Baring It All for the First Time

This is when I was introduced to Broadway Bares and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

May 15, 2018 By Richard JMV

There was a light-up box with a metal pole protruding from the center. The lights changed colors, fading from red to purple and on to blue. Then to green, and the crowd envied everything about those of us in the light. I was on the box in underwear, swinging around the pole, elevated above the crowd. I was in my black boots, fingerless gloves and some sort of leather harness. I recall it being the end of the Black Party (a debaucherous and legendary circuit party in New York City every March). It was Sunday, so I was just trying to keep the theme going.

Later that evening when I showed up to work my go-go shift at gay bar Splash, I was told it was a Broadway Bares: Solo Strips night, so we'd start our shifts later that usual. I had no idea what that was. I just knew I was tired from working Black Party and was ready to make more money. But I quickly learned a little more about Broadway Bares.

The lights went down and the crowd roared as the music started and the stage lights came up. Beautiful men and women filled the stage. I was more interested in the men. They had such incredible bodies, and I think I got pregnant just by looking at a few of them. The numbers were so well-choreographed and the costumes were so perfect. The show gave me a feeling that I couldn't identify. All I know is that it was good.

After the show ended, the dancers took positions all over the bar and did this thing where they danced to raise more tips at the end for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. People shoved money into the underwear of these beautiful, energetic performers. I had the privilege of meeting and talking to some of them, and I think I fell in love with everyone I had a conversation with. And when it was my time to get on the pole. I twirled, feeling empowered by what I had just seen. It kept repeating in my mind for days, until I got lost in the night yet again.

About a few months later in June, my friend Robert told me we'd be attending Broadway Bares: Stripopoly at Roseland Ballroom. I had no idea what I was in for. I was twenty years old and I wanted to go to happy hour somewhere. I did have a fake I.D. so I wanted to use it. He insisted that I come. I accepted and tossed of my light wash skinny jeans, a black tank top with pink trim, some combat boots and spiked my hair high so I'd be closers to these gods on stage.

Upon entering Roseland for the 9:30 show, I saw people dressed up selling T-shirts and hats. I saw costumed beauties walking around with red buckets. Robert and I walked around and mingled for a bit before making our way to the VIP standing section by the stage.

The show started and the whole time I was feasting my eyes on some of the most beautiful men and women as they stripped— well, not full-on frontal nudity stripped; more like a tightly choreographed, super sexy modern-day burlesque to raise money for HIV and AIDS! Everyone donated their time. The audience went nuts. I was so close that I could here the dancers breathing and smell their sweat. I wanted to be up there. The experience really had me captivated, and I even had the privilege of meeting the producer, Jerry Mitchell. He was so kind and so warm and loving with a laugh that you just can't forget.

A year went by so quickly, as I got lost in nightlife, until it was Broadway Bares season again. I had no idea how to be a part of it, but I was interested. Robert knew someone and had me email him. I got a reply and I'd be a VIP cocktail server in the mezzanine at Roseland Ballroom. I was so excited. I was painted up and given an red and white Aussie Bum bathing suit. I wore matching sneakers and took drinks to VIPs. It was really a fantastic experience watching the show twice through while serving drinks and making tips that would all be donated to fight HIV/AIDS. I danced around with a tray full of drinks, not spilling a drop I might add, until someone stopped me that worked for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and said, "You should really think about being in the show next year," and my heart soared. That would be like a dream come true. A dream that I didn't know I really had until that moment.

A place covered in glitter, sequins and smiles, and that smelled of hairspray. It was awesome. It made anything I have ever done look less glamorous. I couldn't stop thinking about it for a few days before getting lost in Pride week 2011 here in New York (The Broadway Bares show takes place each year a week or two before Pride, held the last Sunday in June. For a detailed profile on Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, read the POZ feature "The Show Must Go On.")

I went through that summer finding romance with the Australian and experiencing a lot of Lady Gaga because "Born This Way" was in full force and all that you'd hear everywhere you went. I really did "Marry The Night." I was young, and I hit the town hard. I was turned twenty-two years old and everything was going my way until the romance was gone and I was sitting in the clinic being told that my preliminary results had come back reactive for HIV.

In 2012, I remember the spring weather being so nice. I remember starting my medication. I recall Miss Hell's Kitchen and how it made me feel like I was a part of something, but I needed more. I was lost and needed to keep doing. I reached out to Jerry Mitchell. I told him I had been diagnosed and I wanted to be involved and I think it'd be good for me to do something like Bares. That was all it took. I was open and I was honest about being me and giving my time to this amazing event. I was placed in the pile to be cast for the show.

I went into rehearsals and I discovered the number I would be in was a heels dance piece, with a theme of Puss N Boots seeing as how the show was titled Happy Endings, it had to be some sort of fairy tale number. This was my gig. This is what I did. I would go out on the town every night in high heels and leave burn marks on every floor from how hot I'd be turning the party, so I had plenty of experience going into the dance rehearsals. Oh, and I found out we were wearing leather and fishnets for our costumes—all during a Beyoncé remix to boot. I was in heaven. My boots were definitely made for dancing.

I just remember being a part of a group of people where I could be authentically me in that moment without stigma hanging like a dark cloud over me. I was being me and healing through the love and camaraderie. This was the beginning of a beautiful journey with a lot of trials and tribulation, but I think it turned out better than okay if I am here writing this. I hope you guys are still here with me as it's about to become a bumpy ride with no real road map for a while.

This year I am performing in Broadway Bares, so if you'd like to donate click here. There is a short bio to read. Please help me reach my $10,000 goal to fight HIV/AIDS and end stigma.

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