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Rupert Holmes brings Ruth Bader Ginsburg play to Bay Street



Rupert Holmes' play "All Things Equal" runs through Nov. 27 at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor. Credit: Getty Images / Paul Hawthorne

By Daniel Bubbeo

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For the longest time, Rupert Holmes had wanted to write a play that would do justice to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. He finally got the chance with "All Things Equal," a one-woman show about the late Supreme Court Justice running at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor through Nov. 27.

"I'd always been interested in the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. One reason is because my wife's journey in life has had a number of parallels with RBG's," said the Levittown-raised Holmes, who made piña coladas the umbrella drink of choice in the late '70s thanks to his hit "Escape (The Piña Colada Song)." Like Ginsburg, Liza — Holmes' wife of 53 years — also was orphaned as a teenager, raised a daughter while attending law school and became a successful defense attorney.

It was during the 2020 lockdown that "All Things Equal" began to materialize. Holmes, who had written a few one-actor plays — including "Say Goodnight Gracie," a show about George Burns that ran on Broadway from October 2002 to August 2003 — saw Ginsburg's story as a perfect solo acting vehicle.

"I was thinking it should be someone whose life could really sustain 90 minutes and whose personal story might not be well known to most people," he said. When producer Scott Stander called Holmes shortly after Ginsburg's death in September 2020 and suggested writing a play about her, Holmes leapt at the chance. Michelle Azar plays Ginsburg.

Naturally, the show deals with the obstacles Ginsburg overcame to succeed in her career at a time when few women were studying law, but Holmes also wanted to tap into her life outside the courtroom. Working their way into the script are Ginsburg's expertise as a baton twirler, her love of Nancy Drew mysteries and a passion for opera, which she shared with fellow Justice Antonin Scalia. "She disagreed with him on everything but Puccini," Holmes, 75, said.

Also included is a touching incident about Ginsburg's graduation from her Brooklyn high school. "Her mother died the day before graduation and Ruth was not able to deliver her valedictory address because her father was so devastated that she thought it was more important to stay home and keep him company," Holmes said.

"All Things Equal" is certainly different from other Holmes works, including the Dickensian Tony-winning musical "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" and, of course, "Escape," which might not have hit No. 1 in 1979 if Holmes hadn't made his own escape to Gurney's in Montauk. The original lyric for the chorus was "If you like Humphrey Bogart and getting caught in the rain," which Holmes changed the day he was to record the song.

"It was completely the wrong image," he said. "I thought the couple in this song is looking for something colorful, a fantasy, a vacation in the islands. When you're on vacation, you order an escape drink. So I thought what are escape drinks. I had recently spent a couple of days at Gurney's out in the Hamptons. There was a little thing on the table that said, 'Enjoy a piña colada, mai tai, daiquiri.' I had never had a piña colada but I thought, 'I wonder what's that like?'"

So he subbed "piña colada" for "Humphrey Bogart," and the rest was musical history.

Gurney's isn't Holmes' only Long Island connection. Though he was born in Cheshire, England, where his father was stationed in the U.S. Army, Holmes' family moved to Long Island when he was 3 years old.

"My parents said, 'We're going to move now to a place called Long Island.' I pictured palm trees and pirate ships and lagoons. And then we moved to Levittown," he said. "My British accent lasted about 22 seconds."