

# The Impact of Intimacy Choreography and Consent-Based Practices in Undergraduate Actor Training

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*This article is a revised version of a post written for OnStage Blog (June 30, 2022) titled "The impact of intimacy direction/choreography (or lack thereof) on students in educational theatre." These revisions include more thorough research into theatrical intimacy and education, in hopes to convince faculty members in collegiate actor training programs of the importance of consent-based performance practices to the well-being and professional development of young theatre artists such as myself.*

## About the Author:

Kaila Roach (she, her) is an undergraduate student currently studying at California State University, Chico. She will be graduating with a BA in Theatre Arts in Spring 2023. She discovered her love of theatre during high school and has since been cast in productions of *Oklahoma!*, *Footloose*, *Shrek The Musical*, and *Urinetown: The Musical*. Kaila had her first experience with consent-based practices in her Foundations of Acting class taught by instructor Jami Dru Witt Miller. The following semester, Kaila was cast in a consent-based production of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Jami Dru Witt Miller, where she observed the implementation of intimacy direction firsthand. It was because of these experiences that Kaila felt more valued as an artist and that she could make her voice heard. Kaila believes everyone deserves to have a voice and feel important and respected, which inspired her to research deeper into intimacy direction/choreography and consent-based practices.

**As humans, we *always* have the right to say no and to express our boundaries. How can we ensure that actors have the space and the tools to do this?**

The craft of acting requires that actors live in imaginary circumstances. These circumstances, though imaginary, do not negate the fact that the humans who are playing a character deserve basic respect. Acting is an art and a profession that sometimes requires more physical intimacy than others, and this is not something that should be taken lightly. Performers should be provided the tools to do their job safely and effectively. This means having an **intimacy professional**—“a choreographer, an advocate for actors, and a liaison between actors and production for scenes that involve nudity/hyper exposed work, simulated sex acts, and intimate physical contact” (Intimacy Directors & Coordinators n.d.)—involved in the rehearsal process for shows requiring physical intimacy. More specifically, an **intimacy choreographer or intimacy director** is someone who carries out this kind of direction for “theatre and live performance,” and an **intimacy coordinator** does the same for “TV and film” (Intimacy Directors & Coordinators n.d.). Just as chemistry professors provide students with the information and guidance to safely explore the full scope of their work, theatre instructors need to equip their students with the tools to perform to the best of their ability and feel protected from possible harm. Like a chemist without safety goggles, the absence of consent-based practices can have lasting, detrimental effects.

As an undergraduate theatre major, my experiences with consent-based practices revolutionized my approach to this art form. I believe that an intimacy professional needs to be present in every rehearsal room for productions that require physical intimacy, especially educational rehearsal rooms. Furthermore, consent-based practices should be a foundational element of all undergraduate theatre curricula, specifically as part of a first-year course, to equip students right out of the gate with a “boundary toolkit.” While working with an intimacy professional is a first layer of protection for undergraduate performers, adding consent-based practices to first-year curriculum is a much-needed second layer of protection for students—

one which becomes the first layer of defense during coursework and other experiences in which working with an intimacy professional is not an option. I believe that learning consent-based practices as part of a core curriculum would give students the confidence to communicate their boundaries and be their own advocates. Although an intimacy professional should be involved in rehearsal processes for shows containing physical intimacy, students will also have tools from the curriculum they can use to protect themselves as they enter the “real world.” The presence of an intimacy professional and the implementation of this curriculum must come together. Consequently, if an actor encounters a situation outside of the educational setting in which they foresee a personal boundary being crossed for them, they will have tools to support them in approaching the situation.

Educating students on consent-based practices is not a want; it is a need. In an article titled “Intimate Exchanges,” Carey Purcell (2018) discusses a situation that spurred educator, violence coordinator, and intimacy specialist Adam Noble into action: a student was sexually assaulted during a rehearsal in her scene partner’s dorm room. Thinking back, Noble said: “We were sending these kids off on their own devices with no foundation for how to approach this stuff” (qtd in Purcell 2018). Thus, *Extreme Stage Physicality, or E.S.P.*, was born. This actionable practice“ provide[d] students with a framework to address what he called in an article for *The Fight Master* magazine ‘scenarios of intense physicality ’with comfort and confidence” (Purcell 2018). Noble noted that with this procedure set into place, “the number of reported incidents and problems dropped to zero” (Purcell 2018). A best practices curriculum assists departments in ensuring multiple people in the rehearsal room, and the classroom, are knowledgeable about approaching onstage intimacy. Therefore, the likelihood of someone being harmed in the process is significantly reduced.

The implementation of a consent-based framework can have a significant influence on students. It is essential that theatre instructors recognize the importance of such framework. Therefore, throughout this article, I will discuss published research and speak firsthand about this framework’s impact on me as a student. As an undergraduate student at Chico State, I felt

relieved and pleasantly surprised by the ground rules my acting teacher, Jami Dru Witt Miller (she/her), established in my Foundations of Acting class (typically a first-semester course). Miller is “trained in Best Practices, Intimacy Choreography, and Consent in the Acting Classroom by *Theatrical Intimacy Education*” and “a member of Theatrical Intimacy Education’s Educator Advocate pilot program” (Miller n.d.). Miller implemented several techniques from *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* by Chelsea Pace with contributions from Laura Rikard, a book she always made sure to have on hand, during our class. As Pace describes in the book, “*Staging Sex* lays out a comprehensive, practical solution for staging intimacy, nudity, and sexual violence” (Pace 2020). Pace explains this book “is an essential tool for theatre practitioners who encounter theatrical intimacy or instructional touch, whether in rehearsal or in the classroom” (Pace 2020).

Miller made it clear that we all have a voice as actors. She encouraged us to use our voices by repeating and paraphrasing quotes from the book, including “Your boundaries are perfect exactly where they are” and “It’s ok if your boundaries change. Check in on boundaries with your partner” (Pace 2020, 15). She also explained that boundaries are not personal; they just are, which is another point Pace makes in the book (Pace 2020, 15). Before we started acting, we practiced doing what is referred to as “The Boundary Practice” (Pace 2020, 17) with our peers. Pace (2020) explains, “The Boundary Practice is an exercise designed to address the complex problems of unclear expectations and general awkwardness around negotiating consensual touch” and involves three “Boundary Tools” (17). Miller introduced the three tools we can use to establish boundaries as actors, which include Button, Fences, and Gates (Pace 2020, 17). As Pace (2020) notes in her book, “The Button is a word that indicates that the action needs to pause for a moment” (17). Miller helped us practice using the word and become more comfortable saying it in general. She made it clear we were encouraged to use Button at any time, even if it was not intimacy-related. I felt this tool gave us a lot of agency as acting students.

Button is a great tool, applicable in many intimate scenarios an actor may encounter. However, Button also has valuable applications outside of intimacy work. For example, perhaps my scene requires that I throw a ball across the stage, but before one rehearsal, I injure my arm. I might say “Button” when I get to this part of the scene, allowing me to mark it for this rehearsal instead of throwing. Button can be used at any time and in any context throughout a student’s education to take a breath and ask what they need.

After acquiring an understanding of how to use Button, Miller taught us how to use the other boundary tools. With an understanding of all three tools, we could then participate in “The Boundary Practice” as a whole. Pace (2020) goes on to say, “The Boundary Practice has two major components: a physical exercise and a verbal reinforcement” (17). Jami led us through “The Boundary Practice” itself several times, described in detail in *Staging Sex*, pages 24-30. Miller explained an important concept about boundaries: just as we do not question why one has a fence around their home, we do not question why someone has a fence around an area of their body. Pace also outlines this concept in her book (Pace 2020, 23). Miller consistently reminded us of the three tools and had us use them before rehearsing a scene. Even if we had done Boundary Practice previously, we would check in again because boundaries can change.

After reading about what Noble’s student experienced, it is clearer to me now why having these “Boundary Tools” is essential and why Miller stressed the importance of rehearsing in public spaces. I came into her class not knowing these tools were available to use in asserting my boundaries as an actor. Furthermore, I could use these without fear of being seen as difficult to work with or high maintenance. I am grateful to be joining the field at this time when more people are becoming aware of the importance of intimacy choreography and consent-based practices. It is crucial for students to learn how to approach intimate scenes safely to prevent harm from occurring (see, for example Shively 2022, 74-80).

College is a time when students explore and learn about themselves, their bodies, and the world around them. They are realizing what they like and don’t like. They should come

into educational spaces feeling empowered to find and use their agency in a controlled, guided way. Intimacy work acts as a foundation that allows students to do just that. With the guidance of an intimacy professional through this work, students will be encouraged to discover and establish boundaries, to say “no,” and ultimately to uncover their full potential as artists. Students will find power in knowing their voices matter and they deserve to feel safe and respected throughout their careers.

Let us dive a little bit deeper into the importance of intimacy professionals and consent-based practices in educational theatre. In 2006, Tonia Sina, “creator of the Intimacy for the Stage method and co-founder and executive director of Intimacy Directors International,” coined the term “intimacy choreography” (Purcell 2018). In the article, Purcell mentions, “While studying movement pedagogy, including clowning and mime, Sina was helping to choreograph intimate scenes in student-directed plays and found what she described as “a hole” in choreography and no resources to help with her work.” Sina’s realization echoes Noble’s, and these echoes highlight the lack of, and the need for, intimacy choreography tools within actor training. Noble had been staging fight choreography for many years when the incident with his students occurred—Purcell mentions that he “staged his first theatrical fight in 1992”—and this incident led to Noble’s observation that theatre educators provided tools for students performing violence, but were not similarly preparing students to safely approach intimate scenes (Ibid).

Noble and Sina’s statements indicate that actor training programs readily accepted the need for fight choreography as obvious. And yes, it can be dangerous to stage physical violence without a fight choreographer; performers can get hurt. But these same actor training programs and higher education theatre faculty did not see the parallel need for someone to oversee the staging of intimacy. As a current undergraduate student enrolled in an actor training program, I believe that safety tools and specialists for intimacy choreography are equally as important as they are for choreographing a fight. But theatre departments across

the country have not yet taken action to provide these resources to all of their students, even though specialists and tools for staging intimacy are readily available.

Through creating E.S.P. in 2011, Noble was able to help prepare students to safely and consensually approach staging both performances of physical violence *and* physical intimacy in scenework for class and performance. Noble (2011) explains that as a faculty and resident fight consultant at the University of Houston, where he also worked as the safety officer and movement specialist, he “realized that I could not possibly be everywhere at once, tweaking student fights at all hours, and in the various strange locales that [students] found for themselves to rehearse. The necessity of teaching students a way to safely approach scenes containing sexual intimacy or aggression *on their own* became clear” (14). In his attempt to resolve his concern and serve his student population, Noble created and taught actors with “a foundation of safety” so that if they are ever without a professional, although he still recognized the value in working with a professional when possible (Ibid). Sina wrote about her approaches to intimacy choreography in 2006, and Noble's approaches were published in 2011 (Villarreal 2022, 9-10). These tools have been available for a while. Now, in 2022, these tools are much more widely available, and it is time that undergraduate theatre programs begin teaching students to use them.

After being introduced in different publications as early as 2006, intimacy choreography has gradually become a more popular subject, especially after 2017, when the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements gained widespread awareness (Villarreal 2022). Now, Amanda Rose Villarreal, author of “The Evolution of Consent-Based Performance: A Literature Review,” states:

The work of an intimacy choreographer is to uphold ethical interactions by using consent-based practices, to empower performers with the agency to assert their personal boundaries, to level power imbalances in rehearsal and performance spaces, and to craft choreography for performed intimacy—all with an informed and culturally competent approach that supports both performers and the production. (7)

Susanne Shawyer and Kim Shively, faculty members at Elon University who work with Theatrical Intimacy Education, wrote an article titled “Education in Theatrical Intimacy as Ethical Practice for University Theatre” in which they consider why intimacy choreography is vital in educational theatre (Shawyer and Shively 2019). Shawyer and Shively (2019) engage with scholars Ross Prior et al., Rosemary Malague, Amanda Hess, and Diep Tran in discussing the need students feel to appease those in positions of power, such as their directors, who have the most influence in the room (89). They point out an important aspect of educational theatre: “the pressure to please a faculty member who assigns grades may be intense” (89), highlighting the experiences of students whose directors are simultaneously guiding their artistic processes and grading their coursework. It is evident that “Hierarchies unquestioned in theatre training and replicated in the entertainment industry may encourage actors to believe that they work at the pleasure of the director or producer and discourage them from prioritizing their personal boundaries, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation” (89).

It is essential for students to understand not only **how** to stand up for themselves but also **that they** have that agency as they enter the industry. Pace (2020) mentions, “*Actors are trained to say yes*. Acting school is an exercise in saying yes to everything...By sending the message that an actor is a person that says ‘yes,’ and takes risks, it comes through loud and clear that a person looking to protect themselves and says no isn’t cut out to be an actor” (7-8). The theatre industry needs to continue moving away from harmful power dynamics. Many people in the industry are becoming more aware of them. However, that does not mean that they will never come up against them, and they should know how to conduct themselves when this does happen. Shawyer and Shively (2019) also note, “Theatre educators should be aware of the potential for triggers and trauma responses in the acting classroom and rehearsal hall, and seek out tools to teach students how to establish physical and emotional boundaries that help distinguish self from character” (89). Moreover, Shawyer and Shively (2019) say “sensitivity to the potential for trauma response can benefit the entire acting ensemble” (90). Similarly, it is essential to consider that if the intimacy does not align with an actor’s sexuality, this can be



anxiety-inducing and uncomfortable, as realized by Vida Manalang (2021) after observing their peers when they were working as an actor. An intimacy choreographer can provide assistance with this type of situation, proactively preventing harm that may occur.

Shawyer and Shively's argument holds more weight when sexual violence statistics are considered. Unfortunately, the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence as an adult who is college-age is high, even if that adult is not a student (RAINN n.d.). Cantor et al. (2020) published in the "Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct" that 31.9% of female undergraduate students, 31.9% of trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer students, and 9.0% of male students had experienced nonconsensual sexual contact since enrolling (A7-119).

I can relate to what Shawyer and Shively discuss regarding actors' desire to please those in positions of power, which ties into Pace's writing about actors feeling the need to say 'yes'. However, this way of thinking is incredibly harmful. Recently, I experienced what it is like to apply the tools I learned in class. I was cast in Chico State's production of *Romeo and Juliet* in spring 2022, and I worked with my former instructor and intimacy professional, Jami Dru Witt Miller. I was cast as Juliet's understudy, so I was one of the few people able to see the intimacy choreography be implemented in real-time (with the actors' permission.) Before blocking began, the actors cast as Romeo and Juliet were asked to do "The Boundary Practice" in rehearsal. Miller also reminded actors that they could use "Button" at any time and that their boundaries were perfect, exactly where they were. She could work with any boundaries the actors had. The blocking was clear and concise. Every moment in the intimate scenes was precisely laid out to counts, including closing the distance between them, the touch itself, and opening the distance between them, concepts Miller took from *Staging Sex* (Pace 2020, 40-41). Each touch was directed to be a certain "Level of Touch" (Pace 2020, 42). These include Level 1—Skin, Powder, Touching; Level 2—Muscle, Paint, Moving; and Level 3—Bone, Clay, Pulling (Pace 2020, 43-44). Miller worked with the actors, taking into account and respecting

their boundaries, while also realizing the goals of the production. This experience solidified the idea that actor's voices can and should be heard during the rehearsal process.

Prior to this experience, as a first-year student in Chico State's theatre program, I was convinced that being agreeable was simply part of being an actor, even if it meant I felt uncomfortable or lost during a scene. Consent-based direction is something I never experienced in the past. Although I did not have to go on for Juliet, I felt comfortable and prepared to perform these intimate scenes. Jami made it clear that if I were to go on, any intimacy choreography in place that was outside my boundaries could be changed. Both my scene partner and I would have known exactly what to do. There would have been no room for confusion or boundary-crossing, because we would have been able to discuss this before the choreography was set.

Our costume designer for the show, Elizabeth (Lizzy) Davis, worked with my boundaries regarding the sheerness of one of Juliet's costumes. When I came in for my costume fitting, Davis gave me several options for undergarments I could wear under Juliet's nightgown. She explained what the plan was for the actress playing Juliet, but she also made it clear that it was my choice to decide what I felt comfortable wearing. Having my boundaries respected by my director and my designer left me feeling relieved and valued. I felt like I mattered as an artist and as a human, and I truly felt I had a voice throughout the entire process.

After experiencing consent-based direction, I am confident that I can apply what I have learned throughout the rest of my time at Chico State and throughout my future career and life in general. It is essential that someone who is knowledgeable about intimacy choreography is present for educational theatre productions so that best practices can be put into place. This may require hiring someone who is trained or having members of staff do more research on the topic and train in the work. *Staging Sex* is a thorough and accessible resource for those that want to learn more about intimacy choreography. According to Pace (2020), "The goal is that in every rehearsal room, someone should have access to, and actually use, a system for staging intimacy, nudity, and sexual violence. The plan for making that happen is to have that person

be you” (9). Similarly, Henry Bial, Department Chair of Theatre and Dance at the University of Kansas and the former President of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, believes *Staging Sex* “should be required reading for any theatre maker- full stop” (Pace 2020, xiii). I agree with both Pace’s and Bial’s statements, and I appreciate when Pace talks about “you” being the person to make improvements within the industry. Theatre is about collaboration. All of the collaborators—faculty, staff and students—need to prioritize the safety of everyone involved. In order for undergraduate theatre to be truly ethical, students need to start gaining an understanding of consent-based practices from Day 1 of their higher education, and that means having knowledgeable faculty members on board to teach them. Students, once equipped with this knowledge, can then move forward to become more mindful and assured collaborators throughout the duration of their education and beyond. Whereas in the past, faculty members may have had trouble finding the resources they needed to implement consent-based practices, *Staging Sex* can provide anyone the tools they need to create a more ethical learning environment. I am not claiming that this book is a panacea, but it can provide a great foundation to undergraduate theatre curriculum. In addition, Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) offers many workshops each year with the mission of “empower[ing] artists with the tools to ethically, efficiently, and effectively stage intimacy, nudity, and sexual violence” (Theatrical Intimacy Education n.d.). On the Theatrical Intimacy Education Instagram page, they introduce a “5 day intensive” program called the Educator Advocate Program. They explain, “If you’ve become your program or department’s go-to “intimacy person” and you’re seeking more knowledge, tools, and techniques on intimacy choreography and topics like consent, boundaries, and power dynamics to better support your department and your students, this might be a good fit for you” (@theatricalintimacyed 2022).

Due to my experience with consent-based practices as part of the foundation of my theatre arts education, I have come to understand the ways in which theatre can be produced ethically and how I, along with all of my peers, can become our own advocates. I was able to see past my previous views and grow into a more well-rounded artist. For these reasons, I

believe that intimacy choreography as well as consent-based practices are vital components of the undergraduate theatre curriculum. The safety and well-being of theatre students are not up for negotiation. As Manalang (2021) says in their article “Intimacy Choreography and Youth Empowerment,” “The people making the art are more important than the art being made. The benefits of working with an intimacy choreographer and applying intimacy training are necessary to proactively combat emotional and/or physical traumas that may occur during the art-making process.”

The bottom line is: intimacy professionals need to be a part of productions where intimacy is involved so they can lead students in approaching intimate scenes. Similarly, consent-based practices need to be a part of the undergraduate theatre curriculum to help students hone their power as artists in an educational setting. We all have a voice—we just need the space and the tools to use it. The next generation of artists is in the making. Whether you are involved in theatre or not, to those who resonated with this article, we have a responsibility to stand up for what we deserve, and to those in power in the theatre industry: you have a responsibility to ensure the safety of your theatre community.

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