

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 165, No. 8

Serving Chicago's legal community for 164 years

## 'On the Basis of Sex' shows how a real star is born

If Gloria Steinem is the Martin Luther King Jr. of the women's movement, then Ruth Bader Ginsburg is its Thurgood Marshall.

A shockingly short time ago — the 1970s — when discrimination against women was the law, Ginsburg, a Rutgers law professor, argued six gender-discrimination cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, winning five of them.

To drive home the inequities of gender-based statutes, her strategy was to choose cases involving discrimination against men.

"On the Basis of Sex," directed by Mimi Leder, is Ginsburg's legal origin story. It is also the story of the great romance between Ginsburg and her husband of 56 years, a real mensch, Martin Ginsburg.

The movie opens with young Ruth (Felicity Jones), climbing the steps of Harvard Law School as a men's chorus sings "Ten Thousand Men of Harvard" in the background. It ends with Ginsburg ascending the steps of the Supreme Court.

While the movie is constructed as a courtroom procedural, the legal story wouldn't exist without the love story and formidable spousal alliance at its core.

Ginsburg's nephew, Daniel Stiepleman, wrote the script and a host of other Ginsburgs weighed in on its development, including Ginsburg.

Such clan participation adds substance and detail to intimate family scenes, particularly those in which Ginsburg clashes with her adolescent daughter Jane (Cailee Spaeny), who is today a professor at Columbia Law School.

When Jane receives an A on a paper about to "Kill a Mockingbird," Ginsburg withholds praise. Atticus Finch was a terrible



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lawyer because he covered up Bob Ewell's culpability, she explains, and admonishes Jane to think for herself.

Distractingly dreamy though not exactly charismatic, Armie Hammer is counterintuitively cast as the ebullient and gregarious Martin Ginsburg. It's an odd casting choice for life-of-the-party Marty, a man who could stick a tax joke. Yet Hammer radiates kindness and admiration. His low-key Marty never overshadows cerebral Ruth. After all, it is her movie.

The great gift of the movie is that it presents the Ginsburgs in such human terms. We feel her pain when she calls her husband out for not standing up for her at his law firm party. And in a romantic scene, when the young justice-to-be (ahem) disrobes to reveal a crinolined, 1950s-style slip that resembles an armored wedding cake, I averted my eyes out of respect.

It was Marty, a tax lawyer at Weil Gotshal & Manges, who brought the 1972 case of *Moritz vs. Commissioner of Internal Revenue* to her attention. Charles Moritz,

the sole caretaker of his mother, was an unmarried man who was denied a tax deduction for caretaking expenses that was available to women and widowers. The Ginsburgs argued the appeal together before the 10th Circuit and the Supreme Court. He argued the tax issue. She argued discrimination.

The *Moritz* appeal provides the movie's suspense and is the Rosetta Stone against which the moral standing of each of its characters is judged.

"On the Basis of Sex" tips its hat to groundbreaking feminist lawyers Pauli Murray (Sharon Washington) and Dorothy Kenyon (Kathy Bates) and pumps the brakes on the canonization of Harvard's law dean Erwin Griswold, who was responsible for admitting women to Harvard Law School and condescended to them once they arrived.

By contrast, Columbia's Gerald Gunther, of constitutional casebook ubiquity, is a genial, long-haired hipster who helps Ginsburg moot *Moritz*.

As a SCOTUS biopic, Ginsburg's story doesn't zip along at the pace of 2017's "Marshall." But then, Marshall was a trial lawyer, which offered his movie more opportunities for courtroom pyrotechnics.

Instead, "On the Basis of Sex" might be considered a bookend to the recently released "A Star is Born."

Both movies involve couples who are in the same profession and on the cusp of stardom. Unlike their fictional film counterparts, the Ginsburgs support each other, celebrate each other's intellect and invest in their partners' careers.

That is the way stars are born. That is what equality looks like.