

RBG: Of Many, One (Sydney Theatre Company)

Heather Mitchell gives a magnificent performance in Suzie Miller's new one-woman play about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, highlighting the play's strengths and smoothing its bumps.

★★★★☆ | Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney | Reviewed on 3 November, 2022

by Deborah Jones on 4 November, 2022



In 2019, the premiere of Suzie Miller's *Prima Facie* knocked audiences for six with its emotionally draining examination of how the law works – or fails to work – in cases of sexual assault. It gave Sheridan Harbridge here and Jodie Comer on the West End (and next year Broadway) a gift of a role that asked for messy passion and laser-sharp intellect in equal measure.



Heather Mitchell in *RBG: Of Many, One*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2022. Photo © Prudence Upton

Miller, a former lawyer, goes to the bench again for her new piece *RBG: Of Many, One*, a celebration of the career of US Supreme Court judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Again, Miller has written a part for a single actor, but this time the demands are even greater. Heather Mitchell is up for it, and how. She takes off Ruth Bader Ginsburg's trademark big spectacles and suddenly she's a dewy-faced teenager. Later she's at the gym doing one of her famous workouts – there truly is a book called *The RBG Workout* written by her personal trainer – and looks every second of her more than 80 years. The geriatric hip-swivel is genius, as is the throwaway line about the importance of hydration.

Bader Ginsburg was the second woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court (Sandra Day O'Connor was first) and advocacy for equality was the bedrock of her career. Crucially she saw that getting true equality meant seeking it for men as well as women, a helpful stance when working with a heavily male-dominated court. Important though her achievements were, Bader Ginsburg became a cultural touchstone only in 2013, 20 years after getting to the Supreme Court. That's when a law student dubbed her the Notorious RBG, a play on the rapper The Notorious B.I.G. Despite standing about five feet nothing tall, Bader Ginsburg became a towering public figure and unlikely style icon.

It's helpful to have a fair bit of background knowledge about Bader Ginsburg and American politics as Miller goes back and forth in time, highlighting important cases and covering personal territory. Bader Ginsburg was passionate about opera and Priscilla Jackman's production fruitfully uses Puccini, Wagner and Handel to underscore pivotal moments, particularly in relation to Bader Ginsburg's 59-year marriage to her beloved and unfailingly supportive Marty. The relationship is less well served by the big swerve into sentimentality right at the end. It feels at odds with Bader Ginsburg's steel-trap mind. This isn't in Miller's play, but when Bill Clinton announced her Supreme Court nomination, Bader Ginsburg paid tribute to her mother Celia, who died just one day before Ruth's high school graduation. Clinton was the one who cried.



Heather Mitchell in *RBG: Of Many, One*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2022. Photo © Prudence Upton

Bader Ginsburg was on the Supreme Court during the terms of three presidents, whom she ebulliently channels: Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The latter was the cause of her greatest misstep. She went against her profoundly held belief in the complete separation of executive and judiciary when she publicly denigrated Trump during his run for office and had to back down. Was her refusal to resign during Obama's second term when in ill health another misstep? Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

The scene in which she tries desperately to outlive Trump's term is one of Miller's strongest – that, and the imagined lunch with Obama, struggling to find a way to say he wants her to take one for the team. "He will get no help from me," Bader Ginsburg says drily. Less effective is the early, extended wait beside the telephone for Clinton's call about her selection for the Supreme Court (guess what: she got it).

There are no reservations though about Mitchell. She is magnificent from start to finish, highlighting the play's strengths and smoothing its bumps. On opening night, the cheering audience rose immediately as one. It's a sight, one suspects, Mitchell will have to get used to during the entire run.

The Sydney Theatre Company production of *RBG: Of Many, One* plays at Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney, until 17 December.