

## Statement from Kween Kong

Following my performance at *Drag Roast* at the Astor Theatre, I made the decision to publicly speak about my experience at the venue.

I did not do so lightly.

Throughout my career in television, live performance and media, I have always understood that having a platform comes with responsibility. My responsibility has never been limited to entertaining an audience; it extends to advocating for their safety, dignity and wellbeing. When people purchase tickets to support queer artists, artists of colour and live entertainment, they should be able to expect they are entering a venue where both performers and patrons are treated with respect.

My experience at the Astor Theatre fell well short of that expectation.

After the show concluded, I experienced what I perceived to be an unnecessarily aggressive confrontation with Venue Manager Mark Hammond. During that interaction, I say I was physically backed into a corner alongside my daughter while attempting to access a green room to gain clarity for him that my daughter had been assisting me all night and had been freely entering and exiting throughout the evening. Two security staff also moved towards me in a manner I experienced as intimidating and confrontational.

There is no venue policy that justifies surrounding a performer in full costume, preventing access to their dressing room or escalating a situation through physical intimidation. If someone is close enough that you can smell what they had for dinner, they are standing far too close.

As someone who has spent years advocating for safer spaces for LGBTQIA+, First Nations and culturally diverse communities, I could not remain silent about an experience that left me feeling unsafe.

What has disappointed me just as much is what happened afterwards.

Despite the seriousness of what occurred, neither the Astor Theatre nor its management has reached out to apologise or acknowledge my experience. Instead, their social media

accounts were made private, and shortly afterwards there appeared to be an influx of reviews emphasising how welcoming the venue is to Indigenous and multicultural communities.

One review in particular, from someone identifying themselves as “Angus”, states, “*As an indigenous we have always felt so welcomed and respected...*” I sincerely hope that reflects that person’s genuine experience. Everyone deserves to feel safe and respected in public spaces.

However, positive experiences shared by others do not negate or invalidate mine or others who have not felt bold enough to speak about it.

After sharing my initial account, I posted a follow-up clarifying that my concern extends beyond myself. If this is how I was treated as a nationally recognised performer with a public platform, I cannot help but wonder how members of the general public, particularly those without that visibility, are treated when no one is watching.

Since speaking publicly, I have received numerous messages from people describing similar experiences involving aggressive behaviour or what they perceived to be racially discriminatory treatment connected to the venue and its management. While I cannot personally verify every account shared with me, the volume and consistency of these stories is concerning.

One message came from a booking agent who alleged that, during discussions about presenting an international act, they were told by the venue manager that the theatre no longer programmed Aboriginal or African artists because, allegedly, “the crowds are too violent.” That allegation, if accurately recalled, is deeply disturbing and deserves serious scrutiny. I was not present for that conversation and cannot independently verify it, but it forms part of the broader concerns people have felt compelled to share with me after I spoke publicly.

I also find it telling how differently our community responds depending on who is speaking.

When a queen like Willam stands up to a disruptive audience member or calls out unacceptable behaviour, she is rightly applauded for refusing to tolerate abuse. Yet when queens of colour speak about feeling racially profiled or treated differently, our experiences are too often questioned, minimised or met with demands that we prove what happened.

That double standard deserves examination.

Calling out behaviour that made me feel unsafe is not about seeking sympathy or creating division. It is about accountability.

I have spent my career creating spaces where people, particularly queer people, Pasifika people, First Nations people and other communities who have historically been marginalised, feel seen, celebrated and safe. I cannot in good conscience encourage audiences to attend a venue where my own experience left me feeling intimidated and unsafe.

For that reason, I cannot endorse or support the Astor Theatre in its current form.

My hope in sharing this is not to damage a business, but to encourage genuine accountability, meaningful reflection and a commitment to ensuring that no artist or audience member has an experience like mine again.

Everyone deserves to leave a theatre remembering the performance, not how they were treated once the curtain came down.