

they shuffle on the steps, smile at each other, adjust their umbrellas, hitch their frocks into position.

The music is switched off. 'Hello!' cries the mistress of ceremonies, Joanne' of the Sex Worker Rights Action Coalition, and Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association, peak advisory and advocacy bodies. Dressed to kill in a long split red velvet gown and wearing a beaked black mask over a blonde wig, she addresses the crowd of working women and gathering tourists on the subject of professional prostitution and prostitutes' rights to recognition and protection. The international Day for Whores dates, she tells onlookers, from 1975 when sex workers and their supporters staged a sit-in in a church in Lyon, France, in protest against police abuse and discriminatory legislation. Joanne and others speak to their colleagues and a small crush of photographers about the ongoing fight for legislative protection, social acceptance and freedom from prejudice. While feminists, social commentators and interested bodies debate the politics of prostitution, its virtues and its abuses, it remains an ineradicable industry across the world, and as regulation has assimilated previously chaotic (or organised criminal) illegal aspects of it, so has the prostitutes' pride movement claimed more and more voice. Prostitutes supply sex, counselling, economical affection, succour and sociability to the community. Should they be proud? These women think so.

*Rantipole: A rude romping boy or girl; also a gadabout, dissipated woman.*

Prostitution has been decriminalised in New South Wales since 1995, as it is to varying degrees in Queensland, Victoria, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, but sex workers still feel discriminated against. Intimidation by brothel owners, tight restrictions against brothel zoning, prejudiced attitudes, radical feminist critiques and the persistent stigma of social abjection still corrode the security of sex workers all over the country. This small gathering cannot speak for the thousands of women who work the game in Australia, but its purpose is both pride and education. Look at us, they say, are we so frightening?

Apparently not: an Asian tourist gentleman gestures for one of the Whores to pose for a photograph with him, his arm snugly around her waist, a beaming smile on his face close to hers. 'That'll be seventy bucks,' her friend jokes as the man moves away. Goosebumps rise on bare glitter-strewn shoulders and décolletages as a grey breeze picks up across the water; behind us the Opera House curves, often compared to a woman's, are temporarily neglected by the tourists' curious cameras. The speakers' voices are lost in the great space of the forecourt, but that's not the point; everyone is here to stand together before Sydney's most famous landmark, unabashed. 'The preferred term is ,', Joanne calls out as the press stand to take group photos. 'Too late!' someone yells. There's laughter. 'Whores' is the term of the day. 'We have masks available if anyone has issues with identification,' she advises the crowd. Standing

stiletto-to-stiletto in public is one thing; being recognised in a photo by a husband, parent or employer is another. It seems ironic after the rhetoric, but prostitutes are pragmatists, after all. 'Grab your handbag, fix your hair—prostitutes are everywhere!' the women shout smiling as the photographers click away.

The sun has gone in; it's chilly. The ceremony is over, and the procession moves off back towards Circular Quay, past the café tables and the waterfront. The stereo now plays The Velvet Underground's 'Waiting for the Man' as we twirl our paper umbrellas. I have to dash back to the Writers' Festival, to put on my lipstick, deliver a performance, and sell my product. Still absently clutching my umbrella, I will pass the place where those first women stepped off the Lady Penrhyn in 1788. Though prostitution wasn't a transportable offence, it is supposed that many of those ladies had practiced it in England, and as a trade in the tenuous early years of the settlement, it was one of the few viable for women outnumbered five to one by men in an economy whittled down to survival. 'My God, not more of those damned whores!' Clark ejaculated when the Second Fleet turned up. The uxoriously married Clark later took a mistress, who bore him a child. One thing prostitutes are capable of is great humour: eventually the unrepentant sex workers of Sydney may get to have the last laugh.



*Getting ready for the protest*



*Scarlet Alliance*