

MY YEAR OF HAVING IT ALL

by Nili Bassman

In early August 2018, I signed on as temporary replacement to play the role of Hunyak in *Chicago* on Broadway for three months. I had played the role (with tremendous affection I might add) for the better part of May 2008 - May 2012 and then left to pursue other projects and to see my family again for a hot second. Two months later, I was engaged; the following year I got married; and in the five years that followed I became a mother. Twice. I would not be the first to write about the ways motherhood changes a person:

- (1) how your once self-centered life vanishes in an instant and morphs into one veeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeery long sleepless day governed by a tiny dictator who bears a slight resemblance to you or someone in your family.
- (2) the cosmic speed at which your heart expands to accommodate all the new kinds of love you are now capable of experiencing.
- (3) how “self care” changes literally overnight from daily exercise, reflection, adequate rest, healthy meals, journaling, and socialization into “Hey I peed with the door closed today!”
- (4) the way your body and mind are somehow able to withstand a level of exhaustion you’d never previously imagined yet you often accomplish more by 9am than you used to do in a full day.
- (5) the shift in conversations with your spouse from those of world events, future plans, innermost dreams, casual levity, and events of your days... into those of poop and sleep and-- nope that’s pretty much it.

And this is of course all not to mention that when you leave the house sans babies, you’re overcome with a unique mixture of emotions: primarily guilt with a splash of relief (which then fuels more of said guilt), all blanketed by a sense that part of you is missing. You know that sinking panic you feel when you set out for a 14 hour day of appointments and work and JUST as the subway doors close behind you with no time to spare, you realize you’ve left your cell phone at home? Well, multiply that feeling by a million and then pretend your cell phone is your left heart atrium. That. Welcome to motherhood.

When I got the offer to return to *Chicago* last year, my second child – my son – was six months old. He was still waking three times a night to breastfeed, and my daughter (age 3 at the time) was up and ready to go by 6am daily. My husband/parenting partner was working full time M-F to support our growing family and was therefore out the door by 7am most days. I was still finding my way as a parent of 2 under 4 years old and it seemed like each time I got something down and scored a parenting win, those rapidly shifting humans would change things up on me. Each 24 hour unit was a moment to moment challenge of survival from eyes open to eyes closed. And eyes closed never lasted more than a few hours at a time. Taking on 8 shows a week under these circumstances seemed like an impossible feat. I had worked since becoming a mom, but not since becoming a mom of two. And not in a musical 8 times a week. Not to mention that tiny detail (pun intended) that with ten short days’ notice, I’d be stuffing my still recovering postpartum-second-baby-body back into a costume that fits into a zip lock bag. I’m talking the sandwich variety, folks, not those spacious gallon freezer types.

So naturally, I immediately told my agent “YES”.



The morning of my first day back at work, my baby's cries woke me too early (as usual). I pulled him in bed with me for a first morning feeding (as usual) and tried with all my might to steal a few more moments before his sister woke up and I had to fully commit to opening my eyes for the day (as usual). But this morning was not the usual I'd come to know. And the exhaustion didn't feel as paralyzing. I kissed my husband as he walked out the door, changed and fed my children, and conducted my daily inner debate over whether it would be easier to hose down the breakfast-painted kitchen or simply move to a new apartment. I decided on the former (as usual), ate the remains on their plates for my breakfast (as usual), and tried to entertain both little ones in the bedroom while making myself look decently presentable (alert: not usual!). To be clear, achieving this last step of looking presentable took the better part of two hours and I pretty much just put on actual clothes and applied Chapstick. When the babysitter arrived, I dusted off my old Hunyak shoes (literally) and placed them into my bag between my breast pump and water bottle. I squeezed my children as tightly as I could as many times as I could, teared up, and walked out the door... TO GO TO WORK. To go to work on Broadway. This had been such an everyday occurrence for me for years. But that morning, it felt so far away.

Let me set the scene. I'd spent the last 6 months at home with a newborn and a 3 year old. If you haven't experienced this, imagine being.... never mind, there's really no way to imagine it until you're living inside of it. But it's a unique combination of bliss, entrapment, delirium, anxiety, isolation, deprivation, heart explosions, physical mending, hormonal gymnastics, snuggles, chaos, and filth. Lots of chaos. Lots of filth. You really aren't quite sure what you achieve in any given day, which makes you feel like a failure, but you keep your kids alive and hopefully happy, which makes it all worth it. And fortunately, you don't have the headspace to dwell on feeling like a failure so for the most part, it all comes out in the wash. Speaking of wash... we had just potty trained the 3-year old, thus more filth. And more laundry than we could ever possibly imagine. And very few showers. Very. Few. Showers. Like I said... filth. Prior to this I was pregnant, trying to keep up with a preschooler who never slept, feeling my body and strength and former life fade further by the hour. For the past year or so, I'd been unable to even audition for the most part, let alone work in the field in which I'd spent my whole life making a living. Don't get me wrong, I was happy to do it. I was at present a fulltime resident of Momland. I purchased the deed willingly and happily decorated with poop and breastmilk (we were still working on the color scheme) and I'd do it all again without hesitation. All those proud and adorable moments I shared on Instagram for grandparents and far away friends to see were very very real. But this part of it... This is the part we don't post on social media. Somewhere along the way, my former self in red lipstick and lashes and rehearsal rooms, on Broadway stages and tv sets, chasing and living my passions, felt like a distant shadow. A different human being altogether.

Now here I was alone on a subway headed to work. ALONE. WORK. I felt free and so excited and so guilty about those feelings (remember that guilt?) and so very proud and also a little terrified. Could I do this? Could I still dance? Would this new body of mine work? Would my mommy brain fog remember the lyrics and lines and stay awake past 9pm? Could I give this job as much of me as I wanted to give it (ie all of myself) and still give my family as much of me as I wanted to give them (ie all of myself)? Would my kids still love me? Would my husband? Would I deliver quality work? Would I miss seeing my baby crawl for the first time or miss his first "Mama"? Would my already struggling milk supply dwindle from being away? Would my daughter feel abandoned by me and lose momentum in her development?

Would my husband resent me for being gone every night and weekend? And on and on and on... I distracted my swirling brain by running the lyrics of "Both Reached For the Gun" in my head over and over. Let me tell you, those did NOT stick with me through 6 years and two pregnancies.

The train pulled into 50th street and I got off, bringing all of this (plus the shadow of that left atrium) with me. Together, we turned the corner to the Ambassador Theatre stage door and I'd come HOME. Home to my craft, home to Broadway, home to a show filled with so many talented people that I love dearly. The buzzer was the same. The walk down the alley was the same. The smell was the same. The doorman was the same. The pride I felt for my job and how far I'd come was the same. No it wasn't. It was richer. So much richer. Because the one thing that was very much NOT the same was me.

My heart burst to see so many faces I'd worked alongside in my "former life" and also to encounter more new ones than I'd expected. I walked from the same basement up the same stairs to my same old dressing room. It smelled the same. And I smiled. And I wept. There in that tiny dusty room with dim lights, and powders and lipsticks, and mirrors lined with photographs and cards, and glimpses of decorations from a number of holidays... I found a part of me I didn't know was so dearly missing. She was still there. And I couldn't wait to see who she had become.

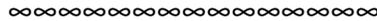


People kept asking me if that first rehearsal back felt like riding a bike. In some ways, yes. It felt like riding a bike with the seat turned around, in someone else's body, wearing twelve inch heels, with my abdominal muscles still separated from growing humans inside of me, and feeling the wind in my hair more splendidly than I'd felt it on a bike before--well, a deeper and more layered splendid anyway. My first performance back felt like my Broadway debut. Hell, my first rehearsal back felt like my Broadway debut. Writing this now, it seems obvious that motherhood had of course changed my perspective not only as a *person*, but also as an artist and an employee. But I suppose I hadn't accounted for how much so.

Tiny moments at work, once taken for granted, were now tremendous gifts that brought me to tears. (Granted I was doped up on breastfeeding hormones but still.) And instances that would have jarred my heart (or ego) way longer than necessary barely caused me pause. I wish I could say this was due to some massive enlightenment that comes as the result of giving birth. But more likely, I simply hadn't the spare energy to take it in. I did however have a renewed ability to appreciate. When you're lucky enough to be in a long running show or go from show to show it's easy to fall into a pattern and forget a larger picture of what we do. The magic becomes a job. And don't get me wrong, it is very very much a job. Performing in a Broadway show – especially a long running Broadway show – is not for the weak, physically or emotionally. (And this is coming from someone who did two home births. On purpose.) It is grueling and taxing on every part of your body and every part of your life and every one of your important relationships. It requires tremendous upkeep and tremendous sacrifice. But here's what I was reminded of coming back to it after six years away:

- (1) We are part of a small percentage of people in the world who get paid to do what we love. And I still love being an actress.

- (2) *Chicago* is an incredible piece of theatre. Stepping back into Hunyak's shoes after visiting a number of other projects reminded me how phenomenal the material itself is. The music, the lyrics, the scenes, and oh the choreography... I felt so privileged to get to be a part of that play again.
- (3) Hunyak's story is so much richer and more heartbreaking and frankly more interesting to play if she is a mother. It baffles me that this choice never occurred to me before becoming a mother myself. But what a gift that little detail added to my continued journey with that role.
- (4) The Broadway community is in a word extraordinary. Also I have phenomenally gifted, generous, and hilarious friends. But, that part I never forgot.



What else did motherhood revised for me at the theatre? The wonder known as the "curtain call". What an interesting phenomenon to receive immediate recognition and praise from strangers for the work you've just done. I found it so ironic every night when I came out center stage at the end of the show and 1000+ people clapped for me. Don't get me wrong—I put my all into this job 8 times a week. But I just kept thinking how much harder the first 14 or so hours of my day were compared to the 2.5 I was being applauded for. We should have a crowd of strangers clap for us when we successfully get an infant and preschooler dressed, fed, and out the door by 8am after a night of no sleep. We should have a group of strangers applaud us when we push a double stroller with 100 pounds in it a mile in the rain at 8am (again after no sleep), balancing an umbrella in the crook of our elbow because there's no bus and the train is delayed and we have to get our child to school. We should be applauded when we get a healthy dinner made while simultaneously breastfeeding a baby in a carrier, stirring pots, cleaning dishes, learning lines, and placating a hungry preschooler who doesn't know how to deal with her big feelings. Where's the standing ovation there? When I bowed after the show each night, I would pretend the audience was acknowledging what I'd done since I'd been awakened 16-18 hours earlier. Try it, supermoms. It's good.

Speaking of supermoms... I can't count the number of times someone called me a "supermom" or "superwoman" over the past year. Admittedly, it felt good to be seen and acknowledged for all I was juggling and how hard I was working to keep everything not only *afloat* but hopefully *in flight* at least some of the time. Sure, I'd like to be thought of as extraordinary in some way; but for anyone who may be in a similar position, I feel a responsibility to dispel that myth. There are enough unreachable images in the world today setting girls and women and working women and artists and mothers and working mothers up to fail. The fantastical idea of a Supermom in a cape balancing a killer job, spotless home, and perfect family, rocking heels, flawless (clean!) hair, rested eyes, and a Crest smile is simply another inaccessible aspiration. Those women don't exist. And anyone that seems to come close has a nanny, a maid, and a therapist and still struggles and feels guilty about it. So, yes, celebrate the mamas around you. Be in awe of them. But know the reality is far from perfect. The reality is a beautiful chaotic painful mess – at times glorious and at times dark. But we do it because that is the gig. And because it gives back to us a million times over. I am beyond proud to be in this club of struggling flawed passionate powerful accomplished working mommy artists who fall apart but GET IT DONE and come to each others' rescues on the daily.



The three months I signed up for at the show quickly turned into a full year contract. And that high of my first few weeks back on the boards settled into something more reasonable. Well, more realistic anyway. I wouldn't call the year that followed reasonable. But it was indeed full. I worked full time as an actress eight shows a week, and full time as a mom nearly every other moment. I felt so lucky to have a fulfilling job that still allowed me to spend so much time with my young kids. It was also fortunate that we had no weekday matinees so my husband's professional schedule was exactly the opposite of mine and we had lower childcare costs. It was also deeply UNfortunate that we had no weekday matinees so my husband's schedule was exactly the opposite of mine and we basically NEVER saw each other. For a year. Not recommended. There were children's birthday parties and ballet lessons on Saturday and Sunday mornings during five show weekends. There were sleepless teething nights during 9 show weeks. There were 'firsts' missed and holidays half-assed. There were fabulous extra work events and opportunities which regrettably meant more family time gone. I lived on 4-5 hours of sleep 6 nights a week for nearly a year. I paid babysitters up to half my salary so I could function. I begged neighbors for help when I was stuck. I constantly felt as though I was letting someone down. There were days I couldn't WAIT to get out of my mom-mess and have a moment alone commuting to work to tell a beautiful story and dance and talk to adults and be appreciated. And there were many times it took every ounce of me to tear myself away from a husband and children (who needed me and whom I sorely missed) in order to get to the job to which I had committed myself and to earn our paycheck.

Some days I did feel like a superhero: when I somehow spent quality time with my children and still filled my freezer with homemade healthy meals and made my husband laugh and connected with a friend and THEN I got to go do an amazing Broadway show. And there were many days I was simply surviving. Mediocrely at best. I had planned to volunteer often at my daughter's preschool, leading "educational yet fun" projects and reading special books to the children. I was able to accomplish next to none of that. I planned on having regular date nights with my husband where we could sit together as a couple and hold hands. I THINK we managed maybe four in the year including our anniversary—and even those dates were fogged by exhaustion and responsibility, and not enough time to reconnect. My home was never sufficiently clean. I missed so many birthdays and special occasions and emails and phone calls and I was a sub par friend and family member to people I cherish dearly. And that weighed on me. Still does. But I was in the thick of it. I had to be more selfish than I've ever been in my life and prioritize my children and still reserve enough of myself to do both of my jobs. Everyone else got the shaft much of the time. Not on purpose, but as a result. Again, this weighed on me and still does. But I'd grasp onto the fact that even on the ugliest of days, there was at least one moment where I succeeded. And even in my most exhausted performances, there was at least one moment I brought escape to a stranger and felt gratitude in my heart. I never felt like I was giving enough to my family. I never felt like I was giving enough to my castmates and friends. But what I can say for sure is that I was giving everything I had inside of me at that moment to each of them. Always.



My year back at *Chicago* ended a few weeks ago. And in the spirit of “going out with a bang”, the final week of my contract coincided with a huge family move and the madness that goes along with that. Did I mention that during this year we were also house hunting, as well as school district hunting for a soon-to-be-Kindergartener with atypical learning styles? Because hey why not throw that in there to keep us from being bored? Unpacking will go on for some time, but right now, our entire lives are out of the old place and into the new. And we have made it. And amidst the boxes and unpainted walls and undone repairs and endless to-do lists, I sit here in a moment of quiet calm. My kids are with their grandmother and I am looking at a lake, resting my body, feeling the air, feeling the *year*, and attempting to put into words all the sentiments I’ve not yet had time to process. It’ll take a while. But more than anything else I well up with an uncontainable gratitude. I have a feeling that what I’ll hold on to most from this season are the glorious bits: the high of the art. The kinship of colleagues. The friendships renewed and the friendships formed. Tap dancing again -- one of my earliest and greatest joys -- in a benefit, knowing my husband and baby were watching me tap for their first time. And the precious gift of having my dance-loving four year old daughter watching her Mommy dance on Broadway, waving from her box seat with a smile to beat all the world’s exhaustion. THAT in itself was worth it all. It’s interesting but no coincidence that those are the two specific instances that came to my mind just now. Truth is that those moments, the few where my family and my art collided... those were the moments where I truly did *have it all*. And I thought I would burst. And right now, in this rare breath of solitary stillness (and by rare I mean “I just saw Nessy and Sasquatch feeding cicadas under a shooting star during a solar eclipse and captured it on film”)... I release into the moment and feel myself. And my body surrenders not only to the gratitude but to the pride. And the amazement. That *I. DID. THAT*. Except I should say *WE* did that. Because I never could’ve done it alone. The greatest gift of the past year were all the heros that came to our aid and helped me make the days happen. The village that allowed me to be a “Supermom” and ‘have it all’. Among them:

- (1) My neighbors, oh my neighbors. My fellow parents in Inwood, the special “small towny” neighborhood gem at the very tippity top of Manhattan. These phenomenal people came to my aid in emergencies more times than I can count, juggling too many schedules and too many children and still taking mine in in a pinch. Providing hugs, ears, relief, solidarity, laughter, confidence, booze on the playground, and extra arms during commutes and playdates and birthday parties. They’ve been an extension of my family and I will always love them and be grateful for them.
- (2) My daughter’s exceptional preschool teachers who knew our temporary situation and loved both my children and went above and beyond (without my asking) to send me reminders for upcoming deadlines and special ed appointments. Who welcomed me into the classroom for water and a tissue on more than one teary and bleary eyed early morning school drop off with baby in tow. I don’t know if they knew how much that meant to me and how it turned my day around.
- (3) Our magical babysitters who made sure that my kids were not only cared for but loved when mommy and daddy were both working. Who went far out of their ways for us with a willingness – no eagerness -- that blew me away. They couldn’t keep me from feeling mom guilt but always kept me from feeling mom worry. They are family.
- (4) My castmates and colleagues in all departments at the theatre, truly. When I say it felt like coming home to The Ambassador, I mean it. I felt lifted up and valued and even loved at work, and that made me want to rise to the occasion even more. I am forever honored by that. They also welcomed and entertained my children anytime they came to visit me at the theatre, and did so with beautiful selfless kindness that far surpassed any polite duty. I’m deeply proud to be a member of the *Chicago* family.

- (5) My dressing roommates. Oh these poor (gorgeous) women saw dark sides of my exhaustion they never signed up for. I couldn't fall apart in front of my kids. I couldn't fall apart in the subway. I couldn't fall apart on stage. So, against my own wishes, the only place my body had was the dressing room. And these ladies – even the ones without kids – somehow got it. And instead of being annoyed, they listened to me and hugged me and lifted me up. They brought coffees and laughter, watched my kids while I napped, went to the ER with me more than once when my crazy son decided to be Evil Kinevil (side note: he's fine); and my lord, a number of them at one point or another even came to my house and DID MY LAUNDRY FOR ME when I was most sleeplessly buried. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.
- (6) My children who watched me leave every night and had too many surprise sitters and still loved me deeply and thoroughly and perfectly even when I could not be the parent I wish I could be 100% of the time. I know everyone thinks their kids are the best, but I'm right.
- (7) And my husband. My Erik, born to be a father, who quite literally made it possible for me to be a working actress at this point in my life. My husband who, against his ideal preference took this past year's journey with me. Who left his kids extra early five mornings a week so he could get home extra early to receive the parent baton when I passed it at 5:30pm and was out the door. My husband who, after a full day of work, did bath and bedtime with two kids under five years old, six days a week by himself for the better part of a year. Talk about superheroes. When my first child was about a year old, an interviewer asked me the secret to juggling a family and this career. My answer? Marry Erik Hayden.

As a teenager I remember passionately planning out two separate lives for myself in my head. I always knew I wanted to move to New York City and be an actress on Broadway. I also wanted to get married and raise a family in a house with a yard, as I had been raised. I didn't know how to reconcile those two dreams. I didn't know whether I could have both. I suppose I felt like my path would reveal itself in time. And having everything seemed like something I'd just figure out along the way if I followed my gut and worked hard. Sounds naïve, but as it turns out, that's kinda how it works. In simplest form anyway. I hope I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to keep figuring it out again and again and again. My year of having it all nearly swallowed me up. But it also saved me. It gave me back much of myself that had been set aside for a while—a part of me that makes me a better mother and wife. It allowed my kids to see that Mommy goes to work, not just Daddy, and that dreams are meant to be chased. It gave me people and art and craft and challenge and love and salary and self and proof. I know that this juggle will never be quite so difficult again. Not in the same way at any rate. There were many extenuating circumstances of timing. My kids are already older and sleeping better (knock wood and spit over your shoulder three times!!), and eventually they will both be in school during the days and most certainly will NOT be breastfeeding. My husband's work is now more flexible. My daughter has started Kindergarten in a fantastic school. And we will not be moving again for approximately one million years. So, it was just all a perfect nova. A perfect violent colorful explosive nova. Do I want to go through the past year again? Nope. No thanks. No. But in hindsight would I choose it again? Would I still say Yes? Without question.