

RBG

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG for short) has spent a rich and fruitful life in the law and in life. Yet for all of that, her contributions, however epoch-making, did not change her essentially retiring and restrained nature. She is not one to make a show, or to show up others. However eventful her life, it has always been somewhat under wraps. Only quite recently, perhaps more so after the death in 2010 of her beloved husband, the more outgoing Marty, has Ginsburg come into her own as an atypical celebrity. That celebrity may shift a bit closer to rock star after the release of “RBG.”

“RBG” is part life story, part personality profile, and part legal history of gender equality, much of which Ginsburg contributed to. That contribution is properly recognized in “RBG” with the descriptions of a landmark series of arguments she made before the Supreme Court in the 1970’s when practicing in New York City as ACLU’s general counsel. These cases for equal pay standards and female recognition in the military and the professions are not only described in the film but enhanced by hearing—from audio tapes—her own oral arguments. It was these cases that led her being named to the DC Circuit Court of Appeals by Jimmy Carter in 1980, and her eventual assumption to the Supreme Court in 1993 after being nominated by Bill Clinton.

Her Supreme Court tenure, now approaching 25 years, is also given due weight in this film, directed by Julie Cohen and Betsy West. Here again, her major agreements and dissents are heard on audiotape, her deliberate and clear voice giving additional authenticity to her arguments. She is so logical, so sensible—how can anybody not agree with the woman?

Ribboned through the legal Ruth is the personal one, a short Jewish Brooklyn girl of unhurried drive and robust moral values, excelling in school at every level, with eventual college work at Cornell, Harvard, and a degree from Columbia Law School. Central to that life is her meeting the love of her life, Marty Ginsburg, as teenagers at Cornell, then following him, with two kids in tow, to study in New York. Their personalities and demeanor were apparent opposites, but their bonds were adamant. Through file footage of the irrepressible Marty and the testimony of Ginsburg’s two children, John and Jane, we get a clear sense of a wholly anchored family.

Other elements of Ginsburg’s story are told. Her warm friendship with her utter ideological rival on the Court, Justice Antonin Scalia, is nicely sketched, highlighted by their joshing during a dual stage appearance. Her passionate love of opera is also noted, including a sprightly scene where she appears in a speaking role in “The Daughter of the Regiment” with the Washington National Opera, surely a highlight of her life. A sour episode is also pointed out: her denouncing candidate Trump during the campaign of 2016, an outburst for which she (as a sitting judge) later apologized. Her everyday life at the Watergate apartments in DC is also shown, including her steady workouts at the gym.

What is finally truly telling in “RBG” is her own recorded testimony, delivered at various points in her life and up to the present day. We hear her in court appearances, testifying at her Senate hearings, making her major court arguments, in public appearances and interviews, and, most intimately, with the filmmakers themselves who

get her to reveal just a bit more of herself. This is a most winning documentary, one that befits an unassuming American icon.
(*The film is rated "PG" and runs 97 mins.*)

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