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Theatre companies and performers combine to tackle harassment

Representatives of Australia's leading theatre companies will come together with performing artists this weekend for an historic forum to make their workplaces safe from sexual harassment and bullying.

About 60 representatives of every major theatre company and freelance artists, practitioners and performers will meet in Melbourne on Saturday and Sunday for the workshop organised by the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance and Artists for Safe Theatres.

Initially led by artists and supported from the ground up by MEAA, this forum invites the theatre companies to work together as a community to tackle and change the systemic issues of sexual harassment and bullying in the theatrical workplace.

The two-day independently facilitated forum will examine how to make workplaces safer from the beginning of casting and rehearsal through to performance, better processes for dealing with complaints that respect the rights of both the complainant and perpetrator, and support mechanisms for victims.

Attendees will include members of the Confederation of State Theatre Companies, large private companies such as Bell Shakespeare, Malthouse, Belvoir, and Circus Oz, Theatre Network Australia, the Australia Council for the Arts, and more than a dozen performers.

"This is a watershed moment where everyone working in the live theatre sector has a shared commitment to create real and lasting change to make workplaces safer," said the director of MEAA Equity, Zoe Angus.

"The high-profile cases featured in the media over the past few months have sent shockwaves through the theatre community, but they represent just a tiny fraction of bullying, harassment, vilification and discrimination that takes place in this sector of the arts.

"The first important step has been to recognise there is a problem and now we have a real opportunity to develop a common approach which will prevent further pain."

A spokesperson for Artists for Safe Theatres said: "To do nothing is not an option. The current crisis amounts to an irrefutable case for change and the industry as a whole needs to act."

The catalyst for the forum was the release late last year of a national survey conducted by MEAA of 1124 people working in live performance.

At least 40% had experienced sexual harassment – ranging from suggestive comments, excessive physical familiarity, intrusive questions about private life and leering – and a similar amount have witnessed it.

But 53% of victims and 60% of witnesses said they had never reported sexual harassment, criminal misconduct or bullying for reasons ranging from worries about professional repercussions, a belief that they did not think anything could be done, fears that reporting would worsen the situation, or hope that it would resolve itself.

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