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## RAISING THE BAR

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Heather Mitchell was recently so frail she struggled to stand up. Now, the resilient – and wisecracking – actor is reprising her award-winning TV role and playing legendary US judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg, writes **ROSEMARY NEILL**

**S**eventeen years ago, breast cancer cost Heather Mitchell two years of paid work and the Sydney home she shared with her husband and two young sons. As the stage and screen actor underwent surgery, chemotherapy and two gruelling rounds of radiation and her cinematographer husband, Martin McGrath, cared full-time for their boys, then aged two and four, she says there was a misapprehension within the film and theatre industries that she couldn't work. "It became normal that I was unwell," she says.

McGrath had worked on the revered films *Proof* and *Muriel's Wedding*, yet it also "became normal that Martin was having to look after the kids and work just dried up completely – there was just nothing for two years," she recalls. "People still cared about us enormously ... (but) there was a perception that 'you're not going to be able to do it'. And there was nothing I wanted more than to be working, because work gives me my energy and it's my passion."

The Upright and Palm Beach star volunteers a bleakly funny anecdote from that time: "I actually went for a screen test for someone who was dying of cancer, and didn't get the role. I went in there bald and I was like, 40kg, and I thought, 'Got this in the bag'." She says this in an exaggerated, self-mocking way, her petite frame rocking back and forth with laughter.

"On reflection, I thought I must have just looked terrifying to them. They must have thought, 'There's no way we can insure her'. I was mad to go for it but I insisted to my agent."

Mitchell and McGrath were forced to sell their house, despite an "extraordinary" \$30,000 cash gift from a mystery donor – and the family eventually rode out their health and financial crises.

Then, last summer, Mitchell's illness returned. "I've had cancer again this year," the 64-year-old says with a startling degree of self-possession during a long, candid interview with *Review*.

"This time I've had a mastectomy; what's called a DIEP surgery



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where they take some of your stomach and create a small breast. It's been very successful surgery. It's like a 10-hour operation." Three surgeons worked on her simultaneously.

"They were really amazing," she says.

The performer, who has been an ambassador for the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney's east where she was treated, found the lump early. "It's about early detection. I'm very, very lucky. Suzie was with me; she was my support."

She is talking about Suzie Miller the playwright. Miller not only helped her close friend deal with her illness; she also wrote a one-woman play for her titled *RBG: Of Many, One*, about the pioneering US Supreme Court judge, Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The play opens at the Sydney Theatre Company's Wharf 1 Theatre on November 3, and for this interview, Mitchell and Miller are eating lunch with *Review* at the company's harbourfront restaurant, basking in elusive winter sunshine. The great grey mass of the Harbour Bridge rears up to our right and a tourist helicopter buzzes overhead like an overbearing wasp. I ask Mitchell how long it took her to recover from her second brush with cancer. "It was only three months," she replies.

Miller interjects, insisting it was longer. "Well, it was three months before I was standing upright," Mitchell clarifies, her husky laugh at once infectious and incongruous, given her birdlike build. Mitchell feels "very fortunate" she didn't need to do chemo this time.

Although her bravado and mischievous charm can seem almost blokey, the sixty-something retains her delicate beauty: she has exquisite bone structure, a chic – seemingly effortless – fashion sense and hooded blue-green eyes that fix on you directly when she is answering questions.

She is one of the nation's most-loved and versatile stage performers and Miller told the *STC* she would only write *RBG: Of Many, One* if Mitchell was in it. "I have to say the company jumped so quickly," says Miller, a former lawyer who wrote the hit play about sexual assault and the legal system, *Prima Facie*, in which Jodie Comer recently triumphed on the West End.

Just months after her cancer treatment, Mitchell is juggling her solo theatre gig with a prominent screen role – she recently filmed season two of Binge's romantic drama, *Love Me* – and this reflects her extraordinary grit and resilience. It also recalls aspects of the character *RBG* – often regarded as America's leading litigator for women's rights – Miller has created.

The playwright mentions "the three strikes" Ginsburg faced as she fought to establish a legal career in the 1950s and early 60s: "She was a woman, she was a mother and she was Jewish and all those three things in her era really played against her."

Although Ginsburg topped her class at Columbia Law School in 1959, she initially struggled to find work as a lawyer.

Mitchell says that when she first read about Ginsburg's family life, "I remember going, 'This is just like me.' My mother died during my last exam at school, which was the same as Ruth Bader Ginsburg. We've both had cancer twice and we're both married to men called Marty."

She related strongly to personal aspects of the judge's story "to do with loss, to do with being in a house of grief. ... What I identify with more than the death of the parent, is how you carry that person with you." Her mother was sick for seven years before she died and "I have always carried my mother with me, really intimately, in my life. Ruth's mother. it seems. was always very present to her."

Like Ginsburg, Mitchell is Jewish and has American ancestry – her father came from upstate New York and she was raised and educated in Sydney, graduating from NIDA shortly before Hugo Weaving, her *Love Me* co-star, did.

*RBG: Of Many, One* explores the judge's life from her teenage years to her death in 2020, aged 87. Asked whether she finds such a long character arc daunting, Mitchell stares me down, *Lady Bracknell* style, pretending she is offended. "Am I overwhelmed? Is that the question?" she asks, while Miller chortles away in the background.

On stage, she will recreate conversations *RBG* had with family members and presidents including Bill Clinton – who nominated her for the US Supreme Court in 1993 – and Barack Obama – who asked her to leave it. Obama did this in 2013, so he could replace her with another liberal judge. Ginsburg refused to resign, and many progressives remain critical of her decision, as it left the way open for Donald Trump to appoint a conservative successor after he was elected president.

Should the feminist trailblazer have stepped down when Obama asked her to? It's only three days into rehearsals and Mitchell riffs: "Well, I already feel quite defensive! I feel the play really interrogates that question and gives you a greater context and insight into what her argument was. We're so accustomed to this idea of people as they get older – that they become more retiring and weaker, but she still had so much to say that she truly believed was going to benefit the future."

While she advocated fiercely for gender equality at work, in education and for women's reproductive rights, Ginsburg was famously critical of the 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision that liberalised abortion rights in America. According to Miller, she could see what other feminists couldn't; that the decision "was vulnerable to being overturned, because it wasn't based on a woman's autonomy over their body, it rested on a privacy principle and it allowed governments to change their minds.

"So she was right. Actually, it was vulnerable and we've seen that play out (with the Supreme Court recently overturning *Roe v Wade*). The awful irony is that if, in fact, *RBG* had left her position (in 2013), it might not have played out in quite the same way."

Mitchell says that "what we're discovering is that there's nothing simple about her". She regularly went to the opera with Justice Antonin Scalia, a conservative Supreme Court judge with an "absolutely brilliant mind". They have both read Ginsburg's "very thoughtful, very detailed" judgments, and there are lines in the play drawn directly from them.

The second woman to sit on the US Supreme Court bench, Ginsburg became an improbable pop culture celebrity late in life. A 2018 documentary about her, *RBG*, was nominated for two Oscars while the feature film, *On The Basis of Sex*, explored her happy and enduring marriage, her early career struggles and hard-won legal victories.

Mitchell says *RBG: Of Many, One* interrogates how the judge had "such a huge heart for family, for people, for women in particular" and yet an intellect "so steely, so strong, so determined, that mined deeply down into every argument ... At the same time, she says she suffers with anxiety at times". (In one likely anxiety-inducing incident in 2016, she publicly criticised then-presidential candidate Trump as a "faker". As she had breached judicial impar-



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tiality, she was forced to apologise.)

I remark that there is nowhere to hide for an actor performing a solo show and Mitchell quips: “Oh I don’t know, I saw a little table at the back”. She says that in a one-person drama, the prospect of forgetting a line “doesn’t intimidate me at all because when you are playing someone who has the ability to talk to an audience, should you forget anything, you can talk to the audience until it comes back to you.”

She is no stranger to biographical roles: In 2018 she anchored Still Point Turning: The Catherine McGregor Story for the STC, which explored, with empathy and often-edgy humour, how the former male soldier and cricket commentator transitioned to a woman. While Mitchell earned raves for her performance, some commentators said she should not have been cast as a transgender woman.

“I would never do that now,” Mitchell says emphatically. “At the time when we did it, Catherine insisted that it was a (biological) woman who played her. ... She has had the full surgery. Then when we met, she wanted it to be me. I was expecting much more criticism and I completely accept and understand the criticisms that were there. ... I don’t feel bad about having done it, but if it was brought to me now, I would say no.”

The rehearsal period for RBG has been divided into two segments because Mitchell had to film her Love Me scenes in September and early October. The STC, she says, has been “remarkably Written by Alison Bell, Leon Ford and others, it’s adapted from the Swedish series Alska Mig and pivots between tragedy and comedy as it explores, across several generations, how romantic love can coexist with profound grief. In season one and two, Mitchell plays Anita, the free-spirited woman Weaving’s cautious widower falls in love with, and she won the best supporting actress Logie for her performance in June 2022.

“I’ve never been to the Logies. ... It was lovely,” she says, sounding a little bemused.

Mitchell describes Anita as “quite a wilful person” and “stoic in a way. I think she sort of sees there’s suffering in life but that suffering only makes great things seem clearer and more wonderful.”

She and Weaving go back a long way: they both starred in the 1980s miniseries Bodyline and in David Hare’s Rapture for STC in 1990. She says they have known each other since they trained at NIDA and that “working on Love Me together is just completely compatible. There’s a simpatico between us which is very respectful”. She says that on set, Weaving is “full of ideas”, while his screen alter ego is “easy to love”.

Asked why Love Me has resonated so strongly with viewers, she responds: “Firstly, there’s something in there for different generations. I also think probably because it is about love. It’s very much about small moments between people, so there’s a gentle, reflective quality about it.” When we speak for a second time, she is about to “cram” her new scenes into three weeks of filming before returning to Sydney for RBG’S tech run. The STC show is directed by the “wonderful” Priscilla Jackman, who wrote and directed Still Point Turning.

The actor’s career has spanned four decades and three mediums (theatre, television and film). On screen, she has played the villainess Ashka in the 1990s teen fantasy series Spellbinder and Gretel Packer in the 2013 miniseries Power Games: The Packer-Murdoch

understanding because, due to the breast cancer, everything got pushed back”.

Love Me is reportedly Binge’s most watched Australian drama. War, for which she garnered a best supporting actress AACTA nomination. In 2019, she portrayed the gravely ill mother of Tim Minchin’s character – a beanie on her hairless head and sardonic one-liners issuing from her lips – in the Foxtel drama Upright, which has been screened here, in the UK, Canada and America.

She is a regular at the STC, where she is a board member. Over several decades, she has appeared in marquee productions including Macbeth, The Cherry Orchard, The Doll Trilogy and All My Sons. In 2017 she played a young boy in a sailor suit as well as his mother, in Caryl Churchill’s Cloud Nine. While this is an impressive roll call of characters, she reflects that “I always find it funny when people talk about careers, because you don’t design a career in this business. You don’t know what’s coming next; you don’t know if there’s going to be anything.”

Such uncertainty has never bothered her, although “financially it can be stressful at times. We lost our house because of breast cancer and we rent now.” She and McGrath, who is currently working on a film in Tasmania, own a small Sydney apartment and rent “a place (in a ritzy suburb) where we want to live but could never buy. Also, that’s my background – my parents didn’t own anything.”

Miller says both Mitchell and RBG have optimistic natures. Ginsburg was “very grateful” for her “great good fortune”, despite the personal and professional hurdles she faced. Mitchell’s optimism is evident when she discusses her health, family and work. The first time she had cancer, she says, “my children were two and four. I must say that although it was challenging and quite a rocky road ... I have become very aware now that I am so much stronger than my body, and that my body challenges me and defeats me numerous times, but as soon as I’m well again, I forget that I was sick.

“What I love about acting is that you don’t have to be on stage thinking about you, because it’s not about you.” RBG: Of Many, One is “about Ruth. It’s about the ideas. It’s all to do with the writing, though. When something is not well written, it’s all about you struggling, but when something is well written and it carries you, it is the most exciting (thing).”

She says Miller has written “a brilliant script. Ruth is so well drawn. There’s such a journey. There are so many ideas. There’s so much richness and so much to convey, that I haven’t even thought about myself”.

**RBG: Of Many, One**, opens at the Sydney Theatre Company’s Wharf 1 Theatre on November 3



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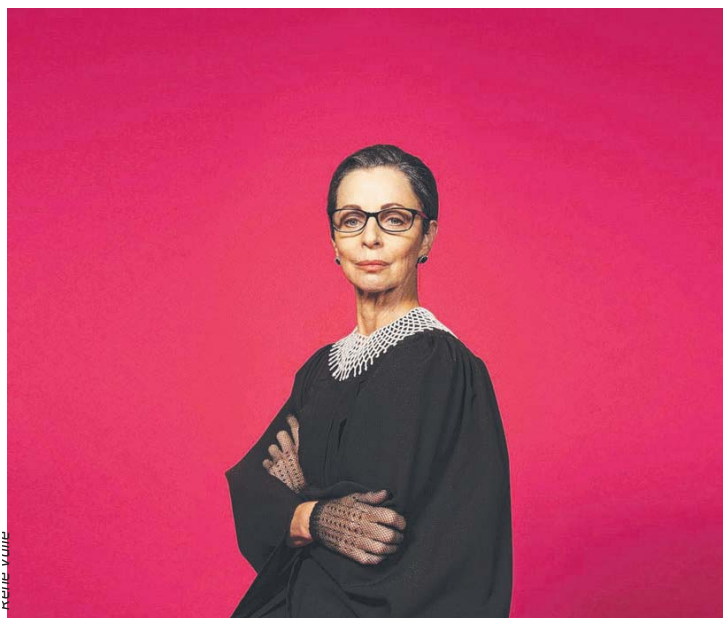
John Feiler



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Far left, actor Heather Mitchell; Mitchell as Ruth Bader Ginsburg in RBG: Of Many, One, for the Sydney Theatre Company; and with Hugo Weaving in a scene from season one of Love Me