

Craig McLachlan accused as Australian media steps up #MeToo witch-hunt

Richard Phillips
22 January 2018

Stage and screen actor and musician Craig McLachlan is the latest high-profile entertainment figure in Australia to have his career unjustly threatened following sexual misconduct allegations that have been widely publicised by Fairfax Media and the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)—the country’s “liberal” media.

McLachlan, 52, is best known for Australian television soaps *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, and other popular dramas, including *McLeod’s Daughters*, *The Wrong Girl* and *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, as well as stage musicals.

Three female actors—Christie Whelan Browne, Erika Heynatz and Angela Scundi—claim that McLachlan abused, harassed or sexually assaulted them almost four years ago, during the 2014 Australian production of *The Rocky Horror Show* cult musical.

McLachlan played the lead role of transvestite scientist, Dr Frank N. Furter, in the sexually-charged show. Browne alleges that he indecently touched her on stage during one of the show’s frequent sex scenes; Scundi said he passionately kissed her onstage, even after she asked him not to.

The women claim that their concerns were ignored by the show’s producers in 2014. They only decided to contact the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance trade union, lawyers and police following last year’s allegations against US film producer Harvey Weinstein.

McLachlan immediately denied the women’s claims, stating: “Frankly, they seem to be simple inventions, perhaps made for financial reasons, perhaps to gain notoriety. In either event, they are to the best of my knowledge utterly and entirely false.”

Yesterday the actor told the *Sunday Telegraph* he would sue Fairfax Media and the ABC for defamation. “By God, I will fight this,” he said, and “the truth will come out.” McLachlan’s long-time partner Vanessa Scammell, a conductor and music director currently working with Opera Australia, told the newspaper she was “shocked, horrified and bewildered at the character assassination.”

Fairfax Media and the ABC are working closely with

former television host Tracy Spicer, a key figure in the local #MeToo campaign. She claims to have information on sexual misconduct by over 60 Australian actors, media personalities and others.

The accusations against McLachlan follow Spicer’s claims in November that gardening television host Don Burke engaged in off-camera “inappropriate behaviour” on his show for decades. A few days later, the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* hurled unsubstantiated sexual misconduct allegations against actor Geoffrey Rush. The Oscar-winning actor is suing the newspaper for defamation. No criminal charges have been laid against Burke, Rush or McLachlan.

Like all those targeted by #MeToo, McLachlan’s presumption of innocence was thrown overboard and the actor put on trial by the media. He was immediately removed from the current *Rocky Horror Show*. The scheduled production of a new season of *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, in which he plays the leading role, was put on hold. Some media commentators demanded the ABC remove all previous episodes of *Doctor Blake* from its online *iview* service.

Fairfax Media, the ABC and other outlets continue to ‘pile on’ against McLachlan. After the previous producers of *Doctor Blake* publicly stated that there had been no issues with McLachlan on the television show, Fairfax Media published interviews with unnamed stagehands. One of them claimed to have witnessed “inappropriate” behaviour by the actor. This included allegations that McLachlan told crude limericks to the cast and crew, as if this were a heinous crime!

Rebuffing allegations by *The Rocky Horror Show* actresses, McLachlan said it is a “confrontational musical oozing with sexuality” and requires that “the actors have to perform certain actions, all of which follow from the show itself—and indeed ‘make’ the show.” Richard O’Brien, who wrote the musical in the early 1970s, had said it “pushes the boundaries of good and bad taste to the extreme.” This is obviously the case.

Two recent articles on the *Conversation* web site by Leith

Taylor, a director, actor and PhD graduate from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, point to a widespread occupational problem confronting performers who play emotionally and physically intense parts.

Because of what is known as “boundary blurring,” many actors have difficulty unwinding and “getting out of character.” According to an Australian Actors’ Wellbeing Study in 2015, up to 40 percent of actors struggle with the problem.

Taylor, who has interviewed scores of drama teachers, students and actors about the issue, states that many of those drawn to the profession are “highly vulnerable” to depression and anxiety, exacerbated by job insecurity and intense performance pressure. She cites research from an American actor and psychoanalyst, who points out that “living oneself into the part” is often reinforced by other cast and crew, which can make “getting out of character” difficult.

The #MeToo campaigners have no interest in these complex problems, let alone the pressures exerted on actors in an industry dominated by profit, “success” and celebrity. Under the bogus banner of defending women’s rights and fighting a “culture of silence,” the anti-democratic #MeToo movement wants the presumption of innocence and other fundamental legal rights dispensed with in sexual harassment cases.

This was explicitly spelled out in two recent *Sydney Morning Herald* articles. A December 12 editorial declared that current court processes on sexual assault cases provide “an indirect form of protection to perpetrators and their employers” and insisted: “As the culture of reporting allegations of sexual harassment undergoes profound change, the law must respond with more flexible solutions.”

In other words, legal principles established over centuries should be torn up. The “profound change” trumpeted by the *Herald* is nothing less than the emergence of a puritanical, middle-class lynch-mob.

On January 8, the newspaper published an op-ed comment by Emily Cole, a former juror in a sexual assault case. She said the jury system had to be “reassessed” because the “public does not have the ability to do its job properly” and lacked “emotional intelligence to understand the psychology of [sexual assault] victims.” Centuries ago the same denunciations of the broad population as ignorant and insensitive were used to oppose all jury trials!

Media industry chiefs are celebrating ratings increases generated by the toxic witch-hunt. Nine Digital declared on December 28 that the sexual harassment allegations were “the media story of the year” in 2017, with record ratings for Fairfax Media and the ABC-TV’s “7.30” program, as well a major boost for the Nine Network.

Pressure is being applied to actors and creative workers to sign up to the campaign or silently acquiesce to its deeply reactionary agenda. Thus far, only two individuals, Richard O’Brien and Germaine Greer, have publicly opposed the violation of McLachlan’s legal rights.

O’Brien, who was directly involved in *The Rocky Horror Show’s* Australian tour in 2014, told the media he had never seen any “concerning behaviour” by McLachlan. “I always found him the most agreeable company,” he said. “You and I are not privy to what went on so we shouldn’t speculate. In fact, I don’t think anyone accused should be named until the police press charges.”

Greer told the ABC’s Radio National she was concerned about McLachlan’s trial by media, warning that although “he hasn’t been proved guilty of anything ... [he] has been punished already ...

“Now it’s becoming if you’re in a position of power or influence, you can’t make a pass at somebody, because it will be considered to be inappropriate use of influence, force and so on. How do you express desire without putting pressure on people? Why can’t we have a rational attitude to sexual offences?”

The appeal for rationality from the #MeToo movement will fall on deaf ears because definite class interests are at stake. #MeToo has nothing to do with exposing the plight of working-class women and defending their basic rights. It is a regressive and divisive movement, driven by privileged and self-centred middle class layers who want to boost their own careers and wealth.

The #MeToo movement’s contempt for presumption of innocence and due process does not occur in a social vacuum. It is of a piece with the evisceration of hard-won legal principles and democratic rights by governments around the world in preparation for more social repression and war.



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