

Australian actor Geoffrey Rush fights back, suing Daily Telegraph for defamation

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Australian actor Geoffrey Rush has publicly challenged the slanderous media witch-hunt against him, announcing yesterday at a Melbourne press conference that he was suing Rupert Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* and its celebrity gossip columnist Jonathon Moran.

The Sydney tabloid last week published a series of unsubstantiated allegations from an unnamed female cast member who claimed that Rush had carried out "inappropriate" behaviour during the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) production of *King Lear* in 2015–16. The STC failed to provide any details about Rush's alleged behaviour and insisted that the actor remain anonymous.

Addressing a packed press conference on Friday afternoon in Melbourne, Rush denounced the *Daily Telegraph*'s attempts to portray him as a "pervert" and "sexual predator." The legal action, he said, was being taken "in order to redress the slurs, innuendo and hyperbole they have created around my standing in the entertainment industry and greater community.

"The *Daily Telegraph* has made false, pejorative and demeaning claims—splattering them with unrelenting bombast on its front pages. This has created irreparable damage to my reputation, been extremely hurtful to my wife, my daughter and my son; to my extended family—and to many colleagues in the Film, Television and Theatre industry. The situation is intolerable and I must now seek vindication of my good name through the courts."

Nicholas Pullen, Rush's lawyer, told the media that the actor would sue for aggravated damages because his "reputation as an actor has been irreparably harmed such that he is likely to be shunned by employers in future."

The legal application, which will be heard in the Federal Court early next year, cited the fact that Rush had been "brought into hatred, ridicule and contempt and has been gravely injured in his character and reputation as an actor and has suffered hurt and embarrassment and has suffered and will continue to suffer loss and damage."

At no time during the production of *King Lear* or since did the STC inform Rush of the alleged misconduct claims, and

it has refused to provide any details since the allegation was published in the media. Yet the *Daily Telegraph*, which is infamous for its xenophobic attacks on refugees, Muslims and welfare recipients, suggested that Rush's conduct was so serious that the theatre company would never work with him again.

Over the past week, the allegations have been splashed across the Murdoch-owned stable of newspapers—in Australia and around the world—and in other media and entertainment industry outlets, jeopardising Rush's outstanding international career and his personal reputation.

The internationally acclaimed performer is one of the very few to have won the so-called Triple Crown of Acting: an Academy Award, an Emmy and a Tony. Other prizes include three British Academy Film Awards, two Golden Globes, and four Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Throwing overboard the basic legal principle of "presumption of innocence," the *Daily Telegraph* has run a total of nine articles smearing the actor and potentially destroying his career. Its first article was headlined "King Lear" and promoted as a "World Exclusive."

The Rush defamation application also reveals that the actor was asked to "stand aside" as the founding president of the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA), which he helped establish in 2012, because of the *Daily Telegraph*'s articles.

In fact, Rush's decision to stand aside came as the media witch-hunt was reaching fever pitch. It followed bullying from Foxtel and Seven television chiefs in the lead-up to the two networks' national broadcast of the AACTA's annual award night last Wednesday.

Brian Walsh, Foxtel's executive director of television and an AACTA director himself, demanded that AACTA disassociate itself from Rush. When that failed, Walsh resigned from the board in protest after a heated meeting on Thursday.

The next day Foxtel boss Peter Tonagh and the Seven network's director of programming Angus Ross sent a joint letter to AACTA chief executive Damian Trehwella.

The letter, which was leaked to the *Daily* cynically declared that both companies “take very seriously the importance of having a safe and trusted work environment for our employees” and demanded that the AACTA board express its “general condemnation of inappropriate behaviour by anyone associated with the industry.” This was despite the fact that Rush himself had still been told nothing about the details of the accusation against him.

Nevertheless, in an implicit threat to axe the broadcast of the award, the Foxtel-Seven letter read: “We are concerned that the current events affecting the industry may impact on the integrity of the awards broadcast next Wednesday night.”

Last Saturday, Rush announced he would “stand aside” as AACTA’s president. While the broadcast went ahead, a scheduled screening of a pre-recorded video by Rush and actress Rebel Wilson was dropped.

Unsurprisingly, the awards ceremony was utterly banal, featuring neither a word of protest about the treatment of Rush nor, for that matter, about any aspect of the political, economic and social crisis plaguing the country. Even Rush’s closest colleagues followed the script, maintaining a stony silence on his victimisation, with just two exceptions, actress Rachel Griffiths and Stephen Curry.

Speaking to reporters on the red carpet, Griffiths (*Muriel’s Wedding*, *Hilary and Jackie*, *Underground: The Julian Assange Story*, *Six Feet Under*, *Brothers and Sisters*) defended Rush. “The fact that we are discussing things in the ‘marketplace’ shows that processes and procedures have not been adequate,” she said.

“It [‘inappropriate behaviour’] is more prominent [in the entertainment industry],” she continued, “because we are a sexy soundbite.” She noted the media silence about the situation facing working class women in the service industry and other industries.

Actor-comedian Stephen Curry warned that the media could misconstrue any comment made by actors on the Rush witch-hunt at the red carpet event and turn it “into a carnival, a side-show attraction.”

“Trial by media has almost started to be accepted, which is really sad and I don’t think it helps in any way, shape or form. It’s so dangerous and creates more division. We have to somehow find a way so that people don’t suddenly convict people through a newspaper. It’s never been the way and it’s not fair to any person accused of anything.”

There are many others in the industry who are deeply opposed to this new McCarthyism, and some are starting to speak out. On Wednesday, the day before the awards ceremony, Neil Armfield, director of the STC production of *King Lear*, slammed the media claims on the Australian

Broadcasting Corporation ~~Teles (ABC)~~ (ABC) breakfast news program, describing them as “misinformation” and insisting that Rush had been the victim of “a great injustice.”

“In my time, in all the weeks and months of rehearsal and performance, I saw absolutely nothing other than an artist at the top of his form, leading a company with respect and playfulness and great artistry...” Armfield declared.

“There is just so much chatter... I have reservations about the way the conversation gets taken up. I think it’s a very difficult thing to control and the presumption of innocence is of course lost,” he said. “But I think even just talking about this as a sexual allegation is completely inappropriate.”

It was the media chatter, Armfield said, that constituted “inappropriate behaviour.”

The *Daily Telegraph* began soliciting stories from women about Geoffrey Rush after the accusations against Harvey Weinstein in the US and the “successes” of a campaign by the ABC, in conjunction with Fairfax Media, to accuse Don Burke, the pioneer and star of the highly popular former television gardening show, “Burke’s Backyard,” of sexual misconduct.

While Rush’s defamation case may temporarily restrain the *Daily Telegraph*, the “sexual misconduct” campaign is intensifying. The one common feature of all the allegations, in both Australia and the US, is that presumption of innocence has been thrown overboard.

The social constituency that supports and benefits from this campaign consists of affluent and grasping social layers, seeking to advance their own careers at the direct expense of others.

More broadly, the growing criminalisation of sexual expression, and the return to a new sexual puritanism, is part of a political agenda of social division and repression being implemented in Australia and globally, as social inequality, the evisceration of democratic rights and the drive to war intensify, threatening an explosive eruption of social opposition by the working class that the ruling elites fear they will be unable to contain.

The authors also recommend:

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