

Stephen Sewell denounces media witch-hunt against Geoffrey Rush

Richard Phillips
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Dr Stephen Sewell is head of Writing for Performance at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney. The well-known screen writer, playwright, novelist and former chair of the Australian National Playwrights Centre is one of the few figures in the Australian film and movie industry who have publicly defended Geoffrey Rush.

Sewell has won numerous awards for his film and theatre work. His plays include *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, *It Just Stopped* and the highly awarded *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America: A Drama in 30 Scenes*. He was a script editor for the film *Chopper* and won an Australian Film Industry award for his screen adaptation of *The Boys*.

Sewell was outraged over the unsubstantiated “inappropriate behaviour” allegations against Rush and posted a comment on his Facebook page last week. He spoke with the WSWs yesterday, after reading “Acclaimed Australian actor Geoffrey Rush becomes the latest witch-hunt victim,” published by the WSWs on December 2.

Stephen Sewell: I totally agree with your article. What has happened to Geoffrey is a frightening affront to any kind of idea of simple justice. To be put in a position where you’re not sure what the accusation is, and your life and your livelihood are under threat as a direct result, is appalling.

Assuming that there was a complaint made [against Rush], there should be processes in place for it to be dealt with. The people I’m most suspicious of is the Murdoch press. I’m concerned that they have identified a really simple way of getting rid of some of the most progressive people in Australia.

It is a very, very easy thing to whip up anonymous

sources to make these kinds of claims. And I know from the experience of one of my students that journalists are phoning people to ask if they’ve got a personal experience they would like to share. This is a very, very dangerous situation. I’m amazed and appalled.

Richard Phillips: The context of the attack on Rush is important. It’s an international campaign and one that is being used to eviscerate basic democratic rights. The cultural atmosphere is being poisoned. We’ve compared the operation against Rush and others to the McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunts in the US during the 1950s.

SS: I was trying to think my way through the analogy with the McCarthy commission and their interrogation method. At least at that time people could defy the interrogation and refuse to answer. But in this case there’s no capacity for this. Who do you tell to get stuffed? Rumour has been given free reign.

I wrote on my Facebook page about how angry I am about all this and the majority of people who responded were supportive. I was just articulating what appears to me to be an elementary understanding of justice.

But there were a few people who were bitterly, bitterly opposed and regarded it as a piece of patriarchal, sexist bullshit and that I wasn’t prepared to believe the so-called accusation. It is not the case that I don’t believe it. My question is what is actually being said? What is actually “inappropriate behaviour?”

RP: As soon as you accept accusations as definite proof, then there’s no legal process.

SS: That’s right, it’s all over.

RP: And this opens the door for anyone to be pilloried.

SS: There is another element in all of this and which has a kind of prudish or anti-sex side to it. If men and

women can't be trusted together, or men can't be trusted with women, the logical conclusion is you may as well have apartheid. Men on one side of the fence and women on the other, and when they want it they can whistle.

All the joy of love and sex, the pleasure of company, seems to be under threat. It would be a terrible thing if the end result of this debate and argument brings us voluntarily into the world of the *Handmaid's Tale*. This would be a horrible outcome.

The author also recommends:

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