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AACTA Awards: Stars of stage and screen urge industry to tackle cancer of sexual harassment

Karlie Rutherford & Kris Crane, The Daily Telegraph

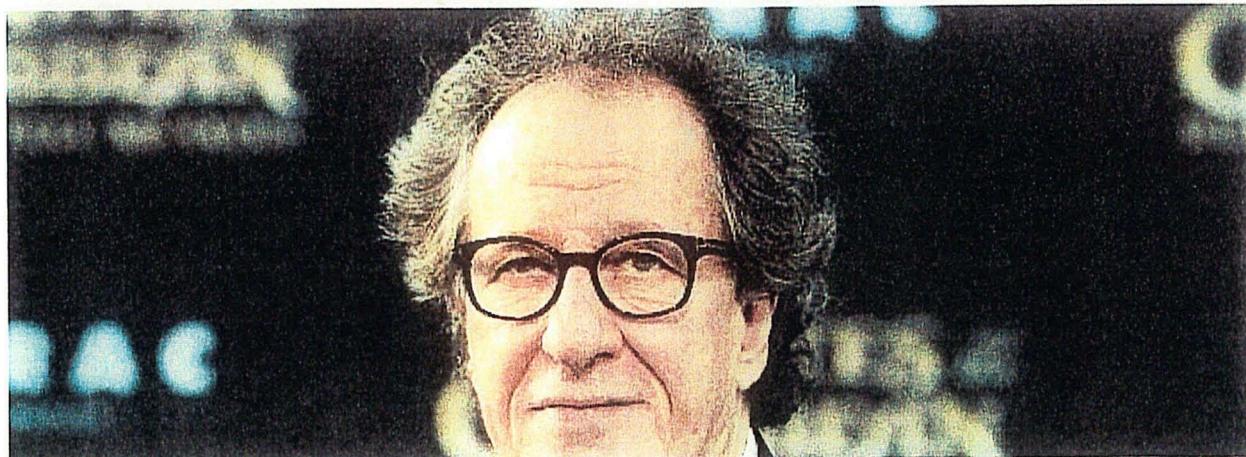
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AUSTRALIA's version of the Oscars has been hit by a last-minute plot twist that has put the dark side of the entertainment industry squarely in the spotlight.

The Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Awards are supposed to be a celebration of local film and television, with honour and homage paid to the giants of stage and screen, but the question many were asking as the show kicked off yesterday was — how will this story end?





Oscar winner Geoffrey Rush has been stood down as AACTA president. Picture: Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP

This year's event has been overshadowed by a series of sexual harassment and bullying allegations levelled at some of entertainment's biggest stars following Hollywood's earth-shaking Harvey Weinstein scandal.

Actor, writer and director Josh Lawson said the industry was in transition and would emerge stronger.

"I think like a lot of people. I stand beside all victims ... and I look forward to the new normal where anyone of any gender can work without intimidation and fear and on equal footing and equal pay," he said at yesterday's AACTA luncheon.





Josh Lawson said the industry will emerge stronger. Picture: Ben Rushton



Walking Dead star Callan McAuliffe worked with Rush and described him as a gentleman. Picture: Richard Dobson

"It's like cutting out a tumour, it's messy, it's bloody and ultimately we will be better for it."

Among the figures in the spotlight is AACTA president and Oscar winner Geoffrey Rush who has stood down from his position after being accused of "inappropriate behaviour" towards a female co-star during a recent stage production of King Lear. A claim he strongly denies.

TV presenter Don Burke is also facing allegations he denies and dozens of other well-known figures are expected to be accused of misconduct.

At yesterday's ceremony winners of production categories were announced in advance of tomorrow's awards night, but the mood was subdued. Rush's fellow AACTA board member, respected film critic Margaret Pomeranz, refused to walk the red carpet or enter the media room after winning Best Female Presenter and ignored requests for interviews.





Margaret Pomeranz refused to walk the red carpet, enter the media room and ignored requests for interviews. Picture: Richard Dobson

Actor and fellow board member Noni Hazlehurst refused to comment, while Susie Porter said she respected Rush's decision to step down.

Walking Dead star Callan McAuliffe, who worked with Rush on Hollywood film The Book Thief, threw his support behind the actor, whom he described as a gentleman.

But he also revealed he'd been subjected to sexual harassment during his career without naming the perpetrator.

"It has happened to me before which is uncomfortable. People grope you," the 22-year-old said. "I certainly wouldn't call myself a victim."

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"I am not a victim of anything so severe as what we are hearing about now. But, you get the hug which lasts too long. Or someone taps you in a place where you would not tap someone else."

Actor Hunter Page-Lochard, who appeared with Rush in Bran Nue Dae, said while he would not comment on Rush's specific allegations because "I don't know anything personally" he supported people speaking out about inappropriate conduct.



Actor Hunter Page-Lochard is supporting people speaking out. Picture: Richard Dobson



800 Words star Melina Vidler is throwing her support to women across the world telling their stories. Picture: Lisa Maree Williams/Getty Images

ABC host Julia Zemiro also refused to comment on Rush, but said abuse was rampant in the industry.

"If you are a woman you are not shocked by men behaving poorly," she said.

"I've not had a hideous time of it. I am extremely proud of the women ... who are speaking out. We have to start calling out behaviours when they happen."



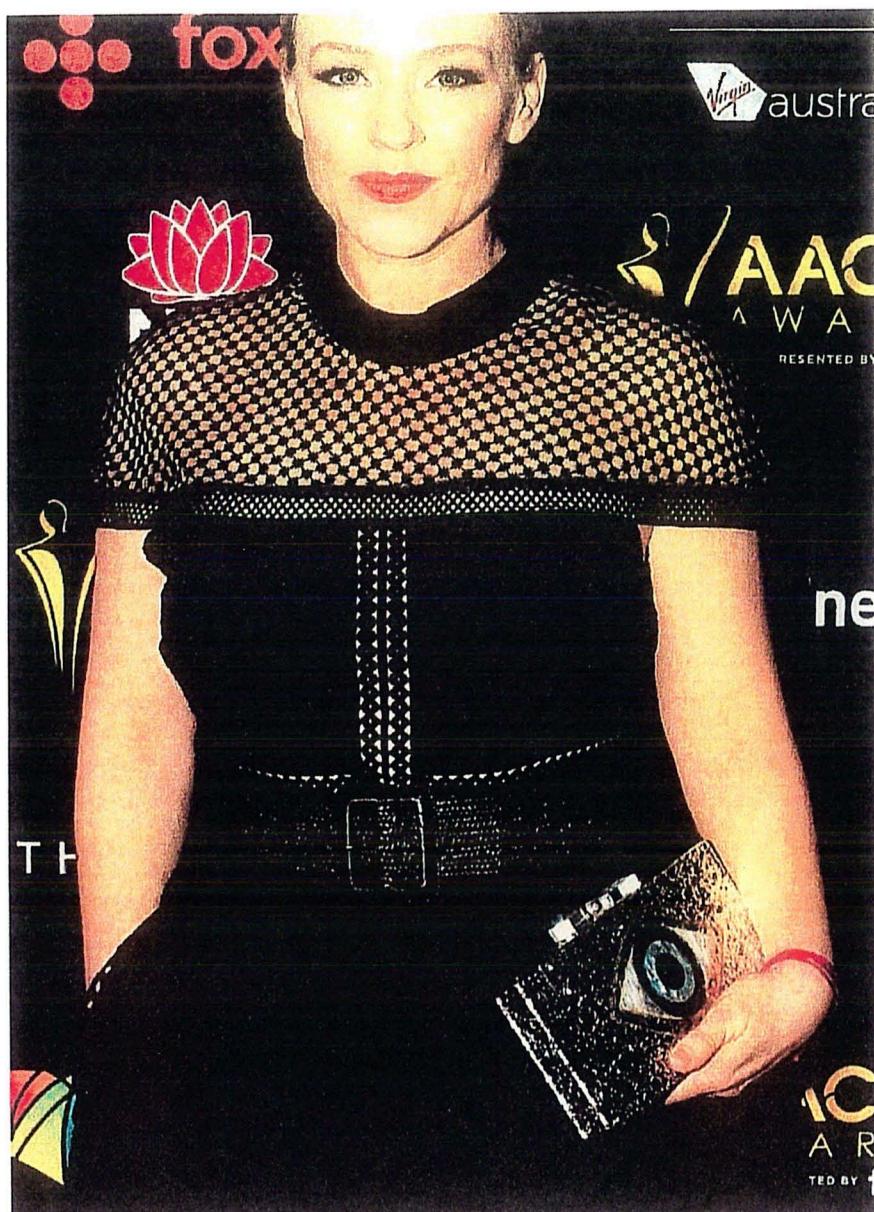
ABC host Julia Zemiro wouldn't comment on Rush but agreed abuse was rampant in the industry. Picture: Richard Dobson



Emma Booth says she is aware inappropriate behaviour goes on and described the movement as a 'beautiful change'. Picture: Richard Dobson

Melina Vidler, who won a Logie for her role in *800 Words*, threw her support behind the women across the globe telling their stories: "It's really difficult to say because you don't want to tell your mother or your husband, let alone the world ... it shows how resilient women are."





Actress Susie Porter.

There was a notable absence of discussion on the issue of the day from the presenters and award winners, however, AACTA did announce its collaboration with Women in Film and Television in NSW (WIFT), supporting an industry forum next week to address harassment.

A poll released last month by WIFT revealed 58 per cent of respondents have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.



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