

A Heroic Ruth Bader Ginsburg in ‘On the Basis of Sex’

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Many heroes of America toiled long behind the scenes to break the chains of oppression. For every Susan Anthony or Martin Luther King Jr. there were the activists, legal experts and volunteers who sought the justice denied to them by the archaic patriarchal society. One such hero is Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the film “On the Basis of Sex.”

Ginsburg is now on the Supreme Court, but before she got there it was a long climb through the mountain of male dismissal in a society that – according to those males – was not equipped for the equality of gender. Director Mimi Leder creates a step by step journey for the legend, who was one of nine women in her Harvard law class of 500 in the 1950s, who married an essential fellow traveler to her work and who had the guts to follow her conviction to the high court. If you have always admired Ginsburg, portrayed with passion and intuitiveness by Felicity Jones, then after experiencing this film you will love and honor her.

Ruth Bader (Felicity Jones) was a product of Brooklyn and her Russian immigrant parents. Encouraged by her mother (who would die the day before Ruth graduated from high school) she pursued higher education in a 1950s era when women were essentially homemakers. She met her future husband Martin (Armie Hammer) at Cornell University, and enrolled later at Harvard law, part of a handful of women in a man’s world.



Felicity Jones as Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 'On the Basis of Sex'

Photo credit: Focus Features

Martin and Ruth Ginsburg's marriage was ahead of the times, with both pursuing their professional lives unabated by roles and sharing in the household rearing of their children. Ruth enhanced her law career as a professor at Columbia University, where she eventually co-founded two major women's rights societies. In 1970, an obscure tax law would be challenged in a case in which Ginsburg's abilities proved essential to further equality evolution.

The procedure of the case takes up the bulk of the film, but it becomes almost endlessly fascinating, as created by screenwriter Daniel Stiepleman and director Mimi Leder. Bit by bit, the essentials of the defense by Ginsburg, which was a counterargument to a law where only women should be the tax deduction beneficiaries of home care, sought to prove that it was unconstitutional to discriminate "on the basis of sex." It was one of those drops in the ocean of oppression that began a ripple that became a wave.

Throughout the film's depiction of Ginsburg from Harvard Law to the centerpiece case was the often discriminatory journey that the future Supreme Court justice had to travel herself in the man's world of the 1950s and '60s... her ascension to the highest court of the land is emphasized more remarkably by the exposition of this bias. She obviously took those slights as the basis for her interpretation of social justice, and continues with that unique perspective today.



Armie Hammer is Martin Ginsburg in ‘On the Basis of Sex’
Photo credit: Focus Features

The supporting cast is all in, and makes the story that much more interesting. Armie Hammer is so sincere as Martin Ginsburg, that his depiction is a monument to the benefits of progressive marriage. Justin Theroux is appropriately fidgety as Mel Wulf, head of the ACLU, which sponsored the tax case. And the great Kathy Bates does a notable cameo as Dorothy Kenyon, a pioneer feminist lawyer who symbolically passes the torch to Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

And no matter what you think of the notorious RBG, you have to admire her guts and glory, to rise from modest roots to the highest decision making court in the land, where she brought in a perspective that benefits all society. When more humans become free in their action and motivations, we all become freer in a hopeful thought process, and in that hope owe a debt of gratitude to Justice Ginsburg.

“On the Basis of Sex” opened everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Felicity Jones, Armie Hammer, Justin Theroux, Kathy Bates, Stephen Root and Sam Waterston. Written by Daniel Stiepleman. Directed by Mimi Leder. Rated “PG-13”



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