

Staging Intimacy

BY STEPHANIE COEN



Chelsea Pace leading a boundary establishment practice at Chesapeake Shakespeare Company PHOTO Molly Prunty

“I like to say that the way we talk about intimacy is deeply unsexy.”

Chelsea Pace is talking to me over the phone from New Mexico about her work as an intimacy choreographer and “intimacy recipe writer” for Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE). This is one of two professional organizations I’ve reached out to for this article about the burgeoning field of intimacy choreography for the stage. (The other group is Intimacy Directors International, or IDI, represented by Houston-based intimacy director Adam Noble.) Pace is one of the founders of TIE, along with fellow theatre educator Laura Rikard, and she’s telling me how she got started in the field nine years ago, when she was coming up as an actor.

“I started asking questions about why there wasn’t a system for staging intimacy,” Pace says. “I wasn’t worried about any of it; I don’t have some great trauma that all of this stems from. I was a very happy actor. But the lack of clarity was surprising to me. I was starting to become interested in stage combat, which is so formalized through the Society of American Fight Directors and Dueling Arts International and other organizations that train fight choreographers and fight directors.

It was strange to me that there wasn’t anybody whose job this was.”

Today, Pace is a Baltimore-based director and educator who regularly choreographs intimacy and teaches workshops on the subject—as well as classes on movement and acting—around the country while also serving on the faculty at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. When I ask her to describe how she works with directors, she tells me that there are three options. The first is that the director says exactly what she or he wants. The second option is that Pace and the director work together with the actors to find what a moment should be. And in the third, Pace comes in to choreograph the moment as she thinks best serves the play.

“Option two is always my preference,” Pace says, “because I’m coming into the room as a collaborator. But all three of these options are responding to how the director wants to work.”

Intimacy choreography as a codified system extends back to 2006, when the term was first used by Noble’s colleague Tonia Sina. Sina created the Intimacy for the Stage method and serves as Executive Director of IDI, which she co-founded with Alicia Rodis and Siobhan Richardson. But, like Pace, many people I speak with tell me they first heard about the practice around 2010. Now—especially in the wake of influential men falling from power

and the rise of the #MeToo movement—intimacy choreography has become an increasingly widespread tool for the theatre field and for theatre training programs.

What exactly is intimacy on stage? One could borrow a phrase from Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart and say about intimacy: “I know it when I see it.” Noble sends an email response to this query: “In brief, intimacy refers to the close, personal (and often private) interactions that occur between lifeforms.” The term might encompass, without being limited to, such actions as eye contact, a kiss, a grope, a grab, nudity, or a sex scene. Intimacy directors are also often called upon to stage scenes of sexual violence.

Directors and choreographers, of course, have been staging intimate—and often provocatively sexual—moments since the beginning of theatre. Recently, Mark Wing-Davey introduced a class called “Sex on Stage” at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts (where he is Chair of the Graduate Acting Program) and taught it himself. “I’m used to staging scenes like that,” he told the *New York Times*.

But in the past, it seems, actors were often left to figure intimate moments out themselves—to fumble and find their way. “I remember being an actor and being in scenes, and kisses and embraces were never



Melia Bensussen in rehearsal for *A Doll's House* at Huntington Theatre Company
 PHOTO Nile Scott Shots/Nile Hawver

choreographed,” **Seema Sueko**, the Deputy Artistic Director at Arena Stage, tells me. “It was like, ‘Well, you’re human, you should figure out how to do it.’”

“Actors were supposed to just ‘go for it’ or negotiate with each other through hand signals and raised eyebrows,” **Evan Yionoulis**, the Richard Rodgers Director of Drama at The Juilliard School, agrees. “It was unfair to put actors in that position. And I can’t believe that it resulted in better theatre.”

One of the key things about intimacy choreography is that it is recordable and repeatable. “It really is choreography,” Pace says.

“The stage manager can write it down. So if it starts getting weird on opening night or three months into the run, the stage manager can come back to it—just like it’s blocking—and say, that’s not where this cross is, that’s not how this kiss goes. So it is all about empowering the actor by having a technique for actually staging intimacy, but it’s just as much in service to directors because I’m bringing into the room a system that allows them to have the kind of process they want to have with the result that they’re looking for.”

“As the director, it’s really helpful to communicate to the stage manager what the choreography is in the intimate moment,

and to have that written down so that there is documentation,” agrees **Dan Knechtges**, Artistic Director of Theatre Under the Stars (TUTS). “On this page, on this word, you are supposed to touch this person’s breast; you are supposed to kiss this person at this moment. Especially on a long run where things evolve, and one of the actors says, ‘Oh, this doesn’t feel quite right.’ The stage manager knows whether the performers are actually doing it the way that it was choreographed.”

The first step is for people to recognize when they do and do not need a pro.”

– Chelsea Pace

What’s clear is that intimacy choreography is a tool. It is much like fight choreography, which is probably the closest analogy—and a

useful one. “I think we all understand enough about fight choreography at this point that we don’t expect anybody to actually punch anybody else and we assume a fight choreographer will be in rehearsal,” **Melia Bensussen**, the newly appointed Artistic Director of Hartford Stage Company, says. “When an actor reads that there’s a slap in a script, the actor doesn’t have to worry that the director is going to insist that he really be slapped.”

Even intimacy choreographers, however, are quick to say, as Pace does, that “not every production with intimacy in it needs an intimacy choreographer. I 100 percent believe

that. It’s just like a show that has a single slap in it. If the director has got some experience with stage combat, they can stage a slap. The first step is for people to recognize when they do and do not need a pro.”

“There are certain moments in a play in which somebody might push or shove somebody else, and I might feel comfortable as a director staging that moment. There are also certain scenes that would require me to bring in a fight director,” Yionoulis says. “I think of intimacy choreography in the rehearsal process in the same way. There are plays in which the graphic nature of the intimacy, as indicated in the text, might require someone with special expertise doing work of that kind.”

In a series of interviews, I spoke with intimacy specialists, directors, choreographers, and educators to talk about this work. Several directors spoke with me after participating in workshops with IDI and TIE, organized by SDC and its Executive Board this past winter. An equal number of directors declined to be interviewed—reflecting, perhaps, the field’s uncertainty about intimacy work.

Barbara Wolkoff, SDC’s longtime Director of Member Services, has seen many changes to best practices in her 21 years as a member of the Union’s staff. “This is a big, heightened conversation that can explode into a new way of thinking or working or open up a door,” she says of the emerging discipline. “And not all directors want—or need—to use an intimacy choreographer. The Union’s role is to be a repository for all points of view. As a responsible leadership group of directors





and choreographers across the country—and, to an extent, across the world—this Executive Board felt, and feels, that it's important to know what ideas and tools are out there."

The intimacy specialists and many of the directors I speak with all teach, and they go easily back and forth between describing their work in the classroom and the methodology they use in the rehearsal room. Pace's system is called "The Ingredients." Noble calls his method "Extreme Stage Physicality." Yionoulis talks about "containers," and Sueko describes a process of "scaffolding."

The words that people use to describe intimacy choreography are different, but what becomes very clear is that this new field is deeply connected to a language of boundaries and consent. Boundaries are established and reinforced; consent (or non-consent) must be given and renewed. And actors are now being encouraged to speak up about how, and when, they are comfortable being touched. As Laura Rikard from TIE puts it, "I often say we're trying to teach how



to have a 'positive no' in a 'yes, and' creative process."

Wolkoff notes, "Safety in the rehearsal room is something that all of our Members are concerned about. But there are different kinds of safety. There's safety in knowing you can take a risk—and there's the safety of knowing that the skill in the room is going to allow it to be safe in a way that the work is potent and real without anybody having a concern for their ultimate well-being. And the person with that skill might be the director or an intimacy choreographer or a fight director or a choreographer. Safety is a collaborative word, not a protective word.

"The nature of what our Members do is to bring the skill of permission and boundaries to a room," Wolkoff continues. "There are a lot of our Members for whom this skill translates directly into intimacy work because there's an understanding of the tension between permission and boundaries. They understand where the limits are, where the boundaries are, and where the borders are. And that happens because there's enough skill in the room, and enough permission in the room, to talk about what's comfortable and what's uncomfortable."

At The Juilliard School, Yionoulis created protocols for "Rehearsing Material with Sexual Content" for Juilliard students, based on guidance from IDI and following the example of Yale School of Drama, where she previously taught.

"In a training program, we have students working on their own, doing scenes without a director. Clear protocols are necessary for them to be free to do their work within



Adam Noble working with Kyle Clark + Catherine Thomas on an intimate scene in *The Debasers* at University of Houston



certain boundaries," she tells me. "Directors also need to know how to do this work in a way that allows a story to be told through choices that do not violate the actors themselves as they embody intimate events in their characters' lives."

"The idea of consent is very important," Yionoulis says. "Let's say there's extended kissing or intimacy in a scene. We need to open up a conversation. The first step in all of this is talking about what the moment is. Who's initiating this act? Does the other character want this or not? And how do we tell that story physically? As a director, I would have a conversation with the actors determining what the moment is about, establishing a container of consent around where are we touching and where we aren't, and then allow for free exploration within those parameters. Intimacy training stresses that consent has to be renewed each time we rehearse something. Today, I feel comfortable with you touching my breast. Tomorrow, I might say, could you not touch my breast? I think that's a useful part of our working process.

"However, as a director," Yionoulis continues, "I do feel that once we're nearing or in performance, there is a professional expectation that consent will not be unnecessarily withheld. Of course, in some situations, modifications could be made that wouldn't undermine the telling of the



Laura Rikard leading a Theatrical Intimacy Education Workshop
PHOTO Brian Offidani

Seema Sueko in rehearsal for *Vietgone* at Denver Center for the Performing Arts
PHOTO John Moore



story, just as you would modify a combat moment to accommodate injury. But if, for instance, nudity is absolutely required for the telling of a particular story, with pre-casting notification, as Equity requires, or if a particular kind of touch is necessary, if an actor is not able to do that or does not feel comfortable doing that—then that might be a situation where one would need to find another actor to fulfill the requirements of the role.”

“I do think a lot of focus has gone into, ‘Well, intimacy directors and intimacy coordinators are just helping actors say no,’” Noble allows. “But this work is about serving productions, and the intimacy choreographer is someone who, as a part of your design team, can help you tell a story.”

Every intimacy specialist I speak with stresses that the work they do is not about shutting down or limiting the creative power of the director. “There are directors and choreographers who have been hesitant about this,” Pace says, “and who think that this means they’re going to lose some of their creative agency in the room, and so they’ve been resistant to it. And I get that. They’re starting to see why it’s so necessary. And it’s always fun for me, the moment when the directors and choreographers and educators in the room realize that I’m not trying to make their lives harder. I’m actually trying to give them tools so they can get exactly what they want in a way that everybody’s going to feel good about it.”

“I was not open to it at the very beginning, and I still have some reservations about it, to be completely transparent,” says Knechtges. “My concerns are about still allowing the organic nature and style that many plays and certainly some musicals have, and allowing the actors to organically develop moments. And I worried that that would be completely killed. But I learned from the workshop that it’s just another tool. It’s not meant to kill any sort of organic process.”

“It’s really asking permission and communicating and making sure everyone is clear on what is allowed and what isn’t,” Knechtges continues. “As dancers, our bodies are our instruments. We are so used to displaying the body, to having the body touched, and to having the body manipulated. A lot of partnering work happens where hands are oftentimes on sensitive areas, the groin or around the chest or a situation like that. So it is challenging because it is requiring us to assume that everything is okay with that. It is a conversation first that doesn’t need to be a lengthy one, but there is a process of conversation that happens instead of just jumping right to it. It does give people working in the room more tools to be able to be creative in a safe way.”

“I found what was most enlightening about the training sessions that SDC provided were the language options to increase my vocabulary and desexualize the direction of sexual moments,” Bensusen tells me. “You really can find other verbs, other ways of expressing similar ideas that get you to the same result but do not engage you in what might be triggering verbs or adjectives. The training gave us a useful set of tools to add to our kits, in order for actors to feel more open and comfortable in exposing themselves to these complicated moments of staging and emotional impact.”

Sueko also finds storytelling value in giving actors a specific, shared vocabulary to say no.

She first encountered the term “intimacy choreography” in 2010, when she ran the Mo’olelo Performing Arts Company in San Diego and brought Colleen Kelly in from the University of Virginia to teach a workshop on theatrical intimacy. (Kelly is one of only four women who have earned the professional designation of Fight Director of the Society of American Fight Directors and specializes in the development of physical techniques for staging scenes of intimacy, abuse, and sexual assault.)

But it wasn’t until 2018 that Sueko first worked professionally with an intimacy

Lisa Helmi Johanson + Glenn Morizio in *Vietgone*, directed by **Seema Sueko**
PHOTO AdamsVisCom c/o Denver Center for the Performing Arts



choreographer, on a production of Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone* at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. "The playwright writes things like, 'She straddles him. She rips off his shirt. They kiss passionately. They kiss with more meaning,'" Sueko tells me on a break from a rehearsal of *The Heiress* at Arena Stage. "There's a lot of contact that's written in the stage directions. As soon as I saw that, I said to the folks at Denver Center, 'I think I'm going to need an intimacy consultant on this.' They didn't miss a beat, because they were very fortunate that one of their house managers, Samantha Egle, is a fight director and an intimacy consultant for IDI. They signed her on board as my assistant fight director and intimacy consultant."

The *Vietgone* process began with a contextualizing conversation between Sueko and Egle, followed by a workshop where Egle led the actors through what Sueko describes as "a series of consent exercises" with the actors "facing one another, making eye contact, breathing, asking permission to step forward, and then the person at the other end either being able to give consent or practice saying no. And that was really powerful, especially practicing saying no—because we don't normally say no in the rehearsal room."

The workshop exercises then "scaffolded" into a process through which the actors took inventory of where they did—and did not—want to be touched. Sueko describes the process this way: "May I take your right hand and place it on my elbow? May I take this and put it on that? Then we added duration: May I do that for two seconds? For 10 seconds?" As they continued to "scaffold up," physical actions—a hug, an embrace—were added. And, at each moment, the actors were asked to give consent or not.

"An unexpected benefit of all of this was after we did that workshop, it ended up creating a vocabulary that also permeated the scene work," Sueko says. "Often, in scene work, we're making offers of ideas and/or an idea is offered to us and we need to be able to ask the questions about it, navigate it, give consent, or find a way to say no if it's not an idea we're interested in. The vocabulary that arose out of the intimacy workshop ended up being vocabulary that the actors naturally used in scene work. That was incredible, and the ability to ask for consent, give consent, receive consent, or receive non-consent—the opposite of consent—was very easy. People could say no, and nobody felt bad about it."

Noble says, "Unfortunately, there are still a lot of actors who feel that speaking their truth or saying no to something makes them

the problem in the room. People are more willing to speak up in a fight rehearsal; I will have actors and actresses say, 'This is really making me uncomfortable. That sword feels like it's really close to my head. I don't know about this move.' They're willing to do that with a fight, and for the most part, directors say, 'We'll change it because it feels unsafe.' And yet, when we get to the intimacy side of it, people are less willing to state that they're uncomfortable because they don't want to be seen as a problem or prude or damaged. I tell people, it's never wrong to speak your truth and say, 'No, that's not something that I will do.'"

"It's a sliding scale of input. If you've got an intimacy director in the rehearsal room, then it can be more direct. The director says, 'I want them to kiss here and slide onto the couch with him on top and then X, Y, and Z.' Maybe there's not any problem, and that's fine. That's what the actors do, and we're great. But if I have spoken to both of the actors and I know that she has issues being pinned down, then I might just ask, 'Hey, would it be all right if she's on top?' to try and figure out how we get the director's vision, the story, and the blueprints that we've set up and be true to the performer's boundaries while delivering the story."

Evan Yionoulis in rehearsal for *He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box* at Theatre for a New Audience
PHOTO Gerry Goodstein



Noble's work has three layers. The first is the story—what the playwright is trying to say, what the director is trying to say—and getting everyone on the same page. The second layer, he explains, "is character. And that's where the actors get to say, 'Well, this is what I think my character would do. This is how I think my character would respond in these circumstances.'" The third layer is the audience and what they are to do, feel, or understand from the moment.

It is in working on the second layer, Noble says, that he insists that every actor has some boundaries. "But I've found that some actors and actresses can get shut down by the boundary process," he tells me.

"I'm not allowed to touch you there and I'm not allowed to touch you there. What do I do?" Each scene partner then offers permissions that are about the communication of consent and knowing what the actor is okay with, as well as what they are not okay with—so they have a starting point for exploration of places where the actor would like to be touched or that they think would serve the scene."

"I just think," Noble offers, "we can tell better stories if we are careful with people, if we are putting them in a safe space where they can offer you their best work."

On its website, Intimacy Directors International includes a note on the role of the intimacy director that includes this statement: "The Intimacy Director takes responsibility for the emotional safety of the actors and anyone else in the rehearsal hall while they are present."

It is statements like this, it seems, that point to a divide in how intimacy choreography is being received by directors and others in the profession. (TIE does not subscribe to this idea.)

"I think when we start framing it that specialists need to be brought into rehearsal for the actors' protection," Yionoulis says, "we start implying that actors need to be protected from the process, and I fear that can infantilize actors and imply that others in the production process, namely directors, are people they have to be protected against at all costs."

Bensussen puts it this way: "As a director, I am very comfortable being responsible for everything that happens within my rehearsal room. I see some of the language around responsibility for each other exceeding the boundaries of what we're required to do professionally. Even in the intimacy choreography workshop—and our coaches were terrific—there was some language around actor self-care and how to support the actor in their self-care. I don't see that as our job as directors. I see our job as directors to make the room one in which the actor can thrive. But that's different than advocating, mandating, supporting, sculpting, even mentoring a professional actor outside of a rehearsal process. I think these are interesting distinctions that we're going to have to make. I've done a lot of teaching and I've seen the change happen in students. I think it will be interesting to see how the profession helps actors feel empowered in the rehearsal room but also independent outside of it and not dependent on the director to take care of things beyond what should be the directors' purview."

"What is also helpful about this training—is it permeates all the training programs and, specifically, actor training programs—is that directors need to know the language the next generation of performers is being taught," Bensussen continues. "There is a generational shift now, not only because of the #MeToo movement—which has been such a great ray of light into these dark corners that too

many people have ignored—but in addition, there's a different view of actor/director relationships, of what it means to lead a room, and to feel safe or feel empowered. All of this is changing, so being exposed to the next generation's language and training is crucial."

"...we can tell better stories if we are careful with people, if we are putting them in a safe space where they can offer you their best work."

– Adam Noble

"The approaches that I've been learning as a director through my connections with training institutions, first at Yale and now at Juilliard, have made me feel more equipped to handle moments of sexual intimacy," Yionoulis offers. "But as directors, our job is to tell a story. It's not our job to find out what an actor's personal past history might be. And therefore, actors do need to be empowered to speak up, and directors need to provide a context in which actors are able to speak up, as we figure out together how to tell the story using their bodies. It is a practice of respect and collaboration that just strengthens the fact that we're all working for the same goal, and that everyone's contribution matters, and that actors' agency is invited in the work."

I spoke with Knechtges at the end of a rehearsal day in Houston. "A lot of it to me is less about the surrounding pedagogy around intimacy," he says. "It does give people working in the room more tools to be able to be creative in a safe way. I'm in rehearsal right now with *Mamma Mia!*, which sounds kind of light and fluffy. And it is. But there are many moments where people are kissing, pulling one another, or touching one another intimately. It has caused me to relate information to our actors who are now asking for permission on how to do that."

If a frothy musical like *Mamma Mia!* lands at one end of the spectrum, *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris—which was cited by many people I spoke with for this article as possessing what Yionoulis calls "a certain boldness

and explicitness about intimacy appearing in some contemporary writing for the theatre"—lands at the other. The website of New York Theatre Workshop, which produced the play under the direction of **Robert O'Hara** last winter, offers this advisory: "This play contains nudity, sexual content, simulated sexual violence, and racially violent language." (See O'Hara's reflection on p. 7 about working with an intimacy director on this play.)

In between those two extremes might be a play like *The Heiress*, which Sueko was rehearsing when we spoke. "There are a few embraces and kisses in *The Heiress*," she says, "so I did a mini-workshop based on what I learned from Samantha so that we could have a vocabulary to build those hugs, embraces, and kisses. Every embrace is very specific dramaturgically. That seemed appropriate for me to do in a show like *The Heiress*, where it's set in 1850, even though the type of physical intimacy is different from *Vietgone*."

"When we're in the rehearsal room, my goal is to get the intimacy staged in a way that everybody in the room feels fantastic about it, and that it can be directed and tweaked as it needs to be because it's been staged with language that's actually directable," says Pace. "It's just bodies moving together in space to tell a story. And that gives a lot of power to the director. It also gives a lot of power to the actor. I think there's this idea that by empowering one group in the room, somebody else has to be giving something up. And I think if the tools that we're bringing up into the room are actually making space for everybody to get what they want, then there's no downside." **SDC**

Sally Wilfert + Berklea Going in *Mamma Mia!* at Theatre Under the Stars, directed by **Dan Knechtges**

PHOTO Melissa Taylor

