

MY *IF/THEN* MOMENT

As told to Michael Gioia

In 2001 **LaCHANZE** lost her husband Calvin J. Gooding in the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks. Twelve years later, the Tony Award winner for *The Color Purple*—newly single following a split from second husband Derek Fordjour—began a new Broadway journey in *If/Then*, a musical about chance, choice, and starting over. LaChanze recently honored her late husband by singing “Amazing Grace” at the May 15 dedication of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

Well, it’s fascinating that the whole experience, to me, was an *If/Then* moment. The day prior, on Wednesday, Idina Menzel said to me, “I’m feeling a little sick.” She got through the matinee, and during the evening performance she really was struggling at the top of the first act.

Before the Act I finale, we were in the wing, and she said, “I don’t think I can do the second act.”

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I said, “Good, you need to take care of yourself,” and she said, “But I’m singing at the 9/11 Memorial Museum tomorrow... Can you do it?” As she was opening the curtain to go on stage, I said, “Yes.”

She went into her dressing room and said, “I’m going to check to see if we can do this, because President Obama is going to be there.... Let’s make sure you’re cleared.” I’m thinking they’re not going to clear me, but as soon as she mentioned me, they must have thought, “Why *not* LaChanze?”

Idina sends me a text: “They want you to do it. It’s ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’ with a string quartet. And, it’s a different arrangement, so you’ve really got to listen and learn.”

From 11pm till 2am, I am thinking about clothing, makeup, hair, and learning the song—that’s all I’m doing. I go to sleep for three hours because I have to be down there at 7am. Since it’s the 9/11 Museum, I’m going to take my daughters. We’ve not seen it yet, and it would be a great opportunity for us—*still* not tapping into the fact of what the emotion is for me.

We are in the car. We’re on our way down. I get a call: “LaChanze, for reasons we cannot disclose, you will not be singing ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water.’ Can you sing ‘Amazing Grace?’ ... You’re going to have to sing it a cappella.” This happens on the East River Drive a half-hour before I get there. My manager is freaking out, but I’ve got to tell you something, I was not stirred by it. It didn’t upset me. Something about it felt so *right*.

I said, “Okay, let me pull it up on my phone and look at [the] lyrics and start thinking about a key that I can sing it in.” I’m running this through my head, and as we’re walking down by the area—the girls and I—I’m starting to have the realization that I’m at my late husband’s burial site. I’m starting to feel that. I look at my children—they’re starting to feel it.

We walk into the museum, and I see a fire truck that has been mangled, and that’s when it hit me—the magnitude of it all. I hadn’t thought about it so seriously until then, so from that point on, I’m trying to collect myself enough to sing.

Standing there singing it, I was thinking, “This is definitely, absolutely right for me to be singing in this moment.” I didn’t feel nervous.

I didn’t feel afraid. I didn’t feel sad, I have to say. I felt very centered and powerful. The line in the song, “I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see,” really did feel like that for me. Affirmation is the only word I can think of. It felt like: “We have come full-circle. Here we are in this moment, honoring these beautiful souls,” and it felt right.

I believe in divine intervention. I don’t believe in accidents. I just don’t. I believe that everything is divinely inspired. Bad things happen—they do—but I also think that when these bad things happen, there’s an equal and opposite force that is happening, and there is good.

No, I don’t think that the universe made Idina sick. I just think that me standing next



LaChanze alongside her *If/Then* co-star, Idina Menzel

to her in that moment is where the intervention happened. And the fact that I had to sing “Amazing Grace”.... I feel that was more appropriate for the moment.

I was able to honor Calvin in that moment. I was able to say his name. It was my chance to say to the world, “This man, who lived—and lived so fiercely and so beautifully—gave me so much love in the time that he was here and gave my children so much love.” And, I want him to know, “We love you, we miss you, but because of this *amazing grace*, we are able to thrive and survive with your memory.”

Singing “Amazing Grace” was almost like Calvin saying, “I’m still here with you. I know this journey has been rocky for you”—and it has been very rocky for me—“but I’m still here.” ♦