

## On the Basis of Sex – DC in the Movies

This year already saw a popular and critically-lauded documentary about ageless Supreme Court associate justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. “RBG” was a flattering, yet comprehensive survey of the woman’s life and her contributions to our justice system. While her life, extraordinary as it is, may appear to be more dutiful than dramatic, her rising fame in recent years was enough for Hollywood to assay a theatrical feature about it. Director Mimi Leder’s “On the Basis of Sex” is the result, a glowing if predictable narrative about her promise.

English actress Felicity Jones is the casting choice for Ginsburg. The plot opens in 1956 when RBG was one the very few women allowed into Harvard Law School and extends to her first major sex discrimination case in 1970 involving—surprise—a man’s right to tax relief while taking time off a caregiver.

The arc of the story, written by Ginsburg’s nephew Daniel Stiepleman, incorporates her marrying the love of her life, the charming Marty Ginsburg (Armie Hammer) and shows her giving up elements of her education and career to enable his. It also depicts her struggle to balance family and work (including a period when her husband fought cancer), her falling back on teaching law when she was unable to gain a position at a law firm, and, ultimately, her taking up the cause of Charles Moritz (Chris Mulkey), a bachelor denied deductions for caretaker expenses while caring for his ailing mother.

Her career glances off characters like the starchy Dean of Harvard Law Erwin Griswold (Sam Waterson), feminine activist Dorothy Kenyon (Kathy Bates), and a feisty lawyer with the ACLU, Mel Wulf (Justin Theroux), among others. While Ruth appeals to the ACLU to take the Moritz case, Wulf rejects her, only to be convinced to give her a chance by Kenyon. The film climaxes in her defense of Moritz before the 10<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver based on sex discrimination (the case is invented for the film, though Ginsburg did take on a real case of sex discrimination against a man).

In the climatic courtroom scene, Jones as Ginsburg acquits herself reasonably well, showing her edginess at her first trial, then working up to an inspirational rebuttal that first intrigues, then convinces the federal judges before her. Though Ginsburg is from Brooklyn, Jones’s accent throughout is high-toned American, with only the word “low-yuh” (lawyer) betraying her origin. The film offers, indeed, a Hollywood ending, but it is mostly earned through Jones earnest performance (the DC preview audience that saw it clapped spontaneously when Ginsburg capped her final argument). Feel good, sure, feel great, not quite.

Jones is an appealing presence as Ginsburg, the quiet but persistent grinder. Her performance demonstrates that Ginsburg was never a radical or clamorous type, rather reserved but persistent, confident though diffident. The other roles fall into foreseeable types: Hammer is a male paragon, Wulf is a gruff wise guy, Bates is a brassy gal, and Waterson is a crusty curmudgeon. Not many surprises here.

Though there are few Washington scenes in “On the Basis of Sex.” The film does show Griswold and company strolling around the Grant Memorial in DC, and a final sequence has Ginsburg, presaging her eventual rise, striding up the steps of the Supreme Court only to disappear behind a pillar and...a nice surprise ending.

*(The film, out for Christmas, is rated “PG-13” and runs 120 minutes.)*

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