

# A gripping, rollercoaster ride

## THEATRE

### STILL POINT TURNING: THE CATHERINE MCGREGOR STORY

★★★★★

The Wharf

Sydney Theatre Company

REVIEWED BY JOYCE MORGAN

You couldn't make this up: A boy from Toowoomba becomes a military officer, cricketer, commentator, author and political adviser. He is the most macho of men who, after years of struggle, transitions as a woman.

"I did do a plausible bloke for a long time," Catherine McGregor tells us with dry understatement.

There is nothing understated in the extraordinary life of the country's most high-profile trans woman. Indeed, one of the challenges of this bio-play is how to condense this to just 90 minutes, when any strand of her tale could make a play.

The result is a gripping, rollercoaster ride that is intensely theatrical and raises questions about gender roles, misogyny and finding that still centre within our psychic chaos that enables us to stay true to our self. The latter especially gives it a universality.

The play is told from the perspective of the present-day McGregor (Heather Mitchell), a sleek, elegant woman in her 60s in tailored white suit and blonde bob. She is mercurial, witty and straight-talking, a figure who shoots from the lip. She is in hospital about to undergo surgery – radical penis amputation. As if there is any other kind.

From there the play unfolds in short chronological scenes. We meet McGregor's earlier selves, the eight-year-old boy Malcolm McGregor (Andrew Guy) whose dying father gives him his first cricket bat, the adult alpha male (Ashley Lyons) who is rampantly



Ashley Lyons and Heather Mitchell, who is outstanding as McGregor creating a complex figure of fierce intelligence, warmth and courage; Andrew Guy and Georgla Symes. Photos: Phillip Erbacher

heterosexual, battles alcoholism and has already blown up his share of bridges before starting on the road to self-acceptance.

This is a long way from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, who wakes to find himself transformed into a woman. McGregor's long, painful journey takes her to the brink of suicidal despair. The one constant throughout is her passion for cricket. Appropriately, it is her encounter with Indian cricketer Rahul Dravid that provides her light-bulb moment. "We see things not as they are, but as we are," McGregor wrote in a recent article. And in Dravid she sees a transcendent figure possessed of an innate stillness beyond gender.

The cast at times function as a chorus, a cacophony of voices in McGregor's head, in the ugly Twitterverse, where some of her harshest critics – and there have been many – have come from within the trans community.



There are unexpected moments of kindness. In one, McGregor is poised to travel for the first time as a woman – but has been booked onto a flight as Malcolm – an airline employee offers to issue the boarding pass in her new name.

Writer-director Priscilla Jackman has crafted her fast-paced and vivid script from interviews with McGregor. As her articulate public appearances attest, McGregor is a gift for any writer. Only one scene strikes a heavy-handed note as a medical specialist

gives a lengthy explanation on gender dysphoria.

The set (Michael Scott-Mitchell) and choreographed movement make much of symbolic circles. The play takes place under a circular rig around which gauzy curtains are drawn, like layers of identity being concealed and revealed.

Mitchell is outstanding in the lead role. She creates a complex figure of fierce intelligence, warmth and courage. As McGregor joined her onstage for a final bow on opening night, the physical resemblance alone was startling.

Awareness of transgender experience is changing – and increasingly seen as a medical, not a mental, condition. Yet stigmatisation and marginalisation remain. The play makes a welcome plea for greater understanding. It is an uplifting work that celebrates individual courage and brings one transgender experience out of the shadows. It will bowl you over.