

Safe Sex

A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer



Alli Trussel and Craig Musser in *Between the Lines*, written, directed and choreographed by Tonia Sina at the University of Oklahoma Lab Theatre 2010.

By Tonia Sina

For years, Fight Directors have been used to manage actors' safety, to craft the stories of fights, and to ultimately contribute to the theatrical process. When I began graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University, I started with the lust for all things violent, and I pursued training in fight directing with a passion. But throughout my time there, it was revealed to me that there was a lesser-known need in theatre that was ideal for me to fill. This need is what I have come to call Intimacy for the Stage.

Up until now, Intimacy has been placed under the umbrella of "Movement," so any movement coach has to handle scenes like that.

SANDRA BENT

In my observations, the director often doesn't see intimacy or sexual scenes as a problem worthy of hiring a coach. This can result in even the best professionals skimming over the process, causing awkwardness and anxiety for the actors who have to fend for themselves. This anxiety is unnecessary and can easily be avoided with the hiring of an Intimacy Choreographer; a movement specialist who choreographs, coaches, and directs intimate and sexual scenes. Much like a fight choreographer, an intimacy choreographer uses similar techniques to teach and guide actors towards a safer, more professional, and dynamic telling of the story.

From Violence to Intimacy

When I was in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University, I played the role of Suzanne in *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. The actor playing Picasso was someone I didn't know very well at the time, and we didn't seem to have much chemistry throughout the rehearsal process. There is a passionate and sexual kiss between the two characters at the end of Act One. Our kiss was neither sexual nor passionate for the majority of the rehearsal process. It frustrated the two of us and the director so much that we came to resent the scene. Then one day the director told us to rehearse on our own and "fix" the kiss. It was tech week and there was little time to rehearse such a small detail with him anymore. We trudged into the lobby and decided the only way to make this kiss scene better was to ultimately pretend it was real. Suddenly the kiss perked right up, and the scene changed completely. Unfortunately, because neither of us approached it with the professionalism and outside eye of a choreographer, we now had crossed a line into reality that intruded on our scene. From then on the kiss was a little too easy and very real. Looking back I can't even say if it was a good kiss for the scene because my emotions were wrapped into it in an unhealthy way. Both of us foolishly ended our current relationships to date each other in a month-long "Showmance." Once reality had crept into the scene, the scene had crept into our reality. After this experience, I vowed that I would find a way to make sure this didn't happen to me, or anyone I worked with, again.

Simultaneously in my masters program, there were many graduate student directed projects going on each weekend. Many of them had scenes that needed fight directors and movement coaches. I was the youngest movement graduate student and also a female, so I was not generally the first person chosen to work on fight choreography projects in my first year. One day, a fellow pedagogy graduate student, directing a play that included a sex scene that started with a striptease, asked the movement majors if any of us could help him. The actress was an undergraduate, and he felt uncomfortable directing her so closely in such a sexually charged scene. I volunteered because, after my own experiences, I thought it would be a great opportunity to help this young woman overcome some of her discomfort with the scene. Together we deconstructed the moves into intentions and obstacles, and I supplied her with specific character driven choreography that showcased her body in a positive way. In the end, she gave a sexy and thrilling performance because her

striptease was specifically crafted to bolster her confidence. After the experience, other directors began coming to me with other sexual content that needed an outside eye. By the end of my second year I had used all of my fight director training to choreograph stripteases, lap dances, passionate kisses, orgasms, and even sexual tension, some of which were in the season's main stage shows. From these experiences as well as my own, I quickly realized that there was a desperate need for this untapped specialty.

Gender Relations and Heightened Emotional Scenes

After exploring my specialty as an intimacy choreographer, I began to notice the staged sexual scenes that didn't have a coach for intimacy. The actors' bodies would betray them in the small details. Where do their hands rest on each other? Are they breathing enough? Are they looking into each other's eyes? Have these actors rehearsed this enough? These kinds of distractions tend to muddle the performance, and if a sexual scene has any amount of insecurity in the choreography the audience will tend to feel embarrassed for the actors. An embarrassed audience is no longer present in the story of the play, they simply want the intimacy to stop. As with violence, there are so many small details that can affect a scene with intimacy, and the audience needs the story to be absolutely crystal clear.

Part of my time specializing in intimacy involved developing a course that I taught at the University of Oklahoma called *Gender Relations in Performance*. This acting class was solely based on sexual scenes, or scenes with "heightened emotions." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the class filled immediately and we took an entire semester studying, exploring, and choreographing scenes with intimacy and sexual content. We drilled exercises in a similar fashion to a sword technique class. Instead of weapons or fists, we used eye contact, breath, touch, sharing weight, contact improvisation, kissing and even some nudity. By the end of the semester, even the most timid and hesitant students performed a high-risk sexual scene for their final exam in front of an audience. It was an amazing and inspiring sight for such a conservative area of the country as Oklahoma.

As Martha Graham said, "The body says what words cannot." This is a common theme in staged fights. The characters might argue, which leads to a heated scene. When there is nothing more to say and the tension has built up to the breaking point, then there has to be an explosion of energy. That explosion is the fight. Sex is exactly the same. The audience needs the tension to build between these two characters. We need to know how they feel about each other. What kind of needs do they need to fulfill with the intimacy? When the "explosion" of energy happens, who initiates it? Who reciprocates, or resists? In that couple of seconds, the story has to be clear. As with violence, I teach my students that they need to "earn" the moment of intimacy that follows. If there isn't enough built up sexual tension, the intimacy will appear forced and awkward.

"A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become superfluous."—Ingrid Bergman



Safe Sex Techniques

I believe that sexual tension is not something that has to be faked, and my Gender Relations course directly explores this with the students. One of the first exercises I drill in class contains teaching the students how to find sexual tension with any person in the room. The students discuss and observe what happens to their bodies when they are attracted to someone, and apply this breath and movement when interacting with any scene partner with which they get paired. We do this without any touching at first, because the students aren't immediately ready to cross the line into physical contact.

Along with testing boundaries of sexuality on stage, we also spend a great amount of time focusing on safety measures for scene work. For example, one of my "real" rules for intimacy scenes is that the students should never be rehearsing without a third party present. It is far too tempting for young actors to slip out of the characters when rehearsing alone. An outside party simply aids in retaining the integrity of the scene by giving it an audience. Two actors kissing in a room are simply that: two actors kissing in a room. I convey to my students that communication is crucial to enable the actors to leave the onstage relationship on stage. This is the most important aspect, since briefly falling in love with every scene partner and leaving real life relationships for him or her is not a viable option. When we drill other intimacy techniques, the desensitization of the exercises causes the students to treat the scenes as choreography, not sex.

Later in the course I use intensity levels when choreographing kissing or body contact of any kind. For example an intensity level of 1 requires the lowest emotional stakes and 10 is the highest possible

Brooke Reynolds (Wendla) and Stephen Ibach (Melchior) in *Spring's Awakening*, adapted by Eric Bentley and directed by Tonia Sina at the University of Oklahoma Lab Theatre 2011.

investment of emotions (usually the step right before sex is initiated). These intensity levels are very useful in the communication between actors so that it is clear which one of them is leading at all times. Once the

uncertainty of who is leading the choreography has been broached, real world emotions and questions can interrupt the scene. The following is an example of an actress's possible dangerous inner monologue due to miscommunication:

"He just grabbed my thigh harder than he ever has. Is he grabbing me like that because he is actually attracted to me? I really like his aggression. Maybe I am attracted to him. I think he wants me to kiss him harder. Next time I am going to moan so he knows being aggressive is ok with me."

This situation can lead to a disaster. This is no longer the story of the play being told, it is the story of these two actors having a real intimate moment. The audience will sense it, detect awkwardness immediately, and they will be lost in the distraction. If the two actors want to pursue a relationship off stage they are welcome to do so, but using rehearsal time for this purpose is unethical and a waste of time. Having an Intimacy Choreographer can prevent all of these concerns before they begin, especially when working with young actors. The following is an outline of the Kissing Protocol that I use when teaching workshops and coaching kissing with students.

Kissing Protocol

1. Talk with your partner about your fears and boundaries
(Ex. I don't like being touched on my knee, I feel like I'm too short...)
2. Decide the story of the kiss
Who initiates?
Who leads?
Does the lead change throughout?
Who gives in?
List objectives of each character
List obstacles of each character
3. Discuss the energy of the kiss
Sexual, romantic, angry, desperate, forced, etc
Each character may have different energy, and that should influence the kiss energy
4. Agree in the intensity levels throughout the kiss
(On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 is lowest intensity, 10 is most urgent)
Does the intensity level change throughout the kiss?
Make sure both partners agree and are clear of any changing intensity
If intensity changes during, agree on who initiates change
5. Agree on the duration of the kiss
How do you know when to stop the kiss?
Technical interruption (lighting, music or sound cue)
Outside character interrupts
Kiss gets interrupted from within
6. Be aware of audience proximity
How close is the audience?
If extremely close, is tongue needed?
If audience is very distant, does the choreography need to be bigger?
7. Choreograph hand placement
Talk through where hands will go beforehand
No surprises when choreographing
Run through hand choreography without kissing so you can see where your hands are
8. Rehearse within full sight of a stage manager, the director, or the intimacy coach
Don't sneak off into a corner together
Don't pressure your partner to rehearse in a way that makes them uncomfortable
Keep open communication with the director, the coach, and your partner

Down to the Basics

In conclusion, there might not be as much physical danger to sex scenes as there is in fight scenes, but they share certain aspects. For example, both kinds of scenes need to be choreographed to tell the story in the script, both require the actors to be completely comfortable with their own and their partner's movements, and both require a common language for the choreography. I feel strongly that in scenes with intimacy open communication is more difficult and even more important. Not being able to discuss sexual content freely can be stifling and confusing for young actors. I mainly work with actors between ages 18 and 23, and I find that the majority of them tend to be slightly uncomfortable discussing sex publicly with people other than peers. Many of them are simply self-conscious about their bodies, but others don't feel as if they have a safe space in which they can talk about the details. Unlike stage combat, this is my responsibility to provide as an Intimacy Coach. I spend quite a bit of my coaching time tactfully explaining to the actors what is aesthetically pleasing about their bodies, and teaching them how to showcase those things. I teach them (men and women) how to walk in high heels, and we have to discuss the mechanics of sex in order to choreograph it truthfully. It can be a fine line, but in my experience this exchange helps loosen the actors up and gives them confidence to explore more risky material. At the end of the day, the details of strangling someone are just as important as the details of having an orgasm to an actor that has to perform both.

Just as in fight scenes, one doesn't have to necessarily have had similar life experiences in order to truthfully portray a scene with intimacy. Many fight directors from the SAFD that I know haven't even been in an actual physical fight. A good choreographer can teach good actors how to move as if they have. However, life experience does help to understand the emotions involved in any scene. Likewise, I have often found that just because a person has sexual experience in their social life, it does not make them an onstage expert. No matter what, an audience of one is not the same as an audience of 300. Even now as an actress who specializes in intimacy, I still need an outside eye to help with my own scenes. I simply cannot see my whole body while I am kissing my partner with my eyes closed. This is why Intimacy Coaches are so useful.

In graduate school I had a skeptical professor approach me with a wry grin and ask, "What makes you so qualified to teach this? Where do you get your research from?" And I simply said, "Like any acting coach. Life." I have no time for that to embarrass me. The truth is I have studied all kinds of sexual scenes for years, and my own experiences have absolutely contributed to my knowledge. Chemistry on stage and off stage fascinates me, and I love to choreograph it. So, no, I may not have a black belt in sexual arts. I do, however, have a fabulous collection of heels and sexy belts that happen to be black. —



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