# ‘Part of the job’: Actors’ experiences of bullying and harassment

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**Abstract**

This article revisits qualitative data collected as part of the Australian Actors’ Wellbeing Survey in 2012 in context of the impact of the subsequent #MeToo movement, and the high-profile court cases involving allegations of inappropriate behaviour in rehearsals. In so doing, the article raises questions about the visibility of a range of behaviours, and the meaning attributed to those behaviours once they are brought into visibility. We argue that understandings of inappropriate behaviour in rehearsal are caught between the Charybdis of a judicial system predicated on a positivist demonstration of corroborated truth on one hand, and the Scylla of anecdote on the other. Analysis of the data collected in 2012 mediates this opposition, establishing a baseline for understanding the complexity and pervasiveness of inappropriate rehearsal behavior, grounded in an attention to the experiences of working actors.

**Keywords**

Actors’ Wellbeing; Rehearsal; Bullying and Harassment; #MeToo

## Introduction

In the May 2019 issue of the British theatre weekly *The Stage*, as a promotion for Mental Health Awareness Week, British Equity president Maureen Beattie is quoted as having been “horribly bullied by a couple of people” while working for a major theatre company (Hemley 2019). “I didn’t mention it for about six months” Beattie explains: “I believed what they [the bullies] told me and thought I must be doing something wrong”. The article continues: “the actions of the people involved had led [Beattie] to believe she was ‘spoiling rehearsals’ because of her ‘negative attitude’.” When she “finally” approached the director, Beattie frames the exchange in terms of her making an apology for “being so negative”, the director responding: “Maureen, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

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The ambiguity in the reporting—the director seems to be referring to Beattie's concerns about being a negative presence rather than to the substance of the alleged bullying—points to the complexity of the situation in general, and in particular to the problem of perception, both in terms of what is visible, and to whom, in the context of rehearsal (and the range of contexts associated with rehearsal, and the significance and meaning of what *is* perceived. This, in turn, is exacerbated by the framing of theatrical rehearsal as a collaborative enterprise, shot through with professional and industrial pressures and anxieties, in which the individual actor is likely to misrecognise and to introject a situational problem—*I am being bullied*—as a personal shortcoming, in order not to rock the boat.

Theatre professionals, Beattie observes, suffer "very particular kinds of vulnerability", drawing particular attention to the ways in which "body image and the pressures to look a certain way could affect people's [read 'actors'] mental health" (adding that "we used to talk about this as a very female thing, but it's just as bad for guys now"), and "how daunting it can be for people touring with shows to live in unfamiliar environments, with people 'you've never met in your life before'". Her recollections are framed within a call for actors "talk about their concerns and to share their anxieties, adding that often others will have experienced the same."

Indeed. However, while there is no shortage of anecdotal accounts attesting to actors' experience of bullying and harassment, no scholarly work has been undertaken to establish the prevalence of such experiences. The Australian Actors' Wellbeing Survey, conducted in 2012, collected responses from 782 performers by means of an extensive on-line survey, developed in collaboration with the Equity Foundation, the professional development arm of Actors Equity, within the umbrella of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Results from the study have been presented in a number of publications (Maxwell et al 2015; Prior et al 2015; Maxwell et al 2018; Seton et al 2019; Szabó et al 2019).

The second half of this current article returns to a body of qualitative data collected in that survey, fleshing out a headline quantitative finding reported in Maxwell et al. (2015), in response to a question about respondents' experiences of bullying and harassment: 26.3% respondents answering in the affirmative. It does so, however, in context of the impact of the #MeToo movement, and in particular in the wake of the successful legal proceedings mounted by the high-profile Australian actor, Geoffrey Rush, against the publisher Nationwide News, who were held to have defamed Rush in a series of articles published in 2017 alleging sexual misconduct. Our findings flesh out the middle ground between the abundance of anecdote on one hand, and on the other, the legal system's demand for a positivist standard of truth over and above hearsay, offering evidence of a wide range of experience of inappropriate behaviour across the sector.

The aim of the article, then, is fourfold: first, to establish a base-line of prevalence of certain kinds of behaviour; second, to propose a provisional typology of predatory, bullying and harassing, and inappropriate behaviours; to attend to respondents' narratives of their experiences, and to the ways in which respondents to the survey not only wrote about those experiences, but how they reflected upon the nature of the


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working life of actors; and, fourth, to reflect on the visibility of these kinds of behaviours in light of the #MeToo movement, and a series of high-profile legal cases, phenomena which unfolded in the years immediately *after* the collection of the 2012 survey data. Indeed, the higher proportion of respondents to the 2017 Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance “Sexual Harassment, Criminal Misconduct & Bullying in Australian Live Performance” survey who reported experiencing and witnessing sexual harassment—40% of the 1,124 respondents—might be interpreted in terms of a raising of consciousness about the issue (MEAA 2017). The data collected in 2012, then, in effect constitutes a control sample in the context of which future research might better understand the complex relationship between various kinds of behaviours, perceptions, interpretations, and understandings of those behaviours, and the effect of a heightened culture of awareness of the former upon the latter.

# Making harassment and bullying visible: The #MeToo paradigm shift

In October 2017 American actor Alyssa Milano, in response to allegations of predatory sexual behavior on the part of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, took to Twitter. “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted” she tweeted, “write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Milano 2017a). In doing so, Milano had unwittingly taken up a phrase coined, originally, by the civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, through her work for Just Be Inc., a nonprofit she founded in 2003 to support young women of colour who had suffered sexual violence (see Russell et al 2018).

The rest, as they say, is history. Following Milano’s tweet, the #MeToo hashtag went viral: 200,000 retweets within 12 hours; half a million within 24 (Sini 2017). By the end of 2017, *Time* had named “the Silence Breakers”—women across a range of fields, but principally actors and screenwriters, who had taken up the spirit of Milano’s tweet and shared stories of sexual abuse in the film industry—as the “person of the year” (Zacharek et al 2017).[2]

#MeToo constitutes something of a watershed, not only in terms of the revelations that have ensued, but in the fault-lines that have become visible in its wake: fault-lines manifested in terms of visibility itself—who sees what—and the meaning and significance attributed to what it seen, or what becomes visible. For some, there is a generational dimension to the logics of these visibilities (see Pelly 2019, Neill 2019), complicated in turn by the economics of scarcity and precarity which pervade the industrial context of the actors’ world.

Prior to #MeToo, however, two other cases involving high profile Australian performers, raised public awareness of sexual misconduct, harassment and assault in

[2] Milano did reach out to Burke within days of the hashtag going viral (Milano 2017b). Despite Burke’s own original misgivings—*The New York Times* reported her as saying “I felt a sense of dread, because something that was part of my life’s work was going to be co-opted and taken from me and used for a purpose that I hadn’t originally intended” (Garcia 2017)—the two have frequently shared platforms and media appearances since.


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the entertainment industry (a third case involved the lifestyle program host Don Burke). Perhaps the more familiar to international readers is the prosecution and conviction of Rolf Harris on 12 charges of indecent assault, and his sentencing to five years and nine months of imprisonment. Most of Harris' offences took place in the context of meetings with fans: an autograph hunter; a waitress; and against the daughter of a family friend, as well as a young actor touring with a youth theatre group. In sentencing Harris, Justice Sweeney in the Southwark Crown Court observed that Harris "took advantage of the trust placed in you, because of your celebrity status, to commit the offenses against three of your victims" and had shown "no remorse" for his crimes (in Walker 2014).

The investigation into Harris' conduct followed hard on the raft of allegations and revelations of predatory sexual conduct with regard to minors on the part of the late British television host, Jimmy Savile, within the British Broadcasting Corporation in the 1960s and 1970s, as uncovered by a Scotland Yard investigation, Operation Yewtree. The scale of Savile's alleged misconduct is immense. A review established by the BBC itself, led by former High Court judge Dame Janet Smith, reported having been in contact with over 720 people and conducting 140 witness interviews (Smith 2016). The investigations into Savile's behaviour, and that of another BBC employee, presenter Stuart Hall, point not only to a culture of abuse within that organisation, but to systemic management failure to identify and to address any risk to the victims; the alleged misconduct characteristically took place on BBC premises, and involved 'guests': audience members, visiting artists and the like.

Closer to home, on 16 May 2014, the actor Robert Hughes was convicted in a Sydney court on two counts of sexual assault, seven accounts of indecent assault, and one of committing an indecent act. The jury was unable to reach a verdict on an eleventh charge, that of committing an indecent act with a child under the age of 16. Hughes was sentenced to 10 years and nine months of imprisonment.

Hughes' offences took place both in domestic contexts, where the victims were the children of family friends, and in the workplace, specifically in the studios of Channel Seven, in which the sit-com *Hey Dad*, in which he played the lead role between 1987 and 1994, was filmed. In sentencing, Judge Zahra of the NSW District Court observed that Hughes had engaged a "systematic pattern of sexual abuse by upon young girls over a number of years", and evidence was tendered of his "regularly and repeatedly" exposing himself to under age cast members. Psychiatrist Olav Nielssen, in evidence, observed that while most offenders in Hughes' position "fell to pieces" he had remained "stoic"; "Generally there's something quite creepy and distressful about child sex offenders", Nielssen claimed. "I didn't detect that anything of that nature from Mr Hughes. I qualify that by noting that he's a professional actor" (Bibby 2014). The qualification here is important, construing actors as unreliable witnesses.

In November 2017—less than a month after Milano's #MeToo tweet—the actor Geoffrey Rush filed a defamation suit against Nationwide News, the publisher of Sydney newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, in the Federal Court of Australia, alleging that the tabloid had "made false, pejorative and demeaning claims" in a series of articles published in October that year. The Sydney Theatre Company had confirmed to a


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*Telegraph* journalist a complaint against Rush from actor Eryn Jean Norville, involving allegations of inappropriate touching without consent during rehearsals for the Company's 2017 production of *King Lear*; the *Telegraph* ran the story, which was taken up subsequently by other mastheads in the News stable. Rush initiated his action, and Nationwide News, relying on the defence of truth, called Norville as a key witness. The Statement of Claim filed by Rush's lawyers referred to the "notorious facts" of the Weinstein case and the Spacey case, which, in "the weeks preceding the publication" of the allegedly—and subsequently affirmed by the Court as—defamatory articles, "had portrayed [Weinstein and Spacey] as 'sexual predator[s] who had committed acts of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment". It also pointed to "a number of famous actors and movie and television executives, including in Hollywood, portrayed in the media and on social media as sexual predators", and finally, "[i]n the days preceding" the defamatory publication, the same portrayal of Australian television personality Don Burke in the media (Rush 2017, pp. 3, 6 and 9), carefully laying the grounds for an argument about trial by association.

Justice Wigney found in Rush's favour, agreeing that he had been defamed by *The Daily Telegraph*. In his judgement, Wigney rejected Norville's evidence *in toto*, finding it uncorroborated, questioning her "credibility and reliability" as a witness, noting her "propensity to exaggerate and embellish" (Wigney 2019, 419). Norville had claimed, in evidence, that a number of actors called by Rush to support his denial of any inappropriate behaviour during rehearsal, that "[w]e're from different generations; maybe we have different ideas about what is culturally appropriate in the workplace" (414). Wigney disagreed: "[t]hat submission is rejected. There is simply no basis for it [...] it appears to have amounted to little more than speculation" (415). For the Justice, the case was cut and dried: the actors who "denied that they saw or heard Rush do in the rehearsal room that Ms Norville claimed he did" were telling the truth. They were reliable witnesses, whose accounts were consistent and corroborated, and, importantly, were not challenged in cross-examination. Norville's claims of a 'normalised', 'enabled' culture of transgression in the rehearsal room, as well as her arguments about the hierarchical nature of the rehearsal room, were rejected. Her evidence, Wigney concluded, "was entirely uncorroborated" (504), and "tantamount to an allegation [that the witnesses in question] had lied" (409).

Much was made in evidence of Rush's persona in rehearsal: his "buoyancy and sense of optimism, his general cheerfulness and enthusiasm" (Robyn Nevin quoted at 401); "ebullient, enthusiastic and playful", approaching rehearsal, on his own account, as a "playpen" in which to do "cheap jokes" (Rush quoted at 466). Wigney accepted this version of things: "[t]he evidence as a whole [...] suggests that Mr Rush's playfulness and ebullience during rehearsals was appreciated and seen by the cast and crew as a positive thing" (466).

As Justice Wigney was preparing his judgement, one of the witnesses who had supported Rush in the case, director Neil Armfield, appeared on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)'s *Q&A* program. Asked about his "observations" of the "chilling effects" of the Rush allegations upon rehearsal practice. Armfield explained that


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> *the rehearsal room is a place of...of play and experiment. I think that [...] in the act of playing [...] and acting, there is [...], sexual energy [...] which, in a sense, is part of an actor's way of connecting to the audience, as much as connecting [...] within the cast (Q&A 2018).*

Another panellist, actor Nakkiah Lui responded:

> *But that assumption of sexual energy, I know as a young girl walking home from school and getting wolf whistles from passing cars, as if people have entitlement over your body, that's an assumption of sexual energy. I get what you're saying completely, but I do think ...*
>
> *Armfield: Yes, I'm not ... I'm not talking about ... I'm not talking about harassment.*
>
> *Lui: No. But I think that sometimes it's not a clear line between what is harassment and what isn't. And sometimes I think that, you know, a lot of the perpetrators ... don't ... And I don't want to make an assumption of the perpetrators either, but sometimes, you know, some people, they don't even ... they're being ... How do I say this? It's scary to say this, to talk about this stuff to be honest.*
>
> *Armfield: Yeah.*

A few weeks later, actor Yael Stone appeared on the ABC's flagship current affairs program, *7.30*, in an interview recorded in New York, beyond the jurisdiction of Australian Courts. (Nationwide had failed in an application to have Stone appear as a witness in the Rush case). Stone offered an alternative interpretation of her own experiences of Rush's behaviour during the run of a production in New York, observing that "sexual energy was couched in this intensely sort of intellectually flirtatious façade [...] so you almost didn't notice what was happening." "If you're constantly being told certain behaviour is OK," she reflected, "and no-one ever stops it, there are no checks and balances on it, then it's right to assume that you can continue with that behavior" (Sales 2018).

At the very least, we might conclude that things are not as cut and dried as Wigney's judgement might have it. Rehearsal (and the various sites surrounding it) are complex cultural worlds, calling for understandings that mediate the demands for uncontrovertible evidence demanding by the legal system on one hand, and the risks of anecdotal hearsay on the other. In the second part of this article, then, we return to the data collected in the 2012 survey—importantly, prior to the paradigm shift of #MeToo—in attempt to better ground those understandings.

## Returning to the 2012 data

“Performers”, observed one respondent to the AWS survey,

> *push the limits and at times cross them, never usually in a malicious way, but in an industry where running around naked backstage is part of your job, it’s hard to say what and when constitutes ‘bullying’ (male, 25).*

This actor points to a certain fuzziness in performers’ conceptions and expectations of interpersonal conduct in their professional context, suggesting a level of acceptance for behaviour that would, in other contexts, be unacceptable. The discourses of ‘limits’ and ‘boundary-pushing’ are familiar tropes in actor training, and it is no surprise that training institutions often struggle with reconciling broader societal values with what might be perceived as the legitimate demands of training actors, particularly within, for example, traditions in which the evocation, manipulation, and sharing of strong memories, sometimes of trauma, is a key aspect of training.

One response to this observation might be to assert that, actually, it is quite easy to identify ‘what and when constitutes bullying’, and that what is as stake is an acceptance or tolerance–and, in extremis, a valorisation–of practices that are quite plainly bullying, and would not at all be acceptable in any other context. These practices involve not only the abuse of hierarchical power—“I can recall”, another respondent commented, “many occasions of small humiliations at auditions and castings”—but operate in peer-to-peer contexts:

> *It is usually subtle or what I would call ‘passive aggressive’ bullying. Colleagues can make comment on your performance or rehearsal process which is undermining but can be slim*[il]*y passed off as ‘colleague banter’. It is an industry in which we are constantly judging ourselves and others. Some people verbalise their thoughts . . . ‘bullying’ in our industry can be difficult to define (female, 49).*

Not surprisingly, there is a gendered dimension to the experience of harassment and bullying. “I work predominantly in comedy and live television” observed one actor, “both of which are aggressively male dominated. I’ve been slapped on the bum, ignored, ridiculed etc. etc. It’s part of the job” (female, 40).

Against this background noise of endemic ‘small’ humiliations, there are, of course, the high-profile cases that grab the attention of tabloid headline writers, as discussed above. Anecdotally, more stories circulate amongst actors, occasionally reaching the media when associated with cases of domestic abuse, and actors ‘going off the rails’, sometimes under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. This is not the place to reprise those particular narratives; at the same time, notwithstanding the attention these episodes attract and the oft-repeated anecdotes of abusive directors and up-staging (or worse) co-stars, there has been no systematic research addressing this aspect of actors’ working lives. Ethnographic accounts of theatrical rehearsal have tended to focus on creative collaborative processes. While they may register instances of artistic conflict, ethnographers have in general trodden carefully when dealing with issues involving


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interpersonal conflict, not least out of ethical concerns, but also because it could be assumed that the presence of an ethnographer outsider in a rehearsal room might militate against the kinds of transgressions that might constitute bullying and/or harassment.

The most interesting exception is perhaps a recent PhD dissertation completed by Adelaide-based actor, director and acting teacher, Terence Crawford, who placed what he calls the 'Political Compass' at the centre of his conceptualisation of the rehearsal room, in order to focus upon what he frames as the 'industrial' aspects of acting practice (2015). While his ethnography does not highlight specific transgressive episodes, Crawford makes it clear that rehearsal rooms are fraught with–and indeed, on his analysis, predicated upon—the delicate, pervasive play of hierarchical authority, experience, age and gender.

In Australia there is very little explicit regulation for actors of, and few guidelines for the conduct of, workplace relationships. Agreements negotiated by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) include limited provisions about workplace safety, codes of practice for the conduct of auditions and for working with children, and a standard contract, under the terms of which undertake to perform consistently with directions established in rehearsal, and are subject, in theatre, to the over-sight of stage management throughout the run of a production. Individual employers—theatre companies, producers—may or may not have an internal code of conduct. It should be noted that Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) is generally evaluated by employers in terms of physical risk, rather than psycho-social risks, which do include bullying and harassment.

Perhaps most compellingly, interpersonal conduct between actors is over-determined by the logics of the marketplace: the risk of being perceived as a potential problem. The attendant threat to reputation and future employment functions to regulate behaviour and relationships in all but the most extreme cases. At the same time, such an atmosphere might lend itself to the kinds of passive aggressive behaviours referred to by the respondent quoted above.

With a view, then, to establishing an understanding of the prevalence of bullying behaviour in actors' workplaces, we asked respondents to the survey a broad question: "Do you ever experience any bullying or harassment (sexual, racial, etc.) during your work as a performer?" If the answer was yes, respondents were then invited to offer an elaboration of the circumstances of those experiences: "in what contexts have you experienced bullying or harassment (sexual, racial, etc.) e.g. training, coaching, casting sessions, auditions, rehearsals, backstage?"

In retrospect, we acknowledge the ambiguity of the initial question, which does not specify that the respondent themselves was the object of the experience of bullying or harassment, leaving open the possibility of the experience being that of a third party. We are therefore reluctant to draw too many conclusions from the data collected. At the same time, the responses suggest a typology of experiences of bullying and harassment, and point towards opportunities for further research.


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In the broadest terms, of the 782 respondents, 206, or 26.3%, answered the first question in the affirmative. 473 answered 'no', and 103 made no response. Women were more likely to respond in the affirmative: 130, or 29% of the overall female sample (for men, the figure was 76, or 23%). Of those reporting experience of bullying or harassment, 63.1% were female.

The 201 written responses amount to nearly 8,000 words. Some wrote at considerable length: litanies of working lives punctuated by sometimes petty and sometimes acute experiences of abuse. Analysis of those responses yields typologies of the modalities, themes, perpetrators, and places of bullying and harassment.

'Modalities' refers to the kind of behaviour identified by respondents. Analysis of the responses identified five broad modalities, here in order of prevalence:

- verbal abuse/comments (including heckling);
- bullying;
- forms of passive aggression (including psychological manipulation and gossip);
- physical threats and violence; and
- forms of industrial pressure.

The seven themes of bullying and harassment identified, again in order of prevalence, were:

- gender;
- sexual;
- sexual orientation;
- race;
- body;
- age; and
- health (including mental illness).

The range of perpetrators of these behaviours spanned both those involved in hierarchical relationships with actors, and peers.

- Hierarchical: teachers; agents; casting directors; directors; producers/management; audiences and members of the public.
- Peer-to-peer: other actors and performers; crew.

Bullying and harassment took place across the full range of places in which actors train and work:

- At school; in training; auditions; rehearsals; during performance, including backstage; and on tour.

A handful of respondents made specific reference to the film and television industries in this context.

Many respondents reported multiple experiences. "Most of the above from time to time" wrote one in response to our cues (female, 67); another wrote of "bullying by


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coaches, directors in rehearsal, management . . . Sexual harassment almost everywhere in one form or another" (female, 49).

## Modalities of bullying and harassment

**Verbal abuse**. Actors reported being yelled at, called names, subjected to put-downs, and being sworn at most frequently by other actors, occasionally by directors, and often in situations of high pressure: "tight schedules and unrealistic expectations . . . The result was a lot of yelling and put downs. I actually did not do another theatre show for 3 years after than experience" (male, 30). Sometimes the verbal abuse takes the form of heckling from audiences or passers-by, the latter in the context of actors working in marketing and promotions or in corporate entertainment. "Pedestrians" explained one such actor, "believe they have the right to tell you how shit your job must be" (female, 20).

Over 20 respondents—almost exclusively female—used the term 'bullying' or its cognates to describe their experience, usually referring to being subjected to a pattern of behaviour by directors, and, most frequently, fellow performers, over an extended period.

**Forms of passive aggression**. This includes feelings of being excluded, or being subjected to 'light-hearted' banter, as we saw above with the example of 'undermining' comments passed off as 'colleague banter' (female, 38). Another recalls being "bullied" by another actor who "employed tactics such as ignoring me, excluding me, and trying to shock me by running around naked after shows" (female, 52). Both these respondents offered rationales for the behaviour to which they had been subjected: the first explaining that "[i]t is an industry in which we are constantly judging ourselves and others. Some people verbalise their thoughts", while the second noting that "I found out later that she was threatened by me." A third referred to "low-level bullying during rehearsals [. . . ] probably driven by the competitive nature of the industry" (female, 28). This kind of excuse making, in which the victim takes on responsibility for their having been abused and effectively normalises the behaviour, is not limited to women: one male explained that he had experienced "bullying", but that it was "usually [...] as a response to an unconscious mistake on my part" (male, 74).

Actors encountered what they identified as **industrial** harassment, including the inaction of management to rectify bullying issues. One wrote of being "repeatedly bullied by theatrical producers [...] threatened [...] by my work with the MEAA" (female, 42), while another encountered bullying "by theatre company owners and promoters usually surrounding queries regarding pay and work conditions including verbal threats and abuse, withholding pay, loss of work and badmouthing me to other performers" (male, 48), and yet another through "negative comments from management about union membership" (male, 37).

**Physical threats and violence**. Although only a handful of respondents reported physical threats and violence, those reports make for unsettling reading. Four women and three men referred to actual or threatened violence, ranging from encounters with


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"out of control" fellow students (female, 40), and being "thrown across a room by an artistic director who was my direct manager" (female, 37). Two male actors reported having been stalked; another referred to "physical and psychological harassment from a sociopathic director" (male, 46).

# Themes of bullying and harassment

As perhaps might be expected, by far the most prevalent themes reported were those associated with **gender** and **sexuality**, with around sixty mentions. These included comments and behaviour discriminating on the grounds of sex, shading up towards what some respondents reported as pandemic levels of sexual harassment, and to issues of sexual orientation. The severity of complaint ranged from experiences of offensive and demeaning banter, through to attempts–some apparently successful–to secure sex in return for career opportunities ("implications of benefits for sexual favours" explained one (female, 29)), to actual sexual assault.

Frequently responses traverse the range of these sub-themes, painting a picture of endemic experiences of casual sexism and acute episodes of predatory behaviour. Many women referred to purportedly joking behaviour, some using scare quotes to indicate their concerns with "'light-hearted' sexual harassment in rehearsals" (female, 35); "the sexual banter that flies around my workplace can make me uncomfortable" writes another (female, 37, trained). Other women implied that the "casting couch" is a real phenomenon, as in the case of the actor quoted above, and the actor who reported "sexual harassment during a meeting with a feature film director. [I] declined to audition" (female, 33) Another referred to having been "sexually compromised when younger" (female, 61), while a third explained that "when I was younger I certainly felt older men were very predatory around me" (female, 40, trained). An older actor suggested that in the past, things had been even worse:

> *[i]n the 1990s there was ALWAYS* [caps in original] *the presence of sexual "bullying" … especially in the Theatre. Casting sessions still rely on "that special twinkle" … when I was a Drama student I was pressured to have sex with a well-known actor because he good be a "good contact" etc. etc. … he basically raped me. This was standard practice back then and of course it was never reported. (female, 59)*

Associated issues included concerns with protocols for rehearsing and shooting nude scenes: being watched by crew members (female, 33), or being forced to receive notes while naked (female, 35).

A handful of male respondents lamented forms of 'reverse sexism': it is "not easy being a man in this world sometimes" explains one. "I am not a "politically correct" animal, and if I ever dare disagree with my colleagues' racist/sexist rants (all against men and/or caucasians), I have been ostracized" (male, 46). "Often being a male, heterosexual, over 30 years, caucasian performer" complains another,


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> *leads to ostracism. At most gigs I am treated as if I have a silver spoon in my mouth because of these things, and am actively excluded and discriminated against. I cannot enter many play and film festivals due to these factors, including my religion (or lack of). I was excluded from a particular event due to my sexuality, and this has been the case because of my gender, race, and age many times in the past … and continues … it happened again YESTERDAY! [caps in original]. (male, 45)*

**Race** was reported as a theme by twenty actors, ranging from reports of racial exclusion, to conversational vilification and racist jokes, to what one actor referred to as the "systemic problem" of racial casting, which took her "to the point of tears and despondency" (female, trained, 30). Three others made similar observations about casting and auditioning processes. One referred to racism as being "prevalent in most workplaces" (male, 56).

**Age** was reported as a factor by eight women and one man (the one quoted above). In most cases, the issue was the youth of the victim: a sense of being sexually abused and condescended to by older peers: 'being spoken to like I was a work-experience girl' (female, 43). A 23-year-old actor pointed to the systemic nature of ageism she has encountered, explaining that

> *I have sometimes felt during rehearsals that I have been targeted by directors because I am the youngest. I'll be the first one called in to rehearse, and the last one to leave. I have felt a strong presence of a hierarchy or food chain and felt very much at the bottom (female, 23).*

On the other hand, one respondent recounted that

> *when I was employed to do a play last year I felt I was unfairly treated by the younger producers and performers in the production because of my age, being the eldest and not being able to remember my lines for various reasons. With verbal abuse and by how they fired me (female, 51).*

Eight women, and no men, reported being harassed about or receiving unwelcome commentary about their **bodies**: from photographers advising diet drinks (female, 28) and agents telling an actor to lose weight (female, 25), or overhearing a director making disparaging comments (female, 27).

Only one respondent reported bullying on the grounds of health, but the details are so disturbing as to be noteworthy: "I have experienced severe bullying over 5 years in a theatre company when someone found out I suffered from severe depression" she explains: "this made me suicidal" (female, 37).

# Perpetrators

**Fellow performers** and **students** were the most frequently mentioned perpetrators of abusive behaviour, with 68 mentions, while **directors** were mentioned 44 times.


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As we have seen, fellow actors are reported as engaging in casual sexism, racism and homophobia, and explicit sexual harassment. We have also seen the invocation of the competitive nature of "the industry" as a rationale for other kinds of bullying behaviour, including systematic campaigns to undermine others' performances. "[I] once had another female cast member try to sabotage my performance", explains one respondent; "she would put thumb tacks in my ugg boots" (female, 28). More experienced actors were reported as "throwing their egos around" (male, 55):

> *a lead actor treat[ed] me like rubbish, not speaking to me, spoiling my work on stage for the audience by upstaging. I still can't bear her (male, 53).*

One actor suggested that this kind of peer sabotage is "a common thing in TV":

> *too many times have I experienced a fellow actor, quite often in an elevated role, using her or his power to direct the scene in a fashion that suits them best, whilst deteriorating your own [sic]. This is a very common and insidious occurrence in acting work that strikes me both as deceitful considering acting requires people to react off one another, and harmful to personal work because this is a job that requires increased levels of sensitivity–for without being sensitive one cannot reveal any emotional connection with the audience outside utter falsity. There is a harmful competitive nature amongst Australian Actors that is based on inflated ego, and an industry that unfortunately procures and mollycoddles such actions (male, 38).*

The strongest language was reserved for **directors**, however, who were variously described as "psychopaths", "ego-driven", "passive aggressive", "clueless", "patronising", "belittling", "degrading", "humiliating", "lecherous", "aggressive", "sociopathic", "threatening", "manipulative", "insecure", "demonic", "slimy", "misogynistic". "Some directors", one actor drily observed, "have average methods" (male, 40). Another singled out "directors who use verbal and emotional abuse as a motivational technique in rehearsal", who "ultimately drive talented and dedicated people out of an industry that needs them" (male, 44).

Casting directors were also singled out, with one actor offering a particularly revealing narrative, referring both to "disrespectful, bullying or belittling comments", and to business practices:

> *demanding that performers keep available days on hold for performances that the agent is yet to confirm casting in: i.e. they keep multiple performers on hold for the same role, before a contract or deal memo is in place, with veiled threats of no further castings if the performer does not comply (male, 48).*

**Management** was mentioned by 22 respondents, largely with reference to industrial-related issues: pressure to be available, to acquiesce to requests, to take the deal, of favouritism, and failure to act upon issues raised in the course of work. "Some tip-


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toeing is required around management at times" advised one actor (female, 31). "I was told by a producer" another recalls, "that he knew I would be trouble because I was a mother" (female, 47).

**Teachers** received ten mentions, responsible for "belittling, patronising, undermining, punishing and humiliating" behaviours (female, 21); others taking "what I'd call a 'hard line' approach to coaching" (female, 33). Another recalled that her training was characterised by "constant sexism", and that "bullying was a daily part of the training style" (female, 31). However, the main problem identified in relationship to training was peer-to-peer harassment and bullying by other students.

A dozen respondents reported issue with **crew** with four women writing about the presence of non-essential technicians during nude scenes.

**Audiences** and/or the **public** were identified by four respondents, reminding us that actors sometimes feel like common property

## Sites of bullying and harassment

**Rehearsal** and **Performance** (including backstage) were mostly frequently cited as the site of experiences of bullying harassment (50 and 46 mentions respectively). **Training** and **auditions** were raised around 20 times each, while **television** and **film** shoots were specifically mentioned twelve times. Seven respondents (all women) referred to being on **tour.**

While the nature of bullying and harassment across these sites has been covered in the discussion above, the circumstances of tours of live performance bear some brief reflection. The circumstances of touring: the relative isolation, living in close proximity with others, frequently in less than salubrious circumstances, and with the pressures of changing venues and being away from normal support mechanisms, all raise the stakes. One actor reported taking on a one-year contract on a touring show straight out of drama school. The experience, she explains, was "awful": she was bullied by an older actor (details unspecified) but "didn't want to jeopardize anything". The director "unfortunately did not have the confidence to know how to handle it" and placed the onus back onto the actor herself, asking her "when was I going to do something about it" (female, 44). This actor also presents the pattern of extending a kind of sympathetic understanding to her bully: "on reflection" she wrote, he was "young and had some problems going on". Three other women report sustained bullying of a sexual nature while on tour; another explained that

> *a company manager took a dislike to me during a tour in Asia and made my life very unpleasant. [They] reported lies about me to the producer which got back to my agent (female, 41).*


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## Conclusion

These accounts, and this analysis, present a compelling picture of the workplace context in which actors pursue their practice. Aside from any arguments about the relative prevalence of bullying and harassment in this particular line of work, and the very general nature of the question to which respondents provided their comments, the value of the data lies precisely in the insights they provide to the working experiences of actors, and the constraints within which those experiences unfold: the competitive pressures which create the opportunities for subtle (and not so subtle) interpersonal friction on one hand; on the other, the profoundly hierarchical industrial structures, in which directors, teachers, casting directors, and company managers—and more experienced actors—have extraordinary levels of authority and power over those who are working under them. The importance of not rocking the boat, or, as one respondent put it, once she had raised concerns about shooting a nude scene, being told that she was "unprofessional", that she should "suck it up and be ashamed of herself" (female, 30) is palpable: the implicit message is that there are always more actors out there if you cause trouble. We have also seen the willingness of actors to tolerate such behaviour, or to engage with it empathetically, attempting to understand and even to exculpate those responsible for inappropriate practices. These ambivalences appear, too, in the results from the MEAA 2017 survey, which reported that "[w]hen asked whether the nature of an actor's work makes it difficult to know what is appropriate and what is not, approximately 48% agreed while 41% disagreed" (MEAA 2017, 4).

## Epilogue

One actor, already quoted above, wrote over 600 words detailing a series of experiences of what she referred to as "bad behavior", which "jeopardis[ed] my work my income, my employment." She confesses to mismanaging various situations: "I didn't understand what was going on", she explains; "I thought if I just kept my distance and [was] polite, professional and respectful it will all just dissipate, but that didn't work." She admits that "when I was younger I was slow to find my own voice and speak up for myself', and that 'I should have spoken up sooner". "[M]y lack of voice" she reasons, "made me too tolerant."

Even as she labours to understand and to accommodate her experiences, in the process accepting responsibility for her victimhood, this respondent goes even further, moving to reassure us that it was not all bad. "This might all sound quite dismal", she concludes,

> *but keep in mind these are separate incidents over 23 years. I have had loads of other positive experiences in between and I can happily report that I have worked with some of those people again in a more productive and mature way (female, 44).*


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