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# THE ROLE OF INTIMACY COORDINATORS IN THEATRE AND FILM

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**Abstract:** The article aims to discuss the importance of coordinators in both theatre performances and film projects, focusing on what they must consider in order to provide the actor with the most suitable work climate, as well as the actor's reluctance to adapt to change. The art of acting, by its very nature, requires the actor to access very personal feelings and emotions, which makes them unable to eliminate the stress caused by the problems which arise during role preparation. Recent social changes cannot but affect the actor's work process, and the essay explores how these nuances are reflected in the discourse of producers – those ultimately held accountable if something goes wrong in a project. The essay draws a parallel between how Western Europe accepts sexuality and how different things are in Romania. The specific language of theatre is different from that of cinema, and this essay aims to offer a transposition of both.

**Keywords:** intimacy coordinator, nude, sex, performance, acting, coach.

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## ***Introduction***

In the context of the changes that have taken place in recent years in the field of performing arts, as well as in the film industry, a new profession has emerged among those who collaborate for the creation of a theatre performance. Many of the world's plays deal with the theme of love, and the characters interact with each other, creating a closeness between the actors who perform the parts. Although suggestion plays an important role in the scenic process, there are certain directorial visions which push the actors towards a more realistic physical contact, by having them touch, kiss or even suggest sexual contact.

A director's training at the Faculty of Theatre is closely linked to the theme of the play they are staging, and to everything related to the established convention that they make a play believable by means of the set design, the soundtrack, the video images, and not least the actors they cast.

Their cues can help the actors, or they can make them tense, pulling them away from the process of creation or their partners. Actors work with their soul, and in their journey of playing a character, they need the support of a specialist when faced with certain intimate scenes which have to be performed. Not all directors should offer this kind of support to actors, and the involvement of an outside professional has become necessary in the context of the MeToo scandal, which swept the world in 2017. Several actresses have reported abuses by producers and directors, thus launching a debate about the actor's freedom to say "no" when they feel the director's instructions are invading too much of their intimate, personal space.

Getting closer to a partner is a slow process, which requires gaining the other's trust; this way of working should be adopted by every director when they choose to work on a theatre production. Acting workshops at the Faculty of Theatre urge students to work carefully with their partner. This is done with the help of the supervising teacher through a selection of exercises aimed at bringing the group together and helping its members gain a sense of mutual trust. A director does not always have enough time to build the actors' confidence. It is wrong to think of the actors as performers who must do whatever is dictated to them by the coordinator. The coordinator should consider people's feelings, use emotional intelligence, and create a safe rehearsal space.

### ***Intimacy in theatre***

An intimacy coordinator also comes from the arts - most of those who work in this field are actors or choreographers who worked in various theatre or film productions, and who felt the need to provide support to those who are faced with scenes that include physical contact between partners on stage. An intimacy coordinator is a position accredited by the American Actors Guild. Their role on set or on stage is to facilitate communication between directors and actors, to put performers in contact with each other and help them talk out certain blocks they may have, to choreographically direct the actors' moment in a way that fulfills the director's vision, and to make sure they create a safe environment for the actors, so that they do not find their colleagues' gestures intrusive.

It's important for a director to understand that actors can have certain blocks too. Directors must be able to talk these problems out with the actors, to adapt their vision of a scene to the actors, and not get stuck in absurd ideas which may lead to a rupture in their relationship. The access of an intimacy coordinator to the artist's creative space has shifted this archaic way in which the director asked the actors to carry out a scene, without giving importance to the therapy they must provide in order to run these loaded scenes more smoothly (Backstage Staff, 2023).

The person responsible for this collaboration between actors and directors must also receive a credential from the American Screen Actors Guild, and before this training can take place, he or she must prove that he or she has worked at least 100 days on a film set or on a theatre stage. As a result of this union-supported program, the Intimacy Coordinator will be able to handle situations involving defending against sexual harassment and abuse of all kinds, combating racism, and mediating conflict that may arise between those in the production. He or she will be able to lead actors from a movement point of view so that they feel safe,

provide mental health first aid, and be able to help actors put up barriers when they feel the need to do so (SAGAFATRA, 2022).

I would like to make a very clear distinction between what is happening outside Romania's borders and what is happening inside our country. Things are completely different in the Western world. The theatre industry in many progressive countries, including England, France and Germany, has for a long time been in step with what is happening across the ocean, in the United States of America.

Ever since college, actors are used to having their rights respected and barriers put in place when it comes to physical contact between students. They are instructed what to do in a borderline situation, where their physical and mental comfort is threatened by a production which does not adhere to these values, or when they encounter a director who is not sensitive to these things.

The paradigm of the Romanian theatre school is defined by a work climate in which the psyche of a student actor is put to the test. They are forced to fully embody the role, and the border between creative freedom and paroxysm becomes a very fine one. Starting from the second year of the acting faculty, the student actor is encouraged to act carefully on stage, but at the same time to let themselves be free in order to find a universally valid truth in the process of assuming a role. Their creative freedom goes beyond the boundaries of logic, and the student actor is confused, not knowing who exactly they are supposed to be.

Today it is known that there are logical mechanisms whose principles accept that a thing can be what it is and at the same time not be, to be something and at the same time be something else, to be something that is neither concrete presence nor absolute absence, therefore to be two or more things at once, so contrary to classical logic, to have a third, fourth, fifth etc. logical solution. (Cojar, 1999, p. 27)

The actor undergoes an extensive process of discovery and becoming vulnerable in front of other people, in front of their stage partners, and in front of the teacher who coordinates the acting exercises. Many of the scenes the student actor works on in college begin with a real discovery of the person in front of them, and the connection between them is of utmost importance, and the main criterion by which an exercise becomes valuable. The boundary between reality and paroxysm becomes fragile, often violating their intimacy for the sake of the veracity of the artistic act (Grotowski, 1998). In the 21st century, the role of the intimacy coordinator is to draw a line between convention and physical or psychological abuse. Each actor knows their own boundaries, and

how they choose to establish this is up to each individual performer (Otos and Shively, 2021, p. 22).

When it comes to the process of working on a theatre production in a professional institution, things are a little different. The instructions that an actor receives from a director in terms of physical approach to a partner are often devoid of empathy and knowledge. In Romania, directors are often faced with a situation which they do not know how to handle, and actors are left without any real support from them. It is important to adopt a knowledge-based way of working, with both directors and actors receiving support from an Intimacy Coordinator, in order to learn how to put things into practice (Steinrock, 2020, p. 155).

Actors are often urged to kiss, or to carry out violent scenes, without the director fully explaining to them what is about to happen. This lack of preparation often leads to actors being traumatised, as they are forced to face a hostile attitude from their fellow actors when they dare to voice their concerns about the act that is about to take place in the rehearsal room.

In Western Europe, things have evolved. Directors no longer feel alone and they have the chance to work with an intimacy coordinator, specialized in both theatre and psychology. These professionals can understand and empathize with the difficult moments actors may face. The action of the play is carefully analyzed by them. They always turn to the actors who are going to play the characters, trying to understand, first and foremost, the man behind the actor, to become aware of the traumas the actor is facing, and the possible emotional breakdowns they may suffer because of working on the play staged by the director.

In this way, the intimacy coordinator gets involved in the relationship between the actor and the director of the performance, stepping in the inner journey the actor goes through in order to bring a character to life. This paradigm shift, specific to the 21st century, would never have been understood by theatre practitioners of the previous century. The coordinator of intimacy thus becomes an intruder, and at the same time a partner of the actor, in relation to the self and those around him.

This sets you up for a bad situation if actors reveal trauma that you (and the rest of the ensemble) aren't equipped to handle. Even the most emotionally intelligent, mental health first-aid certified director isn't a therapist, and rehearsal isn't therapy. An actor reliving their personal trauma on stage every night isn't going to make your play better and it has the potential to damage the actor's emotional well-being. (Pace, 2020, p. 5)

The sex scenes that actors must come to terms with in their professional careers are a real challenge. The director's vision determines the plasticity and impact of the images presented to the audience. An obstacle to be considered is the relationship an actor has with the person with whom they must perform the scene, but also with the director, perhaps the most important member of the team when it comes to intimacy in theatre performance. An essential method is the targeting of technical capabilities to simulate a sexual act or an intimate relationship between two actors, based on the methods developed by Lecoq, Laban or Meyerhold (Rikard, 2019, p. 77).

Pace recommends that the initiation of a sex scene in a theatre performance should occur through a series of clearly defined actions by the creative team, the goal of which is to create the safest possible work climate in which the actors, director, and intimacy coordinator know that there are clear procedures to follow on their journey to an emotionally abuse-free performance. The first thing to keep in mind is the context in which a sex scene takes place. It is important to note that the actors should be aware they can refuse certain indecent proposals from their stage partner, and that they are the first to agree on the actions they undertake. A more intimate setting should be created between stage partners, where the director and the intimacy coordinator can stand aside if the actors so wish. At least in the initial stage, communication between them will be essential to ensure a smooth work process.

Unfortunately, the Romanian theatrical landscape is not characterized by good communication between the members of a performance team. The actor is used to a dictator-like director and is often urged to listen and easily accept their suggestions. Pace advises actors to learn how to say no and to set up clear boundaries.

The second set of rules he proposes is related to the language the director should use when starting work on a sex scene. Actors are stressed about the scene they are about to do, and using bad language will disrupt the workflow. He recommends a de-sexualization of the language in the context of getting the action of the play to flow well. It is a good idea for the director to use non-sexualized words to describe how they would like the staging to reveal the way they envision the play.

The third aspect is the choreography of the sexual moment. Whether we talk about a kiss, a touch or a sexual act, the actors need to be aware they are taking part in a convention, and the action must appear to be real, rather than being real. Actors have a private life beyond their profession and their privacy must be respected. At the same time, setting up the exact steps they must take on stage leads to some detachment, taking the pressure off their shoulders (Pace, 2020).

These tools come to the defense of the actor, as well as the director. They need to work together in order to create the right rehearsal climate for a theatre performance. Whatever method they are used to working with, it is important to accept that there are people who can help with this complicated process of drawing the line between intimacy and abuse, and a professional coordinator can do exactly this.

### *Intimacy in film*

Unlike theatre, things are quite different in film. The principles that film professionals are guided by are different. Film projects attract a lot of money in terms of production, and the crew is much larger. An intimacy coordinator working in film is better paid, and the opportunities are much greater than in theatre. Unlike the theatre world, we find more sex scenes in movies than in plays. This is, of course, happens for economic reasons, which often take precedence when it comes to writing the script for an art film. To sustain the project, a movie must sell tickets in the run-up to post-production.

The concept of intimacy in film is different from theatre. Since college, the actor is used to fully dedicating themselves and working with their partners in the most intimate way possible. Things are different on the movie set. The actor is put in a delicate situation, having to adapt to people he meets for the first time, and to whom he must open up. Rehearsals for a theatre production vary, but they last no less than three weeks, long enough for the actors to get to know each other quite well. In a film project, they may meet for the first time on set, and in the difficult situation of having to work with an actor for the first time, the time they get to know each other is not very long.

Preparing for a sequence is different from a theatre project. Film directors are not in the habit of rehearsing too much with actors, firstly because they do not want to stiffen the process, and secondly because of the technical preparations they must make. Actors who are more thoroughly trained in how to approach a theatre project are not used to this way of working. However, the power to adapt to stimuli is the main advantage they have in their career, given the limited time they have to meet their acting partners (Kelly, 2022).

Intimacy is perceived differently by actors in a movie project. The language of cinema is different from that of theatre. The actors are much closer to the spectator, firstly through the camera, which is able to bring the spectator closer to the actors, through the lenses of the cinematographer, and secondly, through sound; the actor no longer has to project his voice to the last row of seats in the auditorium, because the mic does the work for them. Bringing the story closer to

the spectator has given free rein to directors to explore the intimacy offered by the actors as much as possible, to break the boundaries of convention as much as they can. There are several stages that lead to a deliberate violation of an actor's intimacy; each of these proposals comes from the production of a movie and contributes to the actor's anxiety level.

A real problem in Romanian drama schools is that students are not put in the situation of practicing nude scenes. The theatre lab is a safe space where they can experience the sensation of exposing their bodies in front of other people.

One of the most vulnerable acts that can be asked of an actor is to appear nude. While actors have varying degrees of comfort with this request, there is a wide variety of issues that arise when a story calls for nudity. These issues can have significant effects on many departments in the production beyond the talent. (Bucher, 2018, p. 53)

In theatre, we try as much as we can to bring as close to life as possible the actions that the students perform during acting exercises. They always try to draw inspiration from life, to be as authentic as possible to what is happening in the performance space. When they are faced with situations where the characters must get close to each other, they feel embarrassed. A very important element that our art has in bringing life to life is suggestion. Often theatre directors use this device to avoid making the actors uncomfortable. In a film project, things are much more difficult to hide from the eye of the camera, which can come very close to the actors in order to capture what is going on between them as precisely as possible.

The actors' intimacy thus becomes exploited through the language of cinema, sometimes not in the best possible way. In the early 1960s, the so-called sexual revolution took place, marked by the advent of contraceptives in the United States. In doing so, a difference emerged between what we call reproduction and sexual life. Producers in America, and beyond, took advantage of this by bringing intimate scenes closer to people through movies (Schaefer, 2014). With this variation in the level of audio-visual propositions sold to audiences around the world, the idea that actors taking part in such projects should look good was rekindled. Their physicality was also a way for producers to sell more tickets in movie theatres. Economics became a consideration for a long time. Given how complicated an actor's job is in terms of appearing on a movie set with a large crew, it makes things even more complicated.

An intimacy coordinator can foster a healthier bond between actors and directors, building trust and preparing them emotionally for simulating sex scenes

through better communication. On a movie set, the atmosphere can be more tense and difficult for an actor to manage. The number of people taking part in a day's filming far exceeds the number of workers in a theatre. For a sequence to be filmed properly, you need a cinematographer, boom operator capturing the sound, director, assistant director, costume assistant, make-up artist, electricians and script advisor.

With so many people around, it can often be difficult for actors to concentrate, especially when dealing with a sex scene. The support they can get from an intimacy coordinator becomes one without which a day's filming can't run smoothly. He or she will clear the set of people who aren't necessarily required for the sequence, making sure the actors are covered with a blanket or robe between takes, and will communicate with them to make sure they are emotionally comfortable.

The intimacy coordinator has a very important role in advising the actors and the director, in line with the script they must follow. The psychological aspect is not to be neglected when filming a sequence involving nudity or sex. In addition, a key department in the success of such a sequence is that of the cinematographer and those around him. The preparation of such a sequence must be thorough, so as not to put the actors in discomfort. Before each sequence, it is advisable to block the scene, so that everything that the team is about to film is in order.

The cinematographer, together with the electrician, set designer and gaffer, must prepare the sequence in advance when filming a scene involving sex, as they cannot have the actors rehearse with so many people on set for such a delicate sequence. Together with the director, they have to decide with which lens they will shoot the sequence, how and where they will place the light, what objects will be on set, and the gaffer has to measure the distance from the actors to the lens in order to mark the angle of focus on the camera as clearly as possible (Bucher, 2018).

The film industry in Romania is not recognized for its openness to the new rigors that have long been present in Western Europe. There are many situations where actors are not asked if they want the support of an intimacy coordinator when it comes to filming a sex sequence with an unknown partner. The director is assigned the task of managing their relationship and preparing them for the shoot, which allows frustrations to rise to the surface, given their lack of training in managing the actors' emotions and leading them properly.

A lot of awkwardness up until now [in] talking about sex [has come from] that stage direction: "They make love." It's been, "OK, go for it then," and there's no support. There are a thousand stories in a

handshake, and what we're doing is telling a physical story in the same way we tell a story with text. It's about the story we're telling and always grounding it in that. That's why we're doing this, because we're actors telling stories. We choreograph it, bit by bit, and then they get the acting into it once we have the blueprint. (Mink, 2024)

Things are very different in Western Europe. Actors get real support from an intimacy coordinator on set, but also help from their agent before signing a contract with a production company. The producer is obliged to notify the agent and the actor of a sex sequence in the script, and negotiations about how it will be filmed are carried out at the pre-production stage. This takes a huge amount of stress off the actor's shoulders, as he is made aware of the sex scene well before the filming of the sequence which exploits his intimacy. The Western European actor is getting real support from a variety of structures, which help them understand their role in a film project, demand their rights when they feel something is not working, and set boundaries if they feels unsafe.

There are many nuances that describe the intimacy of the actor and put it in context with the viewer by means of the camera. Each director wants to exploit this intimate relationship in their own way. Two of Hollywood's best-known films produced in the 1990s, *Basic Instinct* (dir. Paul Verhoeven) and *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes), exploit the sex scenes between actors in a very commercial way and want to attract as many viewers as possible, by showing them the box office performance as proof of success. The revenue was in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and the actors' popularity skyrocketed, which is worth considering for those who measure success in this way. We are dealing here with a commercial success derived from exploiting the actor's intimacy, while the image of those who agree to film a sex scene is influenced throughout their career. Some actors are fine with the appearance of intimacy coordinators on set, and feel comfortable with them, while other actors, from different generations, find they can handle these moments very well. Michael Douglas believes that it is the actor's job to communicate and choreograph a sex scene with his partner in the movie, with the help of the director and not an intimacy coordinator (Variety, 2024).

Another way in which the actor's intimacy is used in a film project is to transcend the fictional nature of the work, as the director plays with the transition between fiction and documentary, trying to get a more subjective view of the actor in contact with the director's proposal to explore the theme of intimacy and sexuality. A director who explores this theme in her films is Adina Pintilie, whose debut feature *Touch me not* (2018) shocked the world with her modern vision and with a major visual impact on the viewer.

I have always been interested in the intimate relationship between cinema and reality/lived experience and the intricate ways in which they reflect and transform each other. With all due respect to the classical approach in cinema - in which the director usually invents a fictional story, in the form of a screenplay, and then materializes it into a film - I soon realized that my interest and fascination lay elsewhere, in the territory of the unknown and the unconscious, the liminal and the *uncanny*, the ineffable and the indefinable. I am interested in a maieutic approach - participatory and process-oriented, in which cinema becomes a tool for exploration, (self-)knowledge and *meaning-making*. (Pintilie, 2024)

It's very delicate for an actor to work on such a project where the line between veracity and authenticity is so fine. The exposure is very high and the role of an intimacy coordinator in such a project becomes crucial. The trust that an actor must give to the director is very high, as the actor's body is brutally exposed to the viewer in the theatre. It's very important for the production team of a movie that is on the borderline between documentary and fiction to make sure that everything is very well put together, that there is consensus from everyone involved on set, and that there is no room for interpretation. There's a lot to learn and take on board in such a brave film project, and the actor needs to know that they are protected.

### ***Conclusions***

In conclusion, the context in which an actor works in the 21st century is completely different from the 1960s, and producers in the theatre and film industry need to adapt and create a safe climate for rehearsals to take place in an atmosphere that inspires confidence and trust.

There is a significant difference between an intimacy coordinator working in the film industry and one in the field of theatre. First, perhaps the most important difference, relates to the time spent with the scene partner. Whereas in a movie, two actors may meet a few hours before filming a sequence and then not see each other for the rest of the project, in theatre, actors spend a great deal of time together, beginning with the rehearsal process and even after the show opens, depending on the longevity of the artistic product.

The role of an intimacy coordinator on a movie set is extremely important these days. He or she will make the process of the cast and crew coming together smoother, without conflicts and possible accidents, which may occur. A movie director does not rehearse the movie script so much with the actors. They

prefer to let things unfold more organically, so as not to mechanize the process unnecessarily. In a theatre production, rehearsals for a production can last for years, giving the actors much more time to get to know each other.

In a theatre production, an intimacy coordinator can step in for a while in order to put the actors in the context of being able to communicate properly and choreograph their movement in the space so that the sex scene feels authentic, but at the same time the actors feel comfortable to do it repeatedly. Unlike a film production, a theatre performance requires the actor to do the same thing repeatedly, on multiple nights.

It is important to note that with the advent of this new profession that supports the actor's creativity, the actor has realized that his role on a film set or in a theatre production is very important, especially when their privacy is dramatically violated by the script they must follow. A director's vision of a sex scene may differ from one artist to another. Depending on the dramaturgical context, the scene the actors will perform may require a violent side, which they must access.

If we're talking about a scenario where sexual abuse is being debated, the actors need to be carefully counseled by an intimacy coordinator, and they need to understand that beyond the director's vision, they can refuse certain moves the director asks for if they don't feel comfortable doing so. They then need to negotiate with the actor's agent and the intimacy coordinator in such a way that an agreement is reached, in which each of the parties is at peace.

The process of portraying a character should not include trauma that actors carry with them for years, just because a character in a play or movie script suffers a tragic event. The artist should be aware that it is a convention after all, roles were written to suggest certain things, not to traumatize actors. Directors need to be aware of this too and find new ways to gain the actors' support for their vision of telling a story.

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