

What is Intimacy Direction?

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Guest Writer

Editor's note- Content warning: The following article discusses sexual assault and abuse.

When a scene involves any sort of violence or extreme physicality, it's a no-brainer that a fight director will be hired. Yet when there's intimacy involved, we often expect the actors to wing it. Or worse, to "go in the hallway and figure it out."

An actor-friend of mine recently told me about an experience she had where she agreed to do a topless scene. She shared that had she begun to feel unsafe, she was "positive" that she "wouldn't have said anything, because I wouldn't have wanted to create a problem." Ranging from this sort of discomfort, to [abuse](#), to [outright assault](#), the power dynamics at play often leave actors feeling like they cannot stand up for themselves.

What if an actor decides, 4 weeks into an 8 week run, that their character feels like touching their scene partner's breast during their passionate onstage kiss – even though that had never been discussed or rehearsed before? But they claim they were just "in the moment." And what about the other people in the room, such as the crew? A director may feel comfortable discussing a scene while an actor is half-dressed, but the stage manager or technicians might not be. There needs to be someone who will speak up for everyone. That's where the Intimacy Director comes in.



Intimacy Coordinator, Ita O'Brien, leads a workshop, as Allison takes notes.

An Intimacy Director (ID) is a professional trained to oversee scenes involving intimacy, nudity and sexual content. The goal is to create realistic-looking scenes while keeping it safe for the actors and other participants. We work with the production's director to achieve their desired results while respecting the boundaries of the actors. Ideally, an ID is hired early enough to consult on what should be made clear in the audition notice. We read the script, and then consult with the director to hear their vision of the scene(s) and discuss staging options. Some directors might have a strong vision for what they do or do not want to see, some may only have strong opinions about seeing a few specific moments, and some may completely leave it up to the ID and actors to choreograph.

What Exactly Is An Intimacy Director?

The ID then works with each actor to discover interesting and clear ways to tell the desired story within the actors' boundaries. An ID makes sure rehearsals are closed and union rules are followed. We make suggestions, and ultimately choreograph the scene, just like a Fight Director does. The work needs to be recordable (for example, X initiates the kiss, it lasts for 4 beats, with hands on the outer upper thigh, and Z initiates the break on

the light change) and repeatable (no improvising). The ID makes sure that there will be an intimacy call before each performance, and will discuss closure techniques to keep the work depersonalized. We're also available to modify choreography, should circumstances change which require adjustments – again, just as a Fight Director will modify choreography if an actor sprains an ankle.

On the first day of my Intimacy Direction training, we did an exercise where we stood in a circle, and one person gestured to another person in the circle. The second person simply said “yes” or “no.” If they said “yes” the first person walked to take the second person’s place in the circle. The second person then gestured to a third person, so they could take their place. Person one couldn’t take person two’s spot until person three said “yes” so person two could move. If any person said “no” the gesturing person simply moved on to another person until they got a “yes.”



Allison Bibicoff directs Andy Goldenberg & Chelsea Miller in *The Breast Western*, by Jaime Becker

Initially, I didn’t get the point. As someone who has always felt comfortable speaking up (in fact, in college my sorority gave me the “I Say What Everyone Else is Thinking” Award), it wasn’t until we discussed how some people felt when they said “no” that I understood. Though the exercise had zero consequences, some felt *guilty* saying “no”. This was especially so if the person gestured to before them had also said “no” because now there was more pressure to just say “yes”. Translate this pressure to say “yes” to a rehearsal room setting. Imagine how an actor may feel when the director (a person with the power to hire them, fire them, and recommend them) wants them to do something they are not comfortable doing. That’s a lot of pressure to just say “yes.”

I Still Don’t Think I Need An Intimacy Director.

Do you need a Fight Director for a fight scene, or are you okay just “going for it?” There’s a real risk of someone getting injured if you just go for it, right? The same goes for scenes involving intimacy. Just like you can make that punch safe *and* realistic, the same can be done with intimacy. Plus, many actors don’t have real life experience with all the intimate things they may be asked to do, so they can’t “just go for it.” And while a director may think they know how to handle an intimate scene, you simply don’t know what you don’t know. Even though they mean well, they are not trained on best practices regarding intimate scenes. And even if they are, the actor is going to feel more comfortable being honest about their concerns with someone who doesn’t have hiring and firing power over them.

Isn’t This Just Going To Make The Scenes Boring And Tame?

Just the opposite! IDs are not the sex police. We’re there to make sure the actor is a contributing member of the conversation and that it is clear what they are and are not okay with. And often, because the actor feels safer in the process, the scene will end up being more powerful because the scene was handled with respect and specificity. Establishing boundaries frees up space in the actor’s head to focus on the scene. If they’re not spending energy thinking about what their partner might accidentally do, they can use that energy to focus on the acting. Additionally, the more supported an actor feels, the further they will go. It may seem to take more time upfront, but it actually saves time in the long run, because you won’t have to troubleshoot later.

This is not about restricting people, but rather about empowering them.

Editor’s note: Join LA STAGE Alliance on September 21, 2019 from 11 am – 1 pm for our panel on Intimacy Direction. Admission to this event is free, visit the link to register!

<https://letstalkintimacydirectors.eventbrite.com/>