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A rare act of impersonation: Heather Mitchell's enthralling RBG

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KEY POINTS

- MUSIC: Nick Cave moves from howling rage to heartbreak in electric Melbourne gig
- JAZZ: Anatomical Heart perform at Jazzlab
- MUSIC: Kita Alexander shows why she is one of the country's rising music stars
- THEATRE: Bell Shakespeare enchant with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- THEATRE: Experimental show *Peacemongers* blends theatre and dining

THEATRE

RBG: Of Many, One ★★★★★

Arts Centre Melbourne, until May 12

One test of a good script is whether it can sustain a great performance, and by that yardstick, [Suzie Miller](#) is justly one of our hottest playwrights right now.

Last year, Melbourne audiences witnessed [Prima Facie at the MTC](#), with a bruising tour de force from Sheridan Harbridge as a criminal defence barrister who becomes a rape complainant.



Heather Mitchell plays the late, legendary US Supreme Court judge, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. PRUDENCE UPTON

This new solo show is no less sharp-edged about the oppression women suffer within the male-dominated legal system, but portrays a powerful agent of change, resurrecting one of the heroes in the fight for gender equality under the law.

Trailblazing jurist Ruth Bader Ginsburg, [who died in 2020](#), was the second woman appointed to the US Supreme Court. As a lawyer, she made her name as a leading advocate who strategically chose cases – some involving male plaintiffs – to advance the battle against gender discrimination.

We encounter her on the eve of her nomination in 1993, as she waits nervously for a call from President Bill Clinton, before flitting through her childhood, her marriage to her beloved husband Marty, the discrimination that shaped her approach to jurisprudence, and the highs and lows of her judicial career.



Heather Mitchell (left) doesn't just capture RBG's likeness – she captures her spirit. JAMES BRICKWOOD, WASHINGTON POST

The diminutive, bespectacled Jewish judge from Brooklyn is instantly recognisable – not least because she attained unlikely celebrity, spawning memes and becoming known as “the Notorious RBG” for delivering strenuous dissenting judgments from the liberal minority as the court became more conservative in the 21st century.

Fully inhabiting such a well-known figure is no mean feat, and Heather Mitchell pulls off one of those rare acts of impersonation that channels the spirit, rather than simply the likeness, of its subject.

I have an unused law degree in my pocket. I'm still enough of a law nerd to have read many of RBG's judgments for fun, and Mitchell's performance embodies what you'll find in them – an unwavering commitment to justice backed by painstaking reasoning, lightning intelligence and fierce clarity of mind.

That isn't half of Mitchell's achievement in this magnificent solo performance, which is as convincing at depicting Ginsburg's personal life as her professional one, and adds well-judged splashes of comedy – a bit of neurotic Jewish humour here, some hilarious impressions of Presidents Clinton, Obama and Trump there – to the biographical drama.

RBG's final years were laden with dramatic irony. The play doesn't let us forget that Ginsburg, [urged to resign by Obama](#) to secure a like-minded successor, died while Trump was in office and was replaced by a conservative justice. Nor that she overstepped the mark and betrayed her own ethics [when she criticised Trump](#) during the 2016 presidential election campaign.

You can't blame her for being human. Trump's presidency ushered in a new era of precarity for women's rights in the US, and events since Ginsburg's death – particularly [the rollback of](#)

[reproductive rights](#) since [the reversal of Roe v Wade](#) – lend urgency to this compelling portrayal of a courageous and principled champion of gender equality.

Reviewed by Cameron Woodhead

MUSIC

Nick Cave ★★★★★

Plenary Hall, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, until April 27

On his last visit to Australia, Nick Cave played the [wild and lovely surrounds of Hanging Rock](#); on this tour, he has been booked to play Plenary Hall, a very grand, utterly soulless venue in Melbourne's Convention and Exhibition Centre. The ceilings are high. The carpet is plush. The seats are several different shades of green, all of them virulent.



Nick Cave performs at Plenary Hall in Melbourne on April 26, 2024. RICHARD CLIFFORD

The mismatch between venue and artist is not lost on Cave. “This is an extraordinarily awful, corporate building,” he remarks, midway through the show. “I say that with all the love in the world.”

What Plenary Hall lacks in beauty, it makes up for with acoustics. Cave's voice booms and breaks, oscillating between the evangelical and the intimate. The warm, honeyed tones of the piano fill the space. As he moves through stripped-down, unadorned versions of songs from his five-decade career, every emotion – from howling rage to whispered heartbreak – is radiantly captured.

The production is minimalist: just Cave with his piano, Colin Greenwood with his bass. A spotlight illuminates their figures in such a way as to emphasise the negative space around them. Now and then, it dwindles down and is snuffed out completely, leaving Cave's voice alone and searching in the darkness.

Early in the evening, the crowd's energy is deadened by the weight of the venue – it's all a bit too respectful. Cave prompts the audience to loosen up: he does a little banter, a little audience participation. By the time the encore comes around, everyone is a little too comfortable and the final stretch of the evening feels slightly derailed by Cave fielding and rejecting song requests.



The two musicians deliver a masterful performance. RICHARD CLIFFORD

More problematic is the issue of the mix: for all the Plenary's tech, Greenwood's bass is almost imperceptible throughout the entire show. It seems a shame to have an artist of his calibre on the tour and for the audience not to be able to hear him.

Despite these stutters, the two musicians deliver a masterful performance. Playing this kind of stripped-back show comes with certain constraints – many Bad Seed songs simply don't translate, leaving the available repertoire necessarily narrow. This is not a bad thing. It offers a glimpse of Cave at his most essential.

Still, there is good news for those who might have wanted a little more chaos. With a new album to be released in August, Cave promises to be back next year – and this time, it will be with the Bad Seeds.

Reviewed by Nadia Bailey

JAZZ

Anatomical Heart ★★★★★

The Jazzlab, April 28

Almost exactly a year ago, three musicians from different parts of Australia came together on a rural property in northern New South Wales to improvise, explore and search for a common musical language.

That language was based on a shared sense of adventure and an emphasis on in-the-moment discovery.

Within a week, the trio had settled on a name for their collaborative project – Anatomical Heart – and recorded their debut album. That album has just been released, and Sunday’s concert at Jazzlab marked the band’s first live performance of this repertoire.

The album features compact distillations of the ideas the trio worked on while developing their collective sound. In a live setting, those ideas were expanded and became launching pads for improvisation, often linked to recurring motifs – harmonic or rhythmic – that could be amplified, dissected or dissolved.

Without a clear leader, the focus shifted constantly from player to player, and from sound to sound. Our attention might be drawn to Erik Griswold’s piano, prepared with strips of cardboard and rubber to alter the timbre of certain notes as Griswold struck them with choppy, staccato chords or swept across the keyboard in abstract cascades.

Helen Svoboda’s bass might emit quivering harmonics, spin off into jagged harmonic detours or pulsate and shudder as Svoboda bounced her bow across the strings with percussive vigour. And drummer Chloe Kim was as fascinating to watch as she was to listen to – her face expressing quiet joy, her gestures relaxed and fluid – whether she was creating rolling, fractured grooves or butterfly-light dances with brushes on cymbals.

With all three players living in different cities (Griswold in Brisbane, Svoboda in Melbourne and Kim in Sydney), maintaining this trio as a working unit won’t be easy. But judging by Sunday’s concert, it will be worth the effort. Here’s hoping these three distinctive hearts keep beating in sync for a long time to come.

Reviewed by Jessica Nicholas

MUSIC

**Kita Alexander | Young in Love Tour ★★★★★
Corner Hotel, April 26**

Electric blue lights flicker and fill the stage as the crowd applauds and cheers, yelling out: “Kita!” The band plays the opening bars to *Queen* before the 28-year-old, Brisbane-born musician strides on stage and launches into her set.



Anatomical Heart brings together three musicians from different parts of Australia. JOCELYN WOLFE



Kita Alexander performs at the Corner Hotel on April 26, 2024. RICHARD CLIFFORD

The Byron Bay-based songwriter and performer is finishing up a national tour for her new album *Young in Love*. Speaking to a sold-out crowd at the Corner Hotel, she confesses, “I gave myself four weeks to write this record”, citing family commitments. Her single *Date Night* featuring Australian country singer [Morgan Evans](#) has already amassed more than 5 million streams on Spotify.

The singer’s infectious stage presence has a wholesome, down-to-earth relatability. She swings her hips, and points to the ceiling and the crowd with carefree abandon as if performing in her bedroom like no-one’s watching. The packed venue fed off her energy, bopping their heads, and dancing and singing along throughout her show.

The transition between distinct emotive tones and pace across the set feels smooth. Alongside showcasing the upbeat synth-based tracks on the album, Alexander demonstrates her versatility, pulling out an acoustic guitar for moodier single *7 Minutes In Heaven*. Her performance of the 2017-released *Hotel* about coping with grief and loss elicits the loudest cheer — “my sister would be so f---ing stoked to hear you sing to that song”, she tells the audience afterwards.

Alexander cleverly samples popular music to surprise the audience: Tears for Fears’ *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* during *Between You & I* and Fountains of Wayne’s *Stacy’s Mom* during a pared-back performance of dance collaboration *Atmosphere* — the latter a nod to her triple j Like A Version cover.



The singer's infectious stage presence has a wholesome, down-to-earth relatability. RICHARD CLIFFORD

Bringing back her support acts San Joseph and Jem Cassar-Daley to the stage, she duets with them on *Date Night* and *Best You Ever Had* respectively.

Alexander delivers a fun, breezy escape of an evening, proving she is one of the country's rising indie-pop stars.

Reviewed by Vyshnavee Wijekumar

THEATRE

Peacemongers ★★★

The People, Darebin Arts Centre, until May 5

An experimental, lightly interactive theatre and dining experience, *Peacemongers* brings its audience together for a feed. I got the fragrant vegan curry, but if you didn't provide your dietaries beforehand, you had to negotiate with fellow diners to obtain your preferred dish.



Mia Boonan, Zachary Pidd, Samuel Gaskin, İbrahim Halaçoğlu, and Sonya Soares in *Peacemongers*. DARREN GILL

Disagreement, and how we handle it, lies at the core of this postdramatic deconstruction of utopian thinking, and if the performance is a dog's breakfast, it's still a timely subject to consider in a world of increasing political and social polarisation.

Peacemongers has been four years in development, an arduous odyssey littered with denied grant applications, pandemic-related interruptions, creative differences, and some pretty half-baked ideas (including a few daggy, lo-fi musical theatre numbers), all of them flaunted before the audience through involuted metatheatre that feels like a rebuke to abject failures in Australian arts funding.

One interesting twist sees a filmed performance from an ensemble member with disability (Kate Hood) who couldn't appear in the final production; another wheelchair-using actor (Mia Boonen) replacing her live halfway through.

The cast (Sonya Soares, Zachary Pidd, Samuel Gaskin and Ibrahim Halacoglu) throws itself into re-enacting rehearsals, serving dinner, playing music, singing, and devising conflict-inducing audience participation.



Peacemongers is an experimental, lightly interactive theatre and dining experience. DARREN GILL

The piece is intentionally left unfinished and in a weird place – a person of colour expelled from utopia for being intolerant of bigots, followed by a whimsical final showdown between Tim Tam and Mint Slice fanciers.

Yet nothing in the show is as eloquent or thought-provoking as the perspectives on disability, and the level of engagement with some themes can be undermined by shallow and lackadaisical performance.

That isn't to suggest that *Peacemongers* isn't worth seeing, though it sometimes looks like these artists are giving the bird to their own conditions of production, never mind the audience. *Reviewed by Cameron Woodhead*

THEATRE

A Midsummer Night's Dream ★★★★★

Bell Shakespeare, Arts Centre Melbourne, until May 11

For this critic, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has never yet turned into a nightmare. Shakespeare's magical spree into fairyland, with its scheming sprites and romantic mayhem, is one of those seemingly indestructible plays that leaves me feeling lighter about the world – and the latest Bell Shakespeare production, though it takes a while to get airborne, does lend the audience wings in the end.



Matu Ngaropo makes a lovably ridiculous Bottom. BRETT BOARDMAN

Curiously, it isn't fairies or bizarre love rectangles that typically steal the show. That honour belongs to the mechanicals, who brought lashings of hilarity to Peter Evans' remarkable production of *The Dream* [a decade ago](#) (with Richard Piper as Bottom), and they prove an inexhaustible source of mirth this time, too.

It's a stroke of genius, the meta-theatrical subplot with tradies rehearsing and performing "the lamentable comedy" of Pyramus and Thisbe. Good actors have a lot of fun throwing themselves into the antics; the spirit of amateurism functions almost as Cupid's twin in the play.

An amateur, as the word's etymology suggests, is as mad a lover as any of the romantic leads, and Matu Ngaropo makes a lovably ridiculous Bottom. His camp skewering of the enthusiasm and ego of a weaver who's a superstar in his own mind is laugh-out-loud funny and sports the lack of self-awareness, and unhinged exhibitionist streak, of an Elizabethan reality TV show.



Ella Prince, Imogen Sage and Richard Pyros in a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. BRETT BOARDMAN

The fairies are more otherworldly and unknowably fey than usual – less quick bright things than eerie, gothic, eldritch creatures, reminiscent of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics.

Ella Prince's ethereal, white-haired Puck, Richard Pyros' obsessively deranged Oberon, and Imogen Sage's imperious Titania open the gates to their fairy glen through heightened physical theatre and strange mannerism, lending an inhuman dimension to their intrigues. It's a nice contrast to the all-too-human frailties of the four lovers ensnared in their web, and although the romantic entanglements are a little flat-footed at first, they rise into nimble comic chaos as the misfired fairy spell takes effect.

Tightly choreographed hilarity fuels the ensuing love battle, with Helena (Isabel Burton) and Hermia (Ahunim Abebe) getting their claws out, and Lysander (Laurence Young) and Demetrius (Mike Howlett) having pissing contests over them. What struck me forcefully about the performances is that the lovers are so young and passionate they seem to hate anything they don't love – an extremity tamed only when the patriarchal boot is removed from their throats.

The gender politics behind *A Midsummer Night's Dream* remain problematic, of course, and this production leaves them emphatically intact for the characters and the audience to chafe against. It's a fitting frame of darkness for a production that leaps and glimmers like a will-o'-the-wisp, and is performed to a high standard.

Reviewed by Cameron Woodhead

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