

How intimacy directors can make Australian sets and sex scenes safer in the #MeToo era

ABC Arts By Beverley Wang for Stop Everything!

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PHOTO: Demand for intimacy directing and coordinating is rising in the wake of #MeToo. (Supplied: Nora Theatre Company/A.R. Sinclair)

"Pretty much every actor I speak to — and I come into contact with many every day — have a story of either their own experience, or someone that they were in a show with, that ranges from the uncomfortable to the downright abusive."

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Claire Warden is a frequent confidante due to her work: she specialises in intimacy and sex scenes for stage and screen productions.

"I've heard of full, actual, physical, sexual assaults as part of filming ... I've heard of many people getting physically hurt, as well as emotionally and psychologically hurt; of directors deciding that they would take off their clothes and play the part of the actor with young actors," she tells ABC's Stop Everything!

The New York-based British theatre practitioner is what is known as an "intimacy director" (or in the screen industry, "intimacy coordinator").

It's a role that involves not only choreographing simulated sex scenes, but ensuring safe spaces for actors to perform these scenes — which sometimes include depictions of sexual assault and violence.

It isn't a new profession — but unsurprisingly, demand for this work is rising in the wake of #MeToo.

Last month, HBO announced it would use intimacy coordinators for all productions with sex scenes — a move Warden describes as "a fundamental shift in the entire nature of the industry".

This followed the use of an intimacy coordinator during filming for season two of *The Deuce*, a series about the porn industry in 1970s New York.

The intimacy coordinator working on *The Deuce*, and now across a range of HBO productions, is Alicia Rodis, co-founder of the non-profit Intimacy Directors International, where Warden is a co-leader.



PHOTO: There are calls to have more intimacy directors like Warden (centre right) in rehearsal rooms in Australia. (Supplied: Darrell Hoemann)

'People are finally listening'

When it comes to sexual assault in the theatre and screen industries, Warden says "it's not that the behaviour suddenly got worse, it's that people started to listen — and that people were finally empowered enough to be able to be heard when talking about what needed to change in the industry".

The #MeToo movement has been both a symptom and an enabler of change. In late 2017 — around the time that allegations of sexual assault and misconduct were breaking against Harvey Weinstein and other powerful Hollywood figures — actress Emily Meade, part of *The Deuce* cast, went to HBO executives and asked them to employ an intimacy director.

They listened.

On the set of *The Deuce*, Rodis does everything from making sure actors' genitals are taped and covered, to choreographing the action in sex scenes.

"It's not the things [she does] that are so radical," Meade told *Rolling Stone*. "It's just having someone other than yourself to think about it.

"It shouldn't be a radical concept to give someone something to cover their private parts. But to have someone do it at all — the gesture of it — it helps."

Rodis concurred, telling Rolling Stone: "I am here to give a voice to actors, especially actors who feel like they don't have one. And I'm also here for the producers, to make sure that they know they're doing their best to make sure the set is safe."

David Simon — co-creator of *The Deuce* (and creator and showrunner of *The Wire*) — told Rolling Stone that after working with Rodis, he doesn't want to work without an intimacy coordinator again.

"Because the truth is, we knew we were asking a lot of actors and directors and crew in terms of professionalism and to deliver this material bluntly and honestly. But you can ask all you want — at a certain point everybody has to trust everybody."

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Intimacy director Claire Warden speaks to Stop Everything!

Blurred lines



PHOTO: Warden says keeping fiction and reality separate in the rehearsal room can be challenging. (Supplied: Darrell Hoemann)

Warden says keeping fiction and reality separate in the rehearsal room can be harder than the layperson might realise.

"It's a very complex emotional ground in which we're working," she says.

"Our bodies and our psyches are so closely linked, and our psyches sometimes, when we're acting, have difficulty telling the difference between real and our imagination."

A key pillar of her practice as an intimacy director involves getting actors to develop a shared sign or closure ritual at the end of acting an intimate or sexual scene.

It's a small gesture that reminds those involved that they are leaving those dynamics behind.

"And if you're telling a particularly taxing emotional story, or if you're doing a particularly heavily intimate or sexual scene, it can be difficult if you don't have a structure around it, and something that continually lets you know that this is work, and that we're doing this to serve the story — and it isn't real."

Calls for a cultural shift in the Australian theatre industry

In the Australian theatre industry, intimacy directors are still a rarity.

In a recent episode of ABC's Q&A devoted to theatre, Toby Schmitz, a playwright and actor, was ambivalent about the need for them:

"One can't help but think, 'oh, does that complicate it further? And how do we get the good result where you get something electric, where you actually get a bit of a buzz between people'," he said.

"The only people who can really make that work are the two people who are doing it, and that takes rehearsal time, conversation, understanding, trust, respect. And sometimes those two people may be completely different kinds of people, and then you may need someone like an intimacy officer or whatever it is."

Speaking on the same panel, Zindzi Okenyo, actor, musician and Play School presenter, said while #MeToo had prompted "massive change" in the theatre industry, developing protocols to suit artistic environments was tricky.

"It's fair enough, you know, that there's, kind of, laughter from the crowd when we talk about an intimacy officer. It is, it's funny, it's strange," she said.

"[But] we need to actually put more things in place in order to get to a point where we don't have to worry, that that is just there, that that's the protocol; that I know that when I go to work I am going to be in a safe space, and it is going to be consensual."

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PHOTO: Clare Watson, artistic director of Black Swan State Theatre Company, says intimacy directors are "a great step forward".
(Supplied: Darrell Hoemann)

The first steps of that shift have been taken. In November and December the Equity Foundation, a union-affiliated professional development body for actors, is holding events around Australia with UK-based intimacy director Ita O'Brien.

Clare Watson, artistic director of Black Swan State Theatre Company in Perth, told ABC RN's The Hub on Stage that intimacy directors should be viewed in the same light as vocal coaches or fight directors.

She says "I think that having this idea of an intimacy officer, somebody whose job it is to make sure that the conversation has happened around how people feel most comfortable going into a scene — I think that's a great step forward for us as an industry."