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REVIEW 'ALL THINGS EQUAL: THE LIFE AND TRIALS OF RUTH BADER GINSBURG'

## 'Notorious' reigns victorious

Play about Ruth Bader Ginsburg pleases the court at the Attucks



Michelle Azar as the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The play "All Things Equal: The Life and Trials of Ruth Bader Ginsburg" played at the Attucks Theatre in Norfolk on Tuesday. Bay Street Theater

BY PAGE LAWS CORRESPONDENT

"Justice, justice thou shalt pursue." — Deuteronomy 16:20

And boy, did she ever!

The “Notorious RBG” (surely the least likely but most appropriate street name ever meme-etically conferred on a Supreme Court justice) was famous for pursuing, even harrowing, her elusive prey, Justice. In the Virginia Arts Festival one-person play that rocked the sold-out Attucks Theatre on Tuesday, Ginsburg (channeled, even embodied, by actor Michelle Azar) owned the controversy over her staying in office too long, thereby enabling Donald Trump, whom she detested, eventually to appoint a third conservative justice after she died in 2020. Ginsburg’s excuse/explanation was simple: She was certain Hillary would win.

Or it could be, as “All Things Equal,” by supercharged playwright Rupert Holmes intimates, that, having herself been pursued and harrowed by Death all her life (the death of her sister in childhood, her mother at age 48, and her beloved husband, Marty, later in life), Ginsburg may have thought she’d finally learned how to beat the Reaper by personally defeating his minion, cancer, so many times.

She didn’t cheat death, of course, though this play — as directed by Laley Lippard, who as a Virginia Beach student trained at the Governor’s School for the Arts — gives her brief scenes when she seems knowingly to brush up against her own age, mortality and posthumous legacy. It’s an ultimate form of dramatic irony when Ginsburg on stage says how relieved she is that *Roe v. Wade*, even if poorly written, still stands as a bulwark for women’s right to their own bodies. The groan of the audience signals our superior knowledge, the irony of *Roe*’s recent demise. But this theatrical version of Ginsburg has such an aura of preternatural prescience elsewhere that we begin to suspect that she might have sometimes had it, too.

The chief premise of the play, is, of course, more obvious, and practical: We’re simply witness to a young girl’s interview with the justice, likely as a school project. The girl, purportedly a friend of Ginsburg’s granddaughter, is unseen but addressed as if she were sitting in Ginsburg’s private Supreme Court chambers (so that Ginsburg addresses her by addressing the audience). The Attucks stage is dressed with a large desk, two cellphones (only one of which, RBG admits, she knows how to operate) and a projected background of law books on shelves. The projection is, thankfully, no bigger than a large home TV, counteracting the sense of the theater’s whole back wall as one big projected (fake) set, as was the case in “*The Great Gatsby*” and other recent shows. The smaller screen is used for much more: a Bill Clinton speech, RBG-wearing-a-gold-crown memes, etc.

Just as RBG's "notorious" moniker is both improbable and perfect, so is so much about the show and its mixed creative team: playwright, director and actor.

What, for example, are the odds that the same guy who wrote the song "Escape" — better known as "the Piña Colada Song" — would write a show about a feminist Supreme Court icon? Rupert Holmes is so improbably multitalented and prolific across genres that his mysteries win Edgars, and his adaptation of Dickens' "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" won a Tony for best musical. Typical for him, he wrote the musical's book, composed the music and wrote the lyrics. His other accomplishments in film, TV, and songwriting for Barbra Streisand are too much to go into. His interview this year with the New York Times Sunday Book Review was hilarious enough to have been ghostwritten by — wait a minute — his own play's RBG!

It's precisely that recognizably Holmesian humor that gives the show a theatrical quality sometimes lacking in one-person endeavors, an important edge considering the works in many genres — books, films, etc. — on the same theme. There is, for example, an Australian play that toured there, "RBG: Of Many, One" by Suzie Miller. There's "Justice: A New Musical," which played this spring at California's Marin Theatre Company and elsewhere. There's an RBG workout manual, even a graphic novel aimed at younger readers. And we mustn't forget the comic opera by Derrick Wang, "Scalia/Ginsburg." The two justices, diametrically opposed in their political and legal views, melded in their love of opera.

Holmes' play, so adeptly executed by director Lippard and actor Azar, does not curry the RBG cult of personality. (We do get a cute scene of her stopping to exercise in a workout suit jacket festooned on the back with a glittery "The Supremes.")

We instead get details of Ginsburg's own life — her modest Brooklyn upbringing with a mother working in the garment district. Her mother died at the time Ruth was slated to give her high school's valedictory speech. We're told about Ginsburg's full scholarship to Cornell, where she met her future husband Martin Ginsburg, owner of a spiffy Chevy convertible. After Cornell, Marty joined the service. Both eventually attended Harvard Law School with Ruth, by then the mother of two, forced to finish her legal studies at Columbia. Ruth's run-ins with Harvard Law dean Erwin Griswold become one of the play's running jokes. (He eventually sides with her in a crucial battle later in their careers.)

Details of Ginsburg's biography, the very things one might share with a young interviewer, are fun or poignant and interesting. But we are really there in

tribute to Ginsburg as a thinker, a passionate proponent of equal rights for all persons — male, female, and other. Ginsburg’s work for the Affordable Care Act, on abortion rights, her stand against Hobby Lobby’s religious politicization of health care rights — these are issues the play explains cogently, emphasizing her stand that protecting the rights of people of all genders is the best way to bring the rights of more oppressed genders to the fore.

Ginsburg saw her dissenting opinions as applicable to future, better law. The play’s last words, “I dissent,” remind us of her salutary legacy. She’s still out there ahead of us, still in pursuit of that blindfolded, scales-toting lady.

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