Actor Geoffrey Rush denies new #MeToo-inspired claims of “inappropriate” behaviour

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19 December 2018

Interviews given by actress Yael Stone to both the *New York Times* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” TV program, are being used to once again attack the character of award-winning Australian actor Geoffrey Rush with unsubstantiated allegations of sexual impropriety.

Stone performed in 2010–2011 alongside Rush in a production of the play *Diary of a Madman*, directed by Neil Armfield. Nearly eight years later, she has gone public with allegations that the famous actor’s relationship with her involved conduct that was “reasonably inappropriate” and incidents that made her feel “uncomfortable.”

Stone’s claims have been made within a definite context.

In November 2017, as a raft of #MeToo allegations of sexual assault or impropriety were being made internationally against prominent men, particularly in the performing arts industry, Rush was accused, in an Australian tabloid newspaper, of having “inappropriately touched” a female co-star during a production of the play *King Lear* in January 2016.

On the basis of an anonymous and unsubstantiated allegation, Rush was pressured to resign as president of the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) and his distinguished career was threatened with destruction. He responded by filing a defamation law suit against the owner of Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, Rupert Murdoch’s Nationwide News, and the author of the article, journalist Jonathon Moran.

The case was heard and concluded in a Sydney court last month. The actress who was allegedly “inappropriately touched,” was revealed to be Rush’s co-star in the play, Eryn Jean Norvill. Rush’s lawyers presented a comprehensive case that the claims were “fabricated and a self-serving invention” and that the Murdoch press had published its claims without a shred of evidence (see: “Geoffrey Rush’s lawyer slams ‘gutter journalism’ in Sydney defamation trial”).

The presiding judge, Justice Michael Wigney, is expected to bring down his finding in early 2019.

In her interview with Yael Stone, “7.30” host Leigh Sales asked the actress whether she had intended that her allegations would affect the outcome of the defamation case. She denied this, insisting that her motive was only to “talk about her experiences and hers alone.” She also declared that while she knew Eryn Jean Norvill, she did not consider her a close friend.

What is known, however, is that Murdoch’s Nationwide News sought to introduce into the defamation proceedings, during the last days of the case, supposed “supporting evidence” against Rush, brought by a woman named in the court only as “Witness X.”

Justice Wigney rejected the application on November 3. He noted that Witness X was at liberty to make her claims publicly, but that she could not reveal that she had sought to become involved in the case.

Stone, for obvious legal reasons, was therefore not asked if she were Witness X, whose identity remains unknown.

In her interviews with both the *Times* and the ABC, Stone variously described herself as feeling “shame,” “guilt” and “regret” that she had gone along with Rush’s alleged inappropriate behaviour, because she was only 25 at the time, inexperienced and felt powerless to challenge such a high-profile, “powerful” lead actor. She claimed that she believed that if she had done so, it would have been detrimental to her career.

As noted, Stone worked with Rush in 2010–2011 in both the Sydney and New York productions of *Diary of*

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a Madman, based on the short story by 19th century Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The play concerns the descent into insanity of an older man, Poprishchin, in part due to his unrequited love for the much younger daughter of his director/boss, Sophia.

Rush played the lead role of Poprishchin. Stone, in arguably her first major theatrical role, played the parts of the maid Tuovi, Sophia and Tatiana, an insane woman confined to the same asylum as Poprishchin. A review published in the *Australian* on December 10, 2010, described Rush as giving a "wonderful, virtuoso performance" and Stone as "superb."

In her interviews, Stone said Rush was "incredibly invested in this show." She claimed that her professional partnership with him developed into a close friendship, which escalated into sexually-laced banter between them via text message, often relating to the script. She stated that she took part in these text exchanges and the development of a close relationship with Rush, "willingly" and "enthusiastically."

Stone alleged to the *Times* that Rush would sometimes lie down beside her when they were recovering between matinee and evening productions of the play. She cited two incidents that occurred in their mutual dressing room at Sydney's Belvoir Theatre, after a performance, when Rush allegedly played, what Stone considered at the time to be, jokes. These consisted of the actor holding a mirror above her shower, until she allegedly told him to "bugger off," and performing a "playful, clownish" dance while naked, until she dismissed his antics.

Stone also claimed on "7.30"—but apparently not to the *Times*—that Rush had, on one occasion, asked her to come back to his accommodation. She told Sales that she had interpreted this as an "intimate" invitation to "physical intimacy" between them, and that she had said to Rush, "no thank you." Apparently nothing more came of it.

Stone's own recollections, in other words, contradict her own narrative that she was a young and powerless woman who had no "agency" faced with the older, "powerful" Rush. According to her account, whenever she drew a line, in what she described as a complex relationship, including allegedly declining to sleep with him, he accepted and respected it. She was not assaulted. She was not abused. No crimes occurred. Their relationship did not suffer and her career was certainly not affected.

Following *Diary of a Madman*, Stone was cast in leading roles in several Australian theatrical productions. According to both Rush and Stone, they maintained contact and friendship. Rush wrote a letter of recommendation that assisted the actress in obtaining a working visa to move to the United States, in December 2011. Several months later, she was cast in the Netflix television drama *Orange Is t he New Black* and appeared in its first three seasons.

Rush issued a statement to the ABC that the "allegations of inappropriate behaviour are incorrect" and that "some instances have been taken completely out of context." He continued: "However, clearly Yael has been upset on occasion by the spirited enthusiasm I generally bring to my work. I sincerely and deeply regret if I have caused her any distress."

For the Murdoch media and the most ardent advocates of #MeToo, especially in Australia, Rush's statement will be entirely insufficient. They sought to destroy Rush's career and reputation in 2017 with unproven claims that he abused a female co-worker. They view the fact that he chose to defend himself against defamation as a major setback.

As the *New York Times* revealingly commented: "Australia's defamation laws help explain why the #MeToo movement, while managing to take down some of the most powerful men in the entertainment and media industry in the United States, has not taken off there."

This comment simply underscores the reactionary character of the #MeToo campaign, which is premised on tearing down fundamental democratic and legal principles, above all, the presumption of innocence, and the right to due process, where an individual can face his or her accuser and challenge their accusations before a court.

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