# SYDNEY THEATRE CO EDUCATION

# DESIGN SKETCHBOOK



Sydney Theatre Company acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which the Company gathers. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with whom we work and with whom we share stories.

Cover: Heather Mitchell, Photo: Rene Vaile

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The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly is the Education Manager for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au

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# DIRECTOR'S NOTE: PRISCILLA JACKMAN



Following STC's world premiere in 2022, the gift of sharing *RBG: Of Many, One* with Australian audiences nationally in 2024, particularly with elections looming in the US once again, feels very timely, indeed.

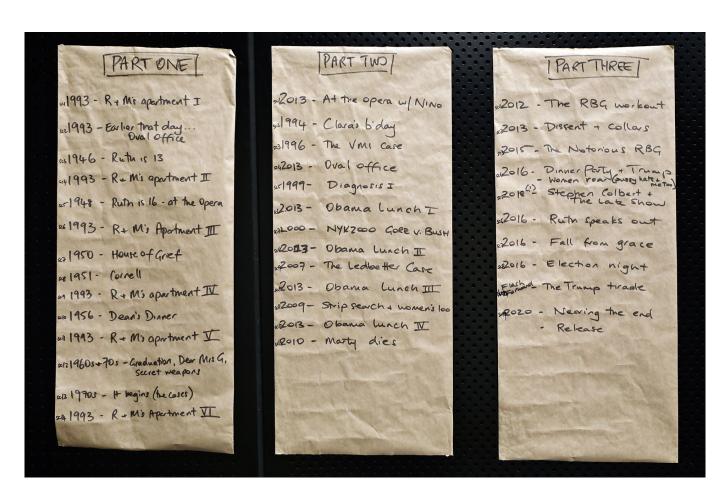
Suzie Miller famously wrote *RBG: Of Many, One* for the incomparable Heather Mitchell. From my initial read of the text, I was passionate that this production must position the virtuosity of Heather's breathtaking performance front and centre. Not only is she required to convincingly take on the iconic Ruth Bader Ginsburg, 13 to 87 years of age inclusive, but also to inhabit every other role in the play. Adding to this, the complexities of the theatrical form requires a sophisticated dexterity and intricate collaboration from the creative team to weave the appearance of effortlessness; a seamless fluidity - navigating multiple times, spaces, locations - all the while supporting and holding space for Heather's astounding transformational craft. I would like to acknowledge the innovative skill and dedicated belief in vision, of our creative team, vocal coach and production team.

Structurally, *RBG: Of Many One*, is divided into three parts, each focusing on a distinct period of Ginsburg's life. Part 1 deals with the domestic sphere – Ruth's childhood, adolescence and student days. Part 2 expands as we witness Ruth inhabiting elite environments, such as the Supreme Court, as well as the growth of her status and

impact. By Part 3 she has literally exploded into the zeitgeist, operating actively in the global world – she is a celebrity, a cultural icon – the Notorious RBG. Ruth's interactions with three presidents in each part, (Clinton, Obama and Trump), provides a meditation on leadership and gender. Through the lens of this one woman, we witness a counterpoint to the distinct models of masculine leadership each of the iconic presidential figures represent.

For me, the gift of working again in deep collaboration with Heather, Suzie and the team, has been both extraordinary and sacred. Perhaps my favourite aspect of Suzie's script, is the parallel Ruth finds between her love of opera and using her voice in court. Opera was an almost a spiritual experience for Ruth - a detail woven lovingly throughout this production. While there is a plethora of information about RBG's life available, we hope audiences (new and returning) walk away moved viscerally by the experience of RBG in this unique theatrical form. Furthermore, we hope this production offers personal insight into the continued relevance of RBG's wisdom and provocation for our world. Through the work, we are reminded of the deeply progressive catalyst for steadfast change that RBG represents, and the need for vigilance in continuing her fight for justice, equality, understanding, compassion and human connection.

# ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



The design of *RBG*: *Of Many, One* is anchored in the importance of foregrounding the virtuosity of actor Heather Mitchell, who creates and sustains over 30 characters over the duration of the production.

Director Priscilla Jackman, in the Final Design Presentation (2022) for *RBG: Of Many, One*, noted the fundamental tension in playwright Suzie Miller's script, which demands both the freedom to use the space to move between time and place, whilst creating and enhancing the "sacred" relationship between Heather Mitchell and the audience through a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Both Jackman and Designer David Fleischer negotiated the delicate balance between these two features of Miller's script by creating a fluid space for Heather Mitchell to play in, using abstracted images that speak to RBG's life and the historical contexts in which she lived.

Jackman's exploration of Playwright Suzie Miller's theatrical form has influenced the way in which Jackman worked with

Designer David Fleischer. Divided into 3 parts, the structure of the narrative requires the creative team to move quickly through time, context, memory, and the inner world of RBG. Part 1 of the script is the longest of the segments, at 50 of the 90 minutes of the performance, with Parts 2 and 3 being much shorter. Part 1, along with Part 2, has been characterised by Jackman and Fleisher as occurring within a "Foundational Space" to which RBG is able to return, after moving through time in flashback, across time and geography. Part 3, however, explodes the conventions of time and space established in Parts 1 and 2, removing the "Foundational Space" accelerating the narrative to the imagined end of Bader Ginsburg's life.

The creative team began the process by finding and defining the relationships between the three parts of the narrative, building a trajectory through RBG's life and context, with this dramaturgical analysis informing the design. Part 1 provides

# ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

the audience with an insight into RBG as an individual woman. Set in the 1990s, Part 1 allows the audience to acquaint themselves with Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the prime of her career, providing a juxtaposition between the young, bright girl who desires a career and a successful domestic partnership and the older Ruth, happily married to Marty and about to be offered the role on the US Supreme Court, carrying a lived understanding of the impediments to women's achievement in the legal profession. Part 2 explores the status and grandeur of Ruth as the iconic Supreme Court Justice and Part 3 offers a shift in the audience's experience, moving from a focus on the individual to the experience of Bader Ginsburg as cultural icon and a reflection of the zeitgeist. The clarity and rigour of the design of the space, supported in its clarity by Alex Berlage's lighting design, is key to understanding the rapid shifts between moments of the narrative.



### **SET DESIGN**



#### **DESIGNER DAVID FLEISCHER**

Designer David Fleischer's visual research focused on the following areas:

- The tension between the "epic" and the "domestic" aspects of Suzie Miller's script and Bader Ginsburg's life.
- The connections between American institutions and their role in the lives of society and individuals. Fleischer was particularly inspired by two key institutions the US Supreme Court and the John F. Kennedy Centre Opera Theatre. The similarity of the architectural language between the two buildings, including columns, curtains, scale, and line was important in developing an abstracted set piece, representing both the institutions of power and culture that RBG worked within, but also her personal journey through time and context.

David Fleischer's practical considerations included:

- The importance of actor Heather Mitchell in the performance space, balancing the importance of the need to use the entire space to tell the story, whilst providing an intimate space for actor – audience relationship to be established and maintained.
- The importance of the set piece remaining static whilst offering the illusion of movement through time, culture, and context.
- The use of lighting design and props to help support the audience developing a quick understanding of the shifts in the worlds of the play.

## **SET DESIGN**

David Fleischer's set design clearly delineates Parts 1, 2 and 3 and serves to support the creation of dramatic meaning for the audience whilst building the atmosphere of each segment.

Part 1 of playwright Suzie Miller's script utilises a large piece of curtain-like gauze on a straight track. This choice is intended to cover the abstracted columns of the US Supreme Court and Kennedy Centre, until their reveal later in the production, whilst also allowing quick shifts in time and space through shifts in lighting states. Additionally, gauze signifies memory for an audience, suggesting an elasticity of time and context, time periods and geographical location. Actor Heather Mitchell is thus able to move freely through the space, creating different characters, whilst at the same time, suggesting to the audience an inner world of memory, feeling and experience.

Fleischer's transition into Part 2 of the narrative is marked by the lowering of a chandelier and a surtitle image, suggesting both RBG's love of the opera whilst providing a practical function, which is to suggest another method of signifying transitions in time and location to the audience. The gauze, lit with red lighting, also suggests opera curtains where necessary. The gauze, easily moved from the space, reveals Fleischer's abstracted columns, made of white stretchy cloth, chosen for its ability to reflect the light, and for its solid, marble-like appearance. Throughout Parts 2 and 3, the columns are, like the gauze, able to reflect Berlage's lighting design, allowing for quick transitions in time and space.



## **COSTUME DESIGN**

Designer David Fleischer relies on the abstraction of form, line, and shape to facilitate quick costume shifts across historical periods. Practicalities are also key to Fleischer's design, as actor Heather Mitchell is required to jump between character, space, and time within the performance space. Fleischer's design must maximise shifts in physicality to allow Heather Mitchell to embody different periods of RBG's life, along with 30 vastly different characters.



Part 1, set in 1993, relies on the shape, line, and colour of late 1980s/early 1990s. Using the silhouette of the period's casual attire, the choice to costume Bader Ginsburg in slacks and a comfortable top, allows the audience to identify the historical context with ease. The addition of a structured jacket at the end of Part 1 signifies Bader Ginsburg's entrance into the upper echelons of the legal profession, providing the transition into Part 2, which occurs in 2003 after her appointment to the Supreme Court.





Designer David Fleischer's costume for **Part 2** of the narrative reflects RBG's elevation to the Supreme Court, with a skirt suit and new glasses marking the development of Bader Ginsburg's status in the legal community. As RBG's life moves to its close in Part 3, a more comfortable version of a suit is introduced for the character.



 $Heather\ Mitchell.\ Photos: Prudence\ Upton$ 

The choice to save the iconic image of RBG in black court robes, modern glasses, and jabot until the last moments of **Part 3** was a deeply considered one. Designed to build the theatrical tension and atmosphere at the conclusion of Bader Ginsburg's life, the heightened tension and atmosphere created by the loss of not only Ruth the individual, but the symbolic RBG, was signified by the image of RBG in her court robes. The creative choice by Jackman, Fleischer, and the creative team, emphasises the enormous loss for the American people.

## LIGHTING DESIGN

#### FIVE QUESTIONS FOR LIGHTING DESIGNER ALEXANDER BERLAGE

1. RBG: Of Many, One requires actor Heather Mitchell to perform on her own for 90 minutes and create up to 30 characters in the performance space. What vision did you have in your mind to support Heather's process of establishing and sustaining her relationship with the audience in the performance space?

When working on a production with a solo performer, the technical elements often end up taking on a sort of 'supporting actor' in the production. We wanted to create a lighting language that helped hold Heather in space, at times as a solo relatable human figure in a black void and at others as a commanding force and icon standing tall and proud in an epic landscape.

#### 2. RBG: Of Many, One moves quickly through time and place, asking the audience to jump across decades in an instant. How does your lighting design support these rapid shifts for the audience?

Shifts in colour, tone and direction all help create a sense of progression of time and place in RBG: Of Many, One. Paul Charlier also created a beautiful score with stunning interludes and stings that greatly assist in the shifts. Not to mention Heather's incredible virtuosic performance!

#### 3. What are some of the key lighting states that you used to create different decades of the 20th Century?

We used the lighting convention of softer and warmer worlds for moments of memory and reflection, and starker, brighter and sharper lighting worlds for RBG's progression through the Supreme Court, when she is at her peak power and force. Towards the end of her life, as her health declines, so too does the sharpness of the lighting world. The lighting that she exists in becomes softer, colder, and dimmer.

#### 4. Can you tell us about how you worked with the gauze and the abstracted columns in the set?

The gauze provided a way of making the columns in the set feel like a distant and looming abstracted idea. With the use of a gauze, we could control when the audience sees them and does not see them. At times the columns are lit to feel like echos of the architecture of the Supreme Court and at other times, they are lit in a way that they wrap around her like the luscious red curtains of the Metropolitan Opera.

#### 5. What are some of the key moments in the production in which your lighting design worked to create mood and atmosphere for the audience? How did you create these?

One of the key moments lights are used to create mood and atmosphere is when Ruth is at home watching Trump on television. Her health is declining, and she is starting to feel powerless. Footlights are used in a cool blue to mimic the light from a television, casting her shadow over the columns behind her, making her look both isolated and tiny in the space.

During sections of media barrage, flashing film lights are also used to help create a sense of momentum and chaos around her.

# **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Rehearsal and production images are courtesy of Prudence Upton.

