

Vanessa Scammell denounces #MeToo campaign that ruined Australian actor Craig McLachlan's career

Richard Phillips, Cheryl Crisp
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In this interview Vanessa Scammell speaks about the devastating impact of the #MeToo-style attacks on her longtime partner Craig McLachlan and the ongoing undermining of the “presumption of innocence” by #MeToo advocates and the mainstream media.

Scammell, who has waged a resolute fight in defence of McLachlan, is an accomplished conductor and music director, with decades of performing experience. She has conducted orchestras across Australia and internationally, including for the Australian Ballet and Opera Australia and with a broad cross section of musicians and performers.

Craig McLachlan, who played the lead role of transvestite scientist Dr Frank N’ Furter in the risqué cult musical the *Rocky Horror Show*, is a popular figure on Australian television and stage with a more than three-decade career in the entertainment industry. On television he is best known for starring roles on *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and in dramas such as *McLeod’s Daughters*, *The Wrong Girl* and the *Doctor Blake Mysteries*. An accomplished performer, he has appeared in many stage musicals, including *Grease*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *White Christmas* and *Chicago*.

On January 8, 2018, McLachlan was accused of sexual misconduct by three female actors—Christie Whelan Browne, Erika Heynatz and Angela Scundi—during the 2014 production of the *Rocky Horror Show*. He was informed of the allegations, which were broad and did not mention names, just three days before they were published by Fairfax Media and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

McLachlan immediately denied the claims, describing them as “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.”

Unable to refute the allegations in a court setting as no charges had been laid against him—McLachlan initiated defamation action in February 2018 against Fairfax, ABC and Whelan Browne. It was the only legal avenue he had to expose the career-destroying claims.

Almost one year later, in January 2019, McLachlan was charged by Victoria Police with various counts of indecent and common assault during a production of the *Rocky Horror Show* in Melbourne in 2014.

When the criminal trial finally began in November 2019, McLachlan’s lawyer Stuart Littlemore powerfully exposed these accusations. The “overtly sexualised atmosphere” of the production, he argued, saw “all cast members engaged in crude physical pranks... actors sitting on each other’s laps, a constant stream of dirty jokes and insincere remarks about their admiration and love for each other.”

McLachlan was found not guilty of all charges on December 15 with Magistrate Belinda Wallington directing Victoria Police to pay him \$500,000 costs.

Compared to the sensationalist, wall-to-wall media coverage of the

accusations and McLachlan’s charges, the acquittal, which directly challenged the #MeToo movement and its methods, was generally ignored by the mainstream media.

McLachlan’s defamation case was postponed until the conclusion of the criminal proceedings. In May 2022, he decided to end the defamation action, after he and Scammell were informed that knowledge of his acquittal in the criminal case would be withheld from the defamation trial jury. The couple had not been previously informed by McLachlan’s lawyers that this would occur.

The allegations against McLachlan came after #MeToo-style slanders were hurled against acclaimed stage and screen actor Geoffrey Rush in October 2017, and a rape accusation was levelled against film actor John Jarratt in November of that year.

No charges were ever laid against Rush, who eventually won a \$2.9 million defamation suit against the *Daily Telegraph* over its false and sensationalist reportage of the accusations. Jarratt was found not guilty of rape after 15 minutes of deliberation by a 12-member jury in Sydney on July 5, 2019. He then won an out-of-court settlement from the *Daily Telegraph* after he sued it for publishing an article that said the actor “got away with rape.”

Despite these important legal victories, the acting careers of Rush, Jarratt and McLachlan were effectively destroyed. McLachlan left the *Rocky Horror Show* and was removed from the *Doctor Blake Mysteries*.

The following is an edited version of an extended discussion with Vanessa Scammell.

Cheryl Crisp: What was the response of fellow actors, musicians and work associates to the allegations against Craig?

Vanessa Scammell: The responses were not very good. Many just stepped away from Craig. One very close acting friend just backed off, as did some other friends that we haven’t heard from since. One even refused to be a character witness out of fear of repercussions to their career. It was brutal.

Although I work in a different sphere to Craig, some of my music industry colleagues—people I thought were friends—offered no support. I found this very hard to deal with and still do to this day. I could probably count on one hand, possibly two hands, the people in the industry who supported us.

Interestingly, the crews—the backstage people—were fantastic. They know and understand what happens and how people behave on a set. Craig has always been loved in every workplace that he was in.

Apart from Craig’s mental health being shot to pieces, I became active in all this because I was there during the *Rocky Horror Show* tour. I was in the dressing rooms daily and knew exactly what was going on.

When I took the stand during the defamation case, I was accused of lying about being in the theatre; that I was never there, and I’d not been

friends with the complainants.

You might have seen [ACT Chief Justice] Lucy McCallum's recent comment on juries. She said a judge's duty is to disallow annoying, harassing or repetitive questions. But from my personal experience this only seems to apply to complainants. There were plenty of harassing, repetitive questions and allegations of lying made against me during Craig's defamation case. It was bullying but no judge intervened and told the lawyer to stop.

In any case, the robust cross-examination process is how you get to the truth. Without that repetitive questioning of the complainants by Stuart Littlemore, who was Craig's lawyer in the criminal trial, the real stories would never have been revealed.

Mr Littlemore had many battles over his robust questioning of the complainants, and he had to back down most of the time. I find it concerning that this applies to one side in such cases but not to the other.

CC: Geoffrey Rush and John Jarrett were supported by their partners during those trials. Your evidence in court was obviously one of the deciding factors in the criminal case.

VS: Yes. The fact that I was sitting in my partner's dressing room was important. I witnessed all the mucking around every night in the theatre and the other actors tapping him on the bottom and being crude and often vulgar. Sometimes I'd say to Craig that this was pushing the boundaries, and he'd say, that's what they're like.

What got to me was the lack of context in the accusations of the complainants and how they put a morbid construct on everything that Craig had said to them. In the first [media] interviews none of the women used the words indecent behaviour, sexual assault or harassment. The media reframed everything, deciding there was indecent assault. How dare they.

One of the things used against him during the criminal case, was that he had said "Whoa" to one of the complainants. This was deemed to be unwelcome; that it made them feel uncomfortable and constituted sexual harassment.

But what one of these women neglected to say was that Craig's comment was in front of the entire cast and in response to when she came out as the understudy for the first time, and in a new costume.

And what's the usual response to this sort of event amongst actors? Everyone goes, "Whoa, look at you." And on this occasion Craig also said, "Here she comes to save the day." The newspapers described this incident as a sexual advance, which really got me. It was disgraceful.

CC: The media are silent because they have a political agenda.

VS: And yet they claim to be looking after women. We now seem to be living in an age where it's wrong to feel uncomfortable. If you're at work and reprimanded or criticised for something you did, it can be defined as bullying. Discomfort has become illegal.

CC: It's connected to the deepening attacks on democratic rights, including the right to protest. If you oppose the Gaza genocide or speak out against Zionism, you're denounced as an antisemite. #MeToo has played a central role in undermining democratic and legal rights.

VS: #MeToo, which was spearheaded by bitterness, anger and outrage, has been able to blossom on social media where it is picked up and given credence by the journalists. It's not that the police are chasing up the people who are being accused, but the complainants are going to the media and then the media agitates, demanding that the police act.

Can you imagine what the media would have done if Victoria Police had not charged Craig?

CC: The *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently characterised #MeToo as an upper-middle class movement, and one that has nothing to do with protecting working-class women.

VS: It's a movement that is destroying women, their partners and their families who are struggling with the impact of these attacks. Acquittals don't seem to matter anymore once the media have accused you and

trashed you. I feel very strongly about changing this, about getting the real stories out there.

I'm very aware that I could end up in real strife—I'm currently the main breadwinner in the family—but I was not going to allow Craig and me to be destroyed by these allegations.

It might seem flippant, but my training as a conductor and having to walk on stage in front of thousands of people and conduct an orchestra of about one hundred people was my training ground. I'm not unused to being in the spotlight and being a conductor helped me handle some of this.

CC: Yes, but what motivated you was an understanding of the injustice of it all. There's also a mile-wide gulf between the media promotion of #MeToo and the attitudes and daily life concerns of ordinary people.

VS: Yes, that's true. Every day we go out people come up to Craig, saying "Great to meet you, mate. I can't believe that shit happened to you." It happens everywhere and it's about something that happened seven years ago.

This brings me back to what you say about why I can't let it go. It's not just us. I have a close family friend whose son was charged with rape—a young man in his early 20s who was in the navy. He slept with a woman and the next day she came over to his house and returned his jumper. Everything was fine but then a few weeks later the police arrived at his house and handcuffed him. He was charged and tried for rape. He won the case but his family lost their home fighting it and yet his accuser walked away scot-free.

One of the big things for me is how can you have a fair trial today in the current situation. How do you get the story out when it is a closed court for the accusers?

CC: We wrote about the Brittany Higgins/Bruce Lehrman case and insisted that the allegations had to be established by evidence and in a court, not on "The Project" [television show] or other media.

VS: Have you heard the *Kevin Spacey Trial: Unfiltered* podcast? It explains how the bogus sexual assault allegations were used against him. You're sent a letter listing various broad-ranging accusations but no names, no places and no dates, and with a demand that you respond within a day.

Craig received this sort of a letter while he was in his outfit for the *Rocky Horror Show* and just about to do two shows. It was disgusting.

Richard Phillips: But the three cases that went to trial in Australia—Rush, Jarratt and Craig—vindicated the actors and exposed the witch hunts against them. Can you speak more about the role of the media?

VS: Exoneration is not as newsworthy as salacious allegations and accusations. The media reported the acquittal but compared to the initial allegations the coverage was so much less. What I also found incredibly distressing is that the media seemed reluctant to report the reasons why Craig was acquitted. It didn't discuss the unreliability and credibility of certain witnesses.

The big issue, of course, was that it was a closed court, but only when it came to the complainants. Craig's evidence was given in an open court and yet so much of his evidence, facts and evidence that were made available to the media, was simply ignored.

The journalists were logged in online during the last two days of Craig's evidence and for Mr Littlemore's summing up. Craig was not cross-examined on 90 percent of his evidence—it was unchallenged, unchallenged, unchallenged. The prosecutors knew they had nowhere to go.

This was not reported because Fairfax and the ABC broke the original story and were not going to report anything that conflicted with their "you have to believe all women" mantras, especially when they were being

sued for defamation over those stories. This made unbiased reportage of the criminal case almost impossible.

CC: If a woman has made an allegation, then what she deserves is to have her accusations properly investigated.

VS: But if allegations are going to be made, why wait four years? They said nothing against Craig during the *Rocky Horror Show* in 2014. In fact, there were continuous friendly text messages to us for years after. The media is playing a dangerous and vicious game.

RP: Your initial response to the allegations was a defamation action. Did you know that criminal charges were going to be laid?

VS: No. We were so bamboozled and didn't know what to do. The MO [modus operandi] of the journalists was to break the story in January, when people are away on holidays. We had to wait three weeks before we could get a barrister—a silk—still in Australia.

We asked advice on what to do and were told to take defamation action, but we were so naïve. In the end we discontinued the defamation because the truth often means little in defamation cases. It's about numbers and getting enough people to say as much as they can, which then become part of contextual truth.

We also didn't know that we couldn't say that Craig had won in the criminal case because certain people involved in the defamation were involved in that criminal case. We were stunned and so I said, "We're out of here, they're going to ruin us financially."

RP: What role was played by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance [MEAA, the industry trade union]?

VS: There are many things I can't talk to you about this. I know that MEAA representatives were advising the complainants to go to the police, telling them that everyone is listening now. But no one from the MEAA called Craig, who is a union member, and asked if he needed any assistance in the protection of his rights.

They were involved in this and there were others, former friends of mine, who were running a clandestine operation to bring Craig down. I saw things that I wish I hadn't seen regarding people pretending to be friends. These events have split the industry, which won't be the same again.

What was so distressing was that one of our friends on the *Rocky Horror Show* was questioned by the police. He said that it was obvious that they wanted to bring Craig down. He said to them that he didn't know what show the complainants were in, but it was not the show he was working on.

He told the police that he didn't see anything that the women claimed, and that the production was collegiate and always fun, and the women had been great mates with Craig. In the end, he told me that he was terrified of losing his job if he didn't support the women in that show. There was enormous pressure.

One of the witnesses in the criminal case claimed that Craig was in love with her because he wrote her a text message. Although it wasn't put into evidence because she didn't have the text, she claimed that Craig offered to bring her some medicine when she was sick. He is supposed to have texted that he could drop off the medicine to "the secret love of my life."

But Craig has said "the secret love of my life" to men, women, trans and drag queens ever since I have known him. And the prosecution was going to use that to say that he was in love with her and that it was a sexual advance. It seems that friendly gestures can now be twisted into sinister allegations to suit a narrative.

We're laughing about this here now but when you're in court, it's not so funny.

CC: #MeToo has had a terrible impact on the relations between men and women.

VS: Yes. I'd hate to be navigating life today as a young man or woman. And now we have an almost anonymous clandestine way of reporting things. People go to HR and then the person accused gets spoken to. If

they ask who made the complaint, the reply is we can't tell you.

What's happened to normal communications between people? If it was something disrespectful or sexist, then in the old days you'd say "Really, shut up and don't say that again, it's just boring," and you'd walk off. That was it, but now there's paperwork because bullying can be a catch all for anything.

RP: How did all this impact Craig's mental health?

VS: For the first three years he basically didn't leave home or answer phone calls. We shut down his email, social media and the phone. I basically did every single phone call with the lawyers. He didn't function. It was like watching someone die for three to four years.

Then we had to get him ready for the court and to face all the media yelling out at you on the court steps. It was terrible. It's been a long battle with mental health and something that has affected both of us.

RP: There was also the immediate cancellation of the *Doctor Blake* television series.

VS: Yes, it was ready to go on Channel 7 for another two years and he was contracted for that. He was also in talks with networks for other new shows. Everything was happening and the *Rocky Horror Show* was about to go again. Everything was stripped as if he was guilty. It was shocking, but that word, I'm afraid, isn't enough to describe what happened.

CC: What was the response from the *Doctor Blake* cast and crew?

VS: While the crew was fantastic, the creators and producers were terrified and basically got rid of him straight away. Following his removal, the producers conducted a workplace investigation and came up with nothing. No complaints whatsoever about Craig or anyone on the crew, but that didn't seem to matter. Innocent until proven guilty? No, it is now guilty until proven innocent, and even when proven innocent, guilt still hangs over an accused person.

One of the actors claimed in their statement for the defamation hearings that Craig had come up to her in a closeup scene and said you're "lovely" and put his hand on her bottom. This was published in the newspapers and so I watched all the Dr Blake episodes and checked all the scripts. There was no such closeup scene with her. Ever. It was made up.

In subpoenaed material, they produced a moment from the rushes of Craig saying the word "lovely." This was picked up on his mic, but guess what, he was off set. In fact, he was talking about a coffee and a biscuit being delivered to him. He wasn't even in the vicinity of the person who made the accusation. They tried to use that as evidence, but then changed the story because it didn't match with the claim and then retracted it. The actor didn't even have a line with Craig.

RP: What does this sort of character assassination mean for ordinary people?

VS: Anyone's life can be destroyed with the click of a button. That's what I've learnt through all this. Even though this happened to us in such a public, humiliating, monstrous and embarrassing level, average people are also being confronted with this sort of thing.

You might be working 9 to 5 and then someone at the office might make an allegation or they could be accused of domestic violence. Life is precarious for people if this sort of thing occurs.

We never thought that this could have happened to us. It's not like a health issue—cancer or something like that—but a calculated attack and clandestinely run for weeks to make sure they annihilated Craig, and from people we thought were friends.

CC: This is also bound up with the transformation of the unions into corporate entities which no longer defend or represent workers in any real sense. People are being forced to try and deal with problems in their workplaces as individuals.

VS: That's exactly right. You're left adrift wondering how to combat this. The union doesn't look after you, the workplace doesn't, future workplaces don't and certain friends in the industry don't. Someone

recently said to me that all this sounds futile so why bother. My reply was if everyone did that then nothing would ever happen.

I'm hell bent on getting this story out and to help others in a similar situation. Many people have written to us—thousands of people—saying, “Thank god you're doing this. You've given me hope.”

CC: There's a general understanding that a grave injustice has been carried out.

VS: Yes, there is.

I'm not sure how we made it through. The worst and best day of my life was the day of the acquittal. It was during COVID and so we didn't have the support of family and friends in the courtroom. I hadn't slept for six weeks, I'm not joking. The magistrate went on and on with her explanation but then she said he was acquitted.

RP: Not just acquitted but awarded \$500,000 costs from the police, which was barely mentioned in the media reportage.

VS: That's right and it was because they charged someone who shouldn't have been charged.

What was being circulated on social media was distressing. We weren't asking people to take sides and jump on social media saying “I support the women” [who made the accusations], but to be respectful of the position we were in.

CC: #MeToo is a divisive and reactionary middle-class movement.

VS: You're right it's about dividing men and women. A campaign was being run against Craig and people who told the truth about what had really happened were cancelled and considered to be on Craig's side. It was astonishing.

CC: But there's such a thing as objective truth, it's knowable and can be proven.

VS: And thank goodness that the justice system did that. The fact is the cornerstone of the justice system held up, and it has for everyone that's been able to fight this in the courts.

CC: That's right. If someone has broken the law then it must be investigated, charges laid, and a proper trial held. At the same time, real crimes are being committed—social inequality, job destruction, homelessness and closures of schools and hospitals—by governments and corporations every day.

VS: Yes, and the courts are being filled with cases that should never be heard, and for us, this meant weeks of court time.

Where is forgiveness in our society? I'm not talking about what Craig is alleged to have done, because he didn't do anything, but when does someone say that's enough now. He hasn't worked for seven years in the industry in which he was so successful.

Although the mainstream industry has shunned Craig, we've been working on other projects, which are gathering momentum, and we'll keep going with those. In his “Six String Stories” tour, which is a live show, he talks to the audience and says there's been some rough years, and he sings some songs that tell this story. People sit there—it's like you could hear a pin drop—and at the end everyone starts singing along in the final chorus with him.



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