

A welcome development:

Actor Geoffrey Rush to return to stage with Melbourne Theatre Company

By Richard Phillips
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The Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) announced last week that Geoffrey Rush will feature later this year in a production of William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night*. Rush, a veteran of Shakespearean performances, will play Malvolio.

Twelfth Night will be the first work for the 66-year-old Rush since the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* made unsubstantiated claims late last year that he engaged in "inappropriate behaviour" toward a female cast member in a Sydney Theatre Company production of *King Lear* in 2015.

Rush's return to the stage is a welcome development. His decision is an act of courage, taken in the defiance of the increasingly toxic, career-destroying and anti-democratic climate created by the #MeToo movement and the corporate media.

When tickets for *Twelfth Night* went on sale early this month, seats were virtually sold out within days—an indication of popular support for Rush and a sign of the widespread outrage over the allegations made against the internationally-acclaimed actor.

Under lurid headlines such as "King Leer," and presented as a "world exclusive," the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* asserted that Rush's alleged behaviour was so serious that the STC decided to "never work" with him again.

Rush immediately denied the claims and a week later launched defamation action against the *Telegraph* and one of its journalists.

The defamation proceedings, Rush told a December press conference, sought "to redress the slurs, innuendo and hyperbole that they have created around my standing in the entertainment industry and in the greater community."

The court case will be heard in September, after Federal Court Judge Michael Wigney and then the Federal Court full bench rejected virtually all the defence arguments advanced by Nationwide News, which publishes the *Daily Telegraph*.

Notwithstanding Rush's denials of the *Telegraph's*

accusations and the lack of any serious evidence to back its claims, the newspaper's reports were uncritically republished by international broadcasters and media outlets, and had an immediate effect on the actor and his career.

Within days, Rush was pressured into stepping aside as president of the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA), which he helped establish in 2012. AACTA cancelled a pre-recorded video address to be the opening of the academy's annual event by Rush and actress comedian Rebel Wilson.

The destructive impact of the newspaper's attacks on Rush's physical and psychological health was detailed in an affidavit lodged by his barrister Nicholas Pullen with the Federal Court in April.

In the first three months after the newspaper's claims, the affidavit said, Rush was virtually housebound, lost his appetite and took medication for lack of sleep. He was beset with anxiety over the future of his career and concerns about the impact of the accusations on his wife and children.

Pullen said the actor woke up "every morning with a terrible sense of dread," would "rarely attend public events" and felt that his worth to the theatre and film industry had been "irreparably damaged."

The fact that Rush has overcome, to some extent, the physical and emotional harm inflicted on him and is resuming his career is laudable. It will give strength and encouragement to others whose right to the presumption of innocence and legal due process have been trampled on by the media-driven #MeToo witch-hunt.

The Melbourne Theatre Company's stance is also commendable. The MTC has refused to buy into the hysteria whipped up by the *Daily Telegraph*. It is to be hoped that other film-makers and theatre companies do the same and ensure that Geoffrey Rush continues to be heard and seen.

While these actions may encourage others to ask questions about the right-wing middle class #MeToo-movement, it would be a mistake to believe that the social forces driving it

will disappear.

Former television celebrity Tracy Spicer, Australia's leading #MeToo advocate, and her supporters have responded to Rush's defamation action with a stream of comments demanding wide-ranging changes to Australia's defamation laws.

Spicer claimed on April 29 that the laws "work to protect the rich and the powerful" and stifle women's voices, making them afraid of speaking out about sexual abuse. She asserted that journalists and newspaper proprietors are afraid of being sued.

A May 1 article in the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance's trade union journal called for a "fairer and more efficient defamation regime," saying the laws are "stacked against media defendants," i.e., the corporate media proprietors. The authors called for an upper limit on the damages paid to plaintiffs and the reversal of the onus of proof for the truth defence. This would require the plaintiffs to prove that what was published about them is false.

While Spicer and other #MeToo vigilantes claim that current laws are constraining their "right" to make allegations against whomever they please, the witch-hunting continues apace.

Over the past six months in Australia, American actor Linden Furnell and Pulitzer prize-winning author Junot Díaz have been accused of inappropriate behaviour—none of which constituted sexual assault or crimes.

In February, Furnell, who was to star in the rock musical *American Idiot*, was sacked for "serious misconduct" the day before the show's opening night in Melbourne. His contract was torn up because he made a "crude allusion to menstruation" to a fellow cast member.

Furnell immediately apologised to his colleague but she complained to the management and he was dismissed without being cautioned or warned. The actress did not want Furnell sacked, yet the management declared he had breached the company's "Zero Tolerance to Inappropriate Behaviour."

In early May, Díaz, a Dominican-American writer and 2008 Pulitzer prize-winner for his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, was pressured to cancel scheduled engagements at the Sydney Writers' Festival. During a festival event, American writer and academic Zinzi Clemmons accused him of inappropriate "sexual behaviour." Clemmons later said on social media that Díaz had "forcibly kissed" her six years earlier.

Two other women added to the social media pile-on. One claimed that Díaz "shouted" and was "aggressive" toward her during an argument. The other, who had a consensual relationship with him for about a year, voiced outrage that he was involved in another relationship during this time. In

this poisonous atmosphere, Díaz decided to return to the US.

The Sydney Writers' Festival itself weighed in, declaring "the moment to reckon with the consequences of past behaviour has arrived."

The campaign against Díaz intensified on his return to the US. Book readings were cancelled at the Boston Children's Museum and the Cambridge Public Library and some bookshops removed his publications from their shelves. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is a creative writing professor, announced an investigation into the allegations. Moves were made to remove him as a fiction editor at the *Boston Review*.

The #MeToo method of trial-by-media is set to escalate in Australia.

Last week, the Melbourne Writers' Festival announced that the prominent #MeToo agitator Ronan Farrow will be a featured speaker at this year's event in August. He will appear with Spicer on August 30 in a session entitled "Power, Abuse and Facing Facts."

Farrow and Spicer will discuss "disclosure, courage and upheaval in reporting on sexual harassment and abuse."

Farrow, the son of former actress Mia Farrow and filmmaker Woody Allen, is a Democratic Party operative and former Obama administration official, with senior US intelligence connections. In 2009, he was appointed a special US adviser in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has been involved in intelligence-propaganda work on behalf of US imperialism in Ukraine, and in the attack on WikiLeaks and its editor Julian Assange.

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