

**Close Encounters of an Intimate Kind:
Gender and Performance during COVID-19**

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Abstract

Intimacy Directors International was founded in 2016 as an organization that targets the artistic direction of intimate scenes (such as sex scenes or romantic scenes) in theatre, film and television. Partially prompted by the #MeToo movement, the intimacy direction effort is an acknowledgement of the sexual harassment and interpersonal discomfort that many performers (largely women) experience in the entertainment industry. The directing approach that is advocated by this group, and other newly formed groups with similar purposes, is one that looks at intimate scene-work much like stage combat or stunt work, where the movements are choreographed in order to prevent harm. There are also frequent check-ins so that the actors feel allowed to voice any anxiety or desire to change or stop what is happening. With COVID-19 bringing performance (particularly live theatre performance) to a halt indefinitely, the effects on performers' careers are substantial. I focus on the consequences to the intimacy direction movement which already targets gender differently, given the inequity faced by most women in these industries. The Intimacy Directors International organization, according to their website, officially dissolved as of March 15, 2020. While they note that their mission—to *initiate* the intimacy direction industry—has been accomplished, I will explore how the dissolution of such a supportive and large part of the movement might affect performance as it regains its place in society, particularly for those most negatively affected by the negligent and predatory practices that brought about the need for intimacy direction in the first place.

1 The #MeToo movement has made it abundantly clear, if it were not already, that women have a disproportionate level of experience of being victimized. In particular, recent years have seen and heard women in the theatre, media and film industries step up to voice their realities of sexual exploitation (Whyte, “The Media’s #MeToo Problems”). Several groups and individuals have made it a mission to support victims of sexual harassment and abuse, and the movement has fueled more awareness as well as funding to be directed toward their coffers (Noveck, “Groups Fighting”). One movement that specifically takes on the hardships faced by performance artists is intimacy direction. Intimacy direction cuts to the heart of the issue many performers (of all genders, but most heavily women) face—that of the pressure to expose their bodies and engage in intimate acts without complaint or resistance. Directors in these industries pressure female performers into exploitative situations explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, there are sexual advances made toward female performers by fellow actors as well as directors themselves, with the caveat that *if* they do this *then* they will be able to keep their job, or indeed get more job offers

in the future. Implicitly, directors can and sometimes do take advantage of the entertainment industries being saturated with female performers, which creates the unspoken reminder that if they do not comply with the directions given, they are easily replaceable. Intimacy director Claire Warden explains how this treatment “strips actors of their basic human rights and the agency over their body” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:5:41-5:50). Directors have sustained this unfortunate environment both consciously and unconsciously.

2 Intimacy direction is a movement intended to target intimate, sometimes sexual, scenes in real time and to construct rules to follow to make sure consent and comfort are primary goals. Even in the best of times, this effort is a difficult one, swimming against the forceful tide of how it has always been done. When asked what the reasons are behind poorly performed or directed intimacy scenes, Warden explains that “it’s not been allowed the structure and the consideration that every other part of a play [or film] is” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:3:21-27). So much energy is put into exact details of blocking, comic timing, theatrical entrances and pacing, but when it comes to a stage kiss or simulating sex, often directors have resorted to a limited direction to the actors of “go for it” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:4:01-07). Another hindrance is the practice of viewing intimacy coordinators skeptically, assuming they will take over or behave as censors to the work (“Intimacy Direction” 00:7:31-8:02). However, as many have learned and as I will show, the intimacy direction effort is an acknowledgement of the sexual harassment and interpersonal discomfort that many performers (largely women) experience in the entertainment industry, and it has been serving performers quite well. In a 2018 article in *The Washington Post*, intimacy consultant Emily Sucher explains the need behind coordinating and choreographing all intimacy on stage—even something as seemingly simple as a kiss, stating that clear boundaries must be set with actors (Catlin, “Meet the Theatre Specialists...”). Now more than ever, when we face the drastic effects of a global pandemic, it is important to highlight and build up such a well-meaning movement, lest it suffers from inadequate support when society reopens.

3 COVID-19 continues to dissect our lives in specific and debilitating ways. Hardships range, but as is often the case in times of crisis, gender is a prominent dividing factor. Financial and emotional hardships have been shown to be exponentially higher in women than in men in the transition to being homebound¹ (González Laya & Linde, “Gender Equality”). This is not

¹ These hardships tend to be felt even more for transgender and non-binary genders than for cis-women, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

surprising, given that women typically hold fewer of the higher-ranking positions that come with extra protections against job loss (Medland “Today’s Gender Reality”). In addition, while current literature on marriage, parenthood and children is now including more references to the gender discrepancy regarding women doing more of the housework and child rearing in families, this has not changed the fact that women are picking up more at home now than ever, when there is more at home than ever to be picked up.² These differences are not limited to workload. In particular, there has been a significant spike in women reporting abuse, largely due to the fact that victims are living with their abusers and unable to leave because of stay-at-home orders³ (Godin, “Victims of Domestic Violence”). Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, leaps were being made in response to the #MeToo movement that were helping these women.⁴ In the entertainment industry, including theatrical performance, a movement to help prevent a similar abuse of power charged onto the scene.

4 Intimacy Directors International was founded in 2016 as an organization that targets the artistic direction of intimate scenes (such as sex scenes or romantic scenes) in theatre, film and television. In the moment of an intimate scene, women performers can and have felt pressured to perform, regardless of their feelings, in order to retain their employment and not get a reputation for being hard to work with. They are taught that “‘no’ is a dangerous word” (“Intimacy Directing” 00:5:22-24). The directing approach that is advocated by IDI, and other newly formed groups with similar purposes, is one that looks at intimate scene-work much like stage combat, where the movements are strictly choreographed in order to prevent harm. There are frequent check-ins so that the actors feel allowed to voice any anxiety or desire to change or stop what is happening. Notably, SAG-AFTRA, the union for screen talent in the U.S. “announced its aim to standardize the practice of intimacy direction for all union projects” (Ates 6). With COVID-19 bringing performance (particularly live theatre performance) to a halt indefinitely, the effects on performers’ careers are substantial. I focus on the consequences to the intimacy direction

2 On top of the gendered disparity noted regarding housework and child rearing (Germano, “Women are Working”), COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown measures have now extended mothers’ work to include homeschooling, home-nursing and extra sanitation measures on top of working from home.

3 It should be noted that there are men who are also abused by their male, female and non-binary partners, and that these men rarely come forward. This article does not include these men (or those who identify outside of the gender binary). The examples used here involve women victims to illustrate the binary discrepancy in sexual violence.

4 Some of these organizations include RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), National Domestic Abuse Hotline, GLBTQ Domestic Violence Project, Womenslaw.org, Take Back the Night Foundation, among others.

movement which already targets gender differently, given the inequity faced by most women in these industries.

5 The originating U.S. branch of the Intimacy Directors International (henceforth IDI) organization, according to their website, officially dissolved as of March 15, 2020. (“Thank You For Visiting”) In their dissolution message, they include that the IDI Apprenticeship Program (which trained intimacy directors and coordinators) is also ending. While they note that their mission—to *initiate* the intimacy direction industry—has been accomplished, it is useful to inquire how the dissolution of such a supportive and large part of the movement might affect performance (“Thank You For Visiting”). As the entertainment industry regains its place in society, those most negatively affected by the negligent and predatory practices that brought about the need for intimacy direction in the first place will likely still need such support.

6 Tonia Sina was the first to coin the term and position of Intimacy Coordinator in her 2006 graduate thesis entitled “Intimate Encounters: Staging Intimacy and Sensuality”. The timeline between this moment and 2016 when IDI was founded, moves to incorporate stage combat principles into the choreography of stage scenes that depict intimate moments. However, intimacy pioneers (and IDI co-founders) Tonia Sina, Alicia Rodis and Siobhan Richardson were working independently. Championing their cause individually was difficult. They longed to broaden the understanding of stage intimacy and the need for training in the practice of directing intimacy. Their goal in founding IDI was to make the intimacy director a known, recognizable role and to promote it as something legitimate and necessary. What evolved with the #MeToo movement was a mad rush to hire intimacy directors, and IDI struggled to keep up with demand (Percy). At that time, in 2016, there was no specific structure to getting certified other than applying to their apprenticeship program. In 2017, Theatrical Intimacy Education was founded by Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard as a “consulting group specializing in researching, developing, and teaching best practices for staging theatrical intimacy” (“Mission”). Pace and Rikard also authored the formative book, *Staging Sex*, in an effort to “offer practical solutions and exercises, provide a system of establishing and discussing boundaries, and suggest efficient and effective language for staging intimacy and sexual violence” (Pace, back cover).

7 IDI founder Tonia Sina notes that the frequency of harassment and abuse is connected to a lack of structure, saying it was “because there were no rules that people were following,” going on to conclude that her goal was “to create a standard protocol” (Catlin, “Meet the Theatre

Specialists...”). This protocol is exemplified by the five pillars that IDI established in their training, which include context, communication, consent, choreography and closure (Morey, “The 5 Cs”). The first and quite critical element, context, concerns the storytelling, which Claire Warden stresses is one of the main functions of an intimacy coordinator—to ask “what is the story we are trying to tell with this moment of physical interaction?” because, as she goes on to say, “[t]here are a thousand stories in a handshake. And that’s just a handshake” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:2:00-11). It takes a great deal of training to understand and uncover the meaning behind intimate scenes and translate that into conscientious scene direction. Warden lists a few of the skills intimacy directors acquire in training: “We’re mental health first aid trained. We’re trained in anti-sexual harassment. We’re trained in diversity. We’re trained in sensitivity training. We’re trained in working with actors with trauma” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:2:46-58). IDI’s founders knew that much would be required of someone coordinating intimacy in performance. Early trainees have continued to build upon IDI’s mission.

8 Marie Percy, certified intimacy coordinator and choreographer from the University of Connecticut, attended the first choreographer’s intensive training that IDI offered in Urbana, IL in the summer of 2018. She describes the experience as a rigorous nine days, including 60+ hours of contact with her instructors, Tonia Sina and Claire Warden, among others (Percy). Percy’s university wanted to model an intimacy direction best practices document that Yale had created and she was consulted as someone with expertise since she has an extensive movement background and had already been doing similar work with actors in the department. The choreographer’s intensive was seen as the best way for her to get the training necessary to help her department and the students. In addition to the training sessions, she had an extensive application process which involved doing a mental health first aid course, multiple online trainings and in-depth research on the laws regarding sexual harassment (Percy). After this process, in early 2019, she was certified according to IDI’s specifications. The draw to be certified and practice intimacy direction was already strong for Percy from a practical, art-making standpoint, but through the training she “really found that the advocacy side of the work can’t be done in a vacuum” (Percy). She was empowered by the other, like-minded theatre artists in the room who all shared ideas about how best to approach the direction of intimate scenes.

9 One of the first to join the apprentice program, Percy has now taken further steps to continue the effort Sina, Rodis and Richardson started. After Percy was approached in early 2019

to run a workshop, her pedagogical skills were tapped when she, Alicia Rodis, and Jessica Steinrock founded Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) with the goal to create a comprehensive, extensive training and certification program. The program they developed has four levels. The first consists of introductory, three-day workshops focused on covering the basics.⁵ The second level is another series of three-day workshops on specific topics. The participant will be given a selection of special topics to choose from and they must choose at least three.⁶ The third level, which is only open to those who have completed the first two, is similar to the IDI choreographer's intensive where participants choreograph and receive feedback on specific intimate scenes, including hyper-exposure such as simulating sex. The final level consists of fieldwork. Candidates would submit a proposal for a final project to be performed in the real world. They would then be paired with a certified intimacy coordinator who would mentor them through the process. A final evaluation would then be administered by a group of certified intimacy coordinators, not including the mentor on the project (Percy). IDC launched its first, first-level workshop in February of 2020 and completely sold out. The participants met for this workshop from February 21-23, but then the subsequent workshops which were planned for this first group of participants were cancelled due to COVID-19 (Percy).

10 Starting March 12, 2020, Broadway theatres in New York City closed their doors due to the pandemic. Touts of theatres being the symbolism of New York's resilience, notwithstanding, the closure of so many theatres had a real and devastating effect on the many individuals working on Broadway. Hollywood has also taken a hit, having to reschedule filming and furlough behind-the-scenes workers indefinitely. Though everyone wishes to return to normal as soon as possible, the reality is that the new normal we come back to may look very different from before COVID-19. Perhaps masks will be handed out to theatre goers as they take their seats. Perhaps blocking will have to incorporate distancing actors six feet from one another, or film actors will be recorded on separate days. In a similar way, the practice of intimacy direction may look quite different than prior to quarantine. This is not to say that there will never be touching or intimacy on stage, but what will it mean to a performer and what will it look like? Though theatres and production companies are showing an increase in the use of intimacy directors and coordinators, there are

5 The basics, in this case, refer to the definition of intimacy direction, understanding consent, and what the central tenants and pillars are of this focus in training (building on IDI's framework). (Percy)

6 Some topics include performing intimacy, movement vocabulary, choreography basics in storytelling, etc. (Percy)

other significant statistics that show how much money these industries are losing while having to remain closed⁷ (Brzeski et al “Global Film Industry”). Once they reopen, it is not far-fetched to surmise that some artistic directors and producers might feel they cannot afford some services. And while the #MeToo movement still carries much weight, if given the choice between hiring someone to design the set or run the lights versus hiring an intimacy specialist, the financial strain may make such decisions moot. In many ways, the reopening of theatres will mimic the same type of job-surplus that has always plagued women in performance. In other words, the drive to get back to performing could easily affect the industry in the same way that the surfeit of women performers in a market with too few female roles affected them before the pandemic. With the possibility of fewer intimacy coordinators (since they have been unable to be trained during lockdown) and fewer acting jobs all around (due to the slow re-opening process) who will be there to protect the actress who is pressured to be intimate?

11 I write this article not to be definitive about our future but to remind audiences and my fellow performance artists that while a lot may change as we re-open theatres, our values should not. The same motivations behind protecting our performers need to remain strong or our industry will falter and people will get hurt. Intimacy direction is “about destroying the power dynamic that’s been set up which makes actors’ bodies the property of a director to do whatever they want [. . .] and to bring an equity to the room [. . .]” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:06:51-7:06). The director’s exclusive and ultimate power interrupts actors’ ability to speak up for themselves in the room (Pace 7). As Percy rightfully asserts, “[i]n no other job do we ask this type of intimacy from employees” without it being a crime (Percy). Having an advocate is essential to having the performers’ boundaries respected. The power dynamics have been abused in the past (both knowingly and unknowingly). After learning about an actor’s boundaries, the next question to be asked is “how do we adapt to make sure that the story is still told while both people are in full consent and agency over their bodies?” since “it’s about really tying it to the story and the impact of intimacy so that we build the world of intimate touch that is relevant” (“Intimacy Direction” 00:12:15-24; 00:17:18-30). It is important to note that what is considered relevant with respect to intimacy has been limited due to the avoidance of facing the issues at play and other constraining elements (such as

⁷ Not only statistics, but there have also been pleas to the public, asking for help to ease the financial hardships. (Wiegand “Buy Plays”)

the male gaze). Intimacy direction holds the key to unlocking new representation in intimacy performance and depicting broader stories that encompass more than just “cis, heterosexual, male-dominant power dynamic sex,” but instead telling stories about “all kinds of bodies and all genders and all orientations and all races and all kinds of people [who] have many, many different ways of being intimate and showing intimacy” (“Intimacy Direction 00:25:20-44).

12 The reality today is that for Hollywood or Broadway producers, hiring an intimacy coordinator is much cheaper than facing a sexual harassment lawsuit. This means that despite the setbacks stemming from the COVID-19 crisis, larger industry professionals will be willing and able to support the ongoing industry of intimacy specialization. In addition, other intimacy groups have been formed, such as Intimacy Directors and Coordinators, whose goal to help train and certify more directors to meet demand are lofty and attainable, once we are able to come together physically once again. Sadly, however, much in the same way that the pandemic has revealed the disparities in society regarding job loss and access to healthcare and insurance, it will likely also expose the socioeconomic factors that will hinder intimacy coordination continuing for less affluent theatre and film companies. In university theatre departments across the country, as well as in amateur and community theatres, women performers frequently outnumber men. This is also prevalent in film (Lang “Study Finds”). With the pressure right now to maintain employment and the continuing gender gap in pay compounded by income insecurity brought on by COVID-19, women will continue to feel the brunt of this much more (Elkins “Michelle Williams”).

13 The good news is that the groups which have been put on hold, such as IDC, are making every effort to meet the needs going forward. Percy’s team understands that “there’s a difference between best practice and available practice” and they want to create “resources for people who can’t afford best practice but would like to do the best they can” (Percy). Other groups such as Theatrical Intimacy Ed are currently offering online workshops and the demand is high.⁸ So while the situation is dire, perhaps the pandemic culture of offering services online will support the movement further and give people the skills they need to protect the most vulnerable. We all need to stay informed and ready to help all performers, especially women, who are all too familiar—

⁸ Currently, all Theatrical Intimacy Ed. online workshops are sold out.

intimately familiar—with the discomfort, shame and danger associated with how they’ve been directed in the past.⁹

⁹ A good resource for anyone exploring intimacy directing is Intimacy Directors & Coordinators’ website, where their motto is “Raise the bar. Eliminate harm.” (“Homepage”) This site has information on training, consultations as well as hiring intimacy directors.

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