



A REAWAKENING

From teen superstardom to “the worst place” in her life, **BRANDY** looks to Broadway for a much-needed reawakening

By Michael Gioia

PHOTOS BY
JASON BELL

“ I just changed my mind about my life, and my life started to change.”

Brandy Norwood, 36, stepped into the spotlight two decades ago. She released her self-titled, R&B debut album at 15 and, less than two years later, was starring as Moesha Mitchell in the hit UPN sitcom about a headstrong teen in a Los Angeles high school.

But after years of fame and success, she says that, as of late, she was in “the worst place” in her life. Things haven’t always been easy for the *Billboard* chart-topping beauty.

In between straddling the worlds of film, television, and pop stardom, Norwood was involved in a widely publicized fatal car crash in 2006. Relationships continued to fail. And she became a single mother to Sy’rai Iman Smith, now 13; Norwood and producer Robert “Big Bert” Smith split a year after her birth.

Her most recent relationship was with music executive Ryan Press. After a two-year engagement, Norwood called things off in April 2014.

“I’m going to make a long story short,” Norwood explains—chronicling her time before

she bowed on Broadway. “It was a long time I was sad and a long time I was depressed. I just didn’t believe in myself. I didn’t have the strength to do anything but just make it through the day, and of course, I had that moment with God where I said, ‘Listen, I need you to come and get me because I don’t have the strength to come and find you... I just need you to come and get me, and I’ll follow whatever you want me to do.’ I believe that higher power came and got me and led me to do the work that it took to change my life.

“All it took was to make a decision to change my mind about who I was and stop believing

“I always wanted to do Broadway. I always wanted to be onstage and [in] live theatre, but I wasn’t ready for it,” she says. However, “When I got to New York and did all my rehearsals, when I stepped onstage as Roxie, I became a different person. I realized that I was born for theatre... It really has reawakened my life in a different kind of way.”

Since making her Main Stem debut in April, Norwood has been knocking them dead as the show’s headlining merry murderess. She’s been making numerous television appearances to perform her favorite showstopper “Roxie,” and posting her own R&B-inspired covers of the

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the lies about myself—stop believing that I was a has-been, stop believing that I’m not going to ever make it again, or I’m not going to ever be able to inspire people again. No. That wasn’t true. I had to start telling myself a different story.”

Norwood began a discipline: gym time, meditation, affirmative speaking, and journaling. Six months later, she got the call to make her Broadway debut as Roxie Hart in *Chicago*.

“I said, ‘I’ve never done anything like this, but I’m ready. I’m ready because I’ve done the work on *me*. And, I’m just going to go see.’”

Although she is not a stranger to musical theatre—enlisted by Whitney Houston to play the Cinderella to her Fairy Godmother in the 1997 television film of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella*—Norwood was nervous.

Kander and Ebb classics—which have gone viral online (“That’s how I sing it when I’m not onstage,” she admits).

“The one thing I noticed about the Broadway community is that I feel like the audience is rooting for you,” she says. “I don’t feel like they’re looking for me to make a mistake. I feel like they want me to win, and that fuels me. I’m vulnerable, but it also fuels me to entertain and to be comfortable in my work because I feel like the audience is with me.

“There is a dream,” she confesses. “There is a dream to be Dorothy in [the upcoming revival of] *The Wiz*, and let me tell you—I will give that everything I have. That role—I just feel like it’s meant for me to do it, and I don’t say that in an arrogant way; I say it in a humble way. I just want to feel what it’s like to be Dorothy. I need to feel what that’s like. I worked with Diana Ross [who played Dorothy in the 1978 film version of *The Wiz*] when I was 15. She played my mother [in *Double Platinum*], and Whitney Houston was my fairy godmother [in *Cinderella*], and she sang ‘Home’ as one of her first songs to be recognized, and I’ve been close to these women... I just feel like I’m next in line for that.

“I think Roxie has given me so much belief that I could do it, and I could really make people feel inspired, and I can really bring something to Dorothy because of the way I feel—my spirit and how genuine I feel inside.”

