama salesman, kept her and sister Cara busy with summer camps, voice lessons and the occasional trek into the city to see a Broadway show. Though a regular in her school's choir, it was a third grade performance that laid the path to her successful future. "I was auditioning for a solo in the choir. I was so nervous, but after my performance, I remember seeing the people's reaction and also how the power of my voice affected them. I began to see that I could connect to people with my voice," says Menzel.

As a teenager, she performed at weddings and bar mitzvahs. She went on to graduate from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 1993, and shortly after graduation she won the role of Maureen in *Rent*, a show that revived and re-invigorated Broadway in the 1990s.

In her 20s and 30s, she admits professional success and stability were forefront in her mind. In the past 18 years, she performed in 13 stage productions and 18 film and television roles, including appearances on the TV show *Glee* and the film *Enchanted*. She was rejected to play the lead role in Disney's *Tangled* and then got the call for *Frozen*. All that seems light years away from the artist Menzel is today. Today, her priorities have shifted to her son Walker.

"People give you so much advice when you become a mother," she says. "But what they don't tell you is that from the day you have the child, you're going to constantly worry about him. You are always thinking about him. They don't tell you how much love you can have for him either. Knowing your capacities of love for someone can only happen once you become a mother."

Menzel says much of her success today is owed to becoming a mother. After years of toiling on the stage and in film and TV sup-

porting roles, Menzel attributes her meteoric rise in recent years to Walker.

"I've learned not to take things seriously, to not sweat the small stuff and to realize there is someone else out there who needs to be put in front of myself [no matter how] I'm feeling about the industry," she says. "I've been kicking around and trying to cross over for years and years. It wasn't until I stopped chasing a dream and when I put myself in a room with people who were more talented than me that all this started happening."

In 2010 Menzel along with husband and fellow actor Taye Diggs (they met on the stage production of *Rent* and are now separated) started A BroaderWay Foundation, which allows girls from underserved communities a chance to express themselves through arts-centered programs.

Every year a group of girls attend Camp BroaderWay in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where they have the chance to bond and empower each other. They are encouraged to write songs, perform them, and use their imagination to create new avenues for themselves. A BroaderWay Foundation is an organization that Menzel holds close to her heart and speaks about with much affection.

"Camp was sort of a salvation for me," Menzel says about her childhood. "I was lucky to go as a kid, and it was an escape from school. I had a hard time finding my inner voice, despite having such a big voice. If I had that problem, then other teenage girls must have that, too."

With a shared love of author Alice Walker's works, Menzel and Diggs always had an affinity for the name Walker. After learning their baby's gender, the couple wandered about New York City and found themselves lost and on Walker Street, which they had

never been on before and further inspired the name. Walker was born on Sept. 2, 2009.

When Walker was a baby, she and Diggs would craft their own "silly, silly" lullabies for their boy. "Sweet Walker" remains her favorite, a tune that Walker still resonates with today. "You're going to fall into your dreams," Menzel still sings to him.

Walker remains the couple's prime focus. Returning to Broadway after a 10-year hiatus (there was a reading of *Nero* in 2008) and now performing eight shows a week in the production of *Iff/Then*, Menzel refuses to let her work's demands interfere with motherhood. Her Twitter page is peppered with her own apologies for not signing autographs after a performance because the babysitter's time is up and Menzel needs to get back to her son.

"There's that constant guilt I have when I can't be with him every moment, like when I need to have the babysitter pick him up from school," Menzel admits. "I'm trying to navigate through it for Walker, and somehow I just need to figure out how not to be hard on myself when times like that do happen. It's not just the showy Broadway profession. I hang out with the moms at school and they are also juggling so much. It makes me feel much stronger."

So what does Walker think of his mommy's fame? Honestly, he's too young to understand it, but the other day, while at a crafts class, Walker heard the song "Let It Go." "My mommy sings that song," he proudly announced to his classmates. And their reaction? "My mommy sings that song, too!"

"I'm excited about my future [and] the experiences that I have in forming who I am and who I will become. There's something about the unknown that is not terrifying these days, just exciting." ■

