

Interview with an Intimacy Choreographer

Interviewee: Rebecca Johanssen, Intimacy Choreographer

Interviewers: Nina Sarnelle + Selwa Sweidan
TOUCH EXPERIMENTS, SLOMOCO Micro-Residency

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

Maybe we could start out by talking a little bit about emotional intelligence?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to recognize and to respond to emotions, both in yourself and other people. So it starts first with yourself with having an awareness that "Gee, I'm having I'm experiencing an emotion right now. Or I'm starting to get triggered into an emotion right now." And then once you have that awareness that you're feeling something, figuring out "how do I manage this? Is this the best place for me to be right now? And if it's not, how do I gain control over that emotional response."

And the second part is recognizing that somebody else is having an emotional response, and then once you have that awareness, learning what to do with that information.

How do you navigate your relationship with them based on the emotional response that they're having? In a very simplistic example, it's recognizing when somebody's been triggered and about to explode, and knowing that that's not the moment to go in and push the button and even further. Being able to step back.

So I still do work in that area. I work with a lot of organizations to help leaders figure out the best way to communicate and navigate difficult conversations with employees that are having disciplinary problems or even helping them figure out how to better motivate the people on their team and how to be better collaborators. By being attuned to those processes.

I do private coaching but I also do big interactive workshops (or used to before the pandemic). But, yeah, that's that's a skill that really translates really well to intimacy coordination: now instead of teaching people how to do it I have to practice it every day, attuning to other people's emotional responses and figuring out the best way to navigate those.

The worst-case scenario is having a director that just absolutely does not want me there, and thinks that I'm going to interfere with his process. So then, figuring out okay what's the best strategy for winning them over? I just worked on a project where all of the directors were lovely and they all welcomed me there—which doesn't always mean that they knew what to do with me when I was there. (laughs)

It's about figuring out what's the best strategy for how to win somebody over who might not necessarily want me there. But then also just figuring out what's the best way to communicate the idea that I need to communicate. Because often, I might be telling the director "No we can't do that," and even the best intention directors don't always like to hear "no we can't do that."

Nina Sarnelle (She/Her):

Amazing thanks Rebecca. This also makes me realize we could step back a bit to look at the basic dynamics at play in your job. I actually don't know the structure: who does want you there? Somebody hired you, is that the production company essentially protecting their own liability?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yes. And most of the time now it's the major production studios like Netflix, Amazon, HBO—mostly TV because that's where most of the intimacy is happening right now. They now have policies put in place where intimacy coordinators are required to be hired on productions that involve intimacy. Largely because of their legal responsibility.

The Actors Union SAG-AFTRA was able to renegotiate their contract this year to increase the protections for actors on set during scenes of intimacy and nudity. They stopped short of requiring an Intimacy Coordinator because honestly right now I don't think there are enough Intimacy Coordinators in the world to fill that demand if all of a sudden every SAG-AFTRA production had to have one. But they implemented enough new policies that it just makes it more efficient to hire an intimacy coordinator. And we know those new rules better than anybody does. I just worked on

a show for Netflix and I had a whole legal team I had to report to. And they were the ones emailing me about the Union rules, to make sure that everybody knew exactly what the expectations were.

So, yeah, the production company is usually the one that's hiring me. Sometimes I'll get hired on to the Production because the actor has requested that intimacy coordinator be hired. Especially if it's an actor that has a lot of power on the production, then they won't even question allowing an intimacy coordinator. I worked on a film that involved a lot of lead up to a sexual encounter without actually showing it. The lead in the film just wanted an IC there to make sure that no boundaries are crossed in the touching because she had bad experiences before.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

Wow. You're dealing with so many stakeholders, it's impressive. With the legal team, with people on set that may not understand or have resistance to what you're doing, and then caring for the actors too. That's a lot to manage in one role!

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yeah I mean, Intimacy Coordinators are considered department heads in the film industry so I'm the head of my own one person department. So that means that I get to be involved in the meetings with the producers and the director. During the shoot, I stand right next to the director at the monitor, and I'm in constant communication with them about how we can change the shot or give an actor a different direction for how to move their body. So it's not an entry level position in the film industry, for sure.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

Could you give us an example of that moment, going into the shot, and adjusting or responding in some way? How that happens?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Everything in the film industry is very different from theatre—we don't rehearse a lot. And part of my job is just convincing the production that we need to schedule time for rehearsal for the intimate scenes because the more time you spend rehearsing them, the less time it will take to shoot. And most actors want that too. The first production I ever worked on, the actor told me "I want the movement to be specific, I

want it to be intentional—meaning motivated by the character—and I want it to be over with as quickly as possible."

So I always go into intimate scenes with that in mind: the actors want this over as quickly as possible. And how can I help to achieve that? I try to get as much rehearsal time as I can. And that's not always possible. I encourage productions to schedule the intimate scenes to be the first thing we shoot in the morning, if that's possible. Because actors are going to be nervous about it all day. They won't eat lunch, if you schedule it for after lunch, because they don't want their bellies to be bloated when they're naked on set. And so, if I have any influence over scheduling, I try to find the right time of day.

Rehearsals are always on a closed set, which means the absolute bare minimum number of people that need to be there. Sometimes it's just me, the actors, the director and maybe the cinematographer to figure out what the shot are going to look like. We rehearse in full clothing with no kissing involved in rehearsal at all. We talk through very specifically what their boundaries are around kissing so that there's no surprises when the cameras are rolling. And I encourage constant dialogue between the actors even if I'm not involved in it, to feel comfortable sharing with each other if something doesn't feel right.

Because I often work with actors who have been working together for a while and they already have a rapport with each other. But then you can also walk into a room where the actors have never met until it's time to rehearse their intimate scene, I've had that happen. I find that judging the relationship that already exists between them helps determine how much involvement I have over their consent conversations. If they've never met, I'm very heavily involved in establishing that conversation. And if they have already been working together for a long time I just say "Let's lay out the ground rules. How often do you want me to check in?"

One of the reasons why I work with the legal team is because actors have to sign what's called a 'nudity rider, which details exactly what they're agreeing to appear on film. Are they agreeing to simulated sex? We have very specific language around that: what parts of their body they're okay with showing up on film, places they can and can't be touched. And so part of my job is, when the actors come in and we start filming, to make sure that if we catch something on camera that's not allowed in their nudity rider that everybody knows that part of the shot is not usable.

On a recent production we were doing a simulated sex scene where the woman was on top of the male, and her nudity rider said that we could see the side of her breasts

and not the front. And so we had pasties to cover up her nipples, knowing that if we did catch them it would automatically not be usable. I went in and I worked with her to keep the motion in the lower part of her body with her arms pressed down, so that we couldn't see what we weren't allowed to see on camera. So those are the kinds of adjustments that I usually make. Or if something's just not reading because we're in a really tight shot, then I work with the actor to figure out what part of their body they need to move to give the appearance that something is happening. For instance, once we were really tight in on an actor's back with the other performer's hands on their back, and we needed him to roll his shoulders a little bit to indicate that they were having sex. To simulate that motion. So it gets very technical, there's nothing sexy about it at all.

Typically the director is in charge of figuring out how to communicate what's going on when it can't be shown directly, but with intimate scenes it becomes a conversation with us. We usually know more than they do about how to simulate intimacy. We have a number of techniques: changing the scale you're working with, or shooting from a particular angle, or coaching the actor's body position to block the action. We're trained in this through choreography workshops, and we also learn from each other. The IC community is very close, so we are always in conversation with each other about best practices. We're always sharing new products we've found to create barriers between the actors. It's a very complicated process.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

You mentioned buying products to protect or create a barrier. I'm wondering if you could talk more about coaching the visual vs. when you're paying attention to the tactile and what is felt on the body.

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Actors have varying comfort levels with what they want and what they don't want in terms of protection. We're required to give them barriers because it's illegal for any genitalia to touch, or to be touched directly on film. Legally, that's where it crosses the line into pornography and it requires a different kind of license for production to do that. And Intimacy Coordination (IC) is a relatively new profession.

Different Intimacy Coordinators (ICs) have different products and we like to share the things that we're using. At the bare minimum, I use a strip of yoga mat that I cut

out to place on whoever is on bottom in a "traditional" sexual position. And then they're also wearing modesty garments that we can line with a bunch of different layers on the inside to protect from sensitivity.

So for performers—we always use gender affirming language, so we refer to actors with a penis and actors with a vulva, rather than assigning a gender to them. So for actors that have a penis, we have what's called the sock, or the pouch. And they also have another layer of a garment that they put over that and I can layer in between those two soft foam cups. For the performers with a vulva we use panty liners or different products to line the inside of those garments just to give them some extra layers of protection. Depending on the actors' comfort level I provide them with a number of options and they choose which one would make them feel most comfortable. And then we layer the yoga mat in between them. If they want more protection than that I have a number of other things like a little pillow or a small, deflated ball that can go between them. There's a number of different options for creating barriers between their bodies so that they feel safer. I've found with performers that know each other really well they're like "Naw, don't worry about it" and then I have to check in to make sure that they've kept the yoga mat in place. They'll be like "but it's a pain!" and I'm like "gotta have it, gotta have the bare minimum." Yeah so it's a lot of tricking the camera, finding any way that we can to make it look like something is happening without it actually having to happen to the actor. They can touch a slightly different part of the body than what's being implied and we can trick the camera with the angle. Sometimes when they're in a sexual position they're actually staggered a little bit. An actor's legs don't have to be sprawled wide open, in many shots they can keep their legs together on one side. We do a lot of what we call masking.

I had a scene I shot where the lead actor absolutely did not want to be kissed at all. And the director really wanted it to look like they were kissing. And so what we ended up doing is stacking them so that they were actually like this far apart from each other, and mimicking the action of kissing. The camera was directly behind them so you couldn't tell that there was that much space between them. Some actors don't mind being kissed or being touched or anything like that, but my job is to make sure that I have options for them if they don't want it.

Nina Sarnelle (She/Her):

On a very basic level, what I find really interesting about this conversation in relation to Selwa & my research is: this is actually about *not touching*. Or *not feeling*. Protecting the actors from touching and feeling.

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yes. Well, it's all about consent and what is the actor consenting to, and how do we reconcile that with the shot that the director wants. My job is to make sure that the director can get the shots that they want while still respecting the actors touch boundaries. A lot of times, if the actors know each other and they trust each other then they don't mind the touching and my job is just to make sure that they don't cross any lines legally. But for actors that don't know each other or haven't established that kind of communication, they're often much more shy about their touch boundaries and I have to get a little more creative in those situations.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

Is that a phrase you use often, "touch boundaries"? And do you hold these touch boundaries in your head or do you take notes or diagrams?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

I take really copious notes in my meetings with the actors. One of the new union requirements around nudity and simulated sex scenes is that somebody other than the director has to have this conversation with the actor about their boundaries, and what they're agreeing to. And then that has to be communicated by that third party to the director. This made it efficient for companies to hire an Intimacy Coordinators because who better to do this work? We are trained in this. So my job is to take extensive notes, and then communicate to production the relevant pieces of information from my conversation with the actor.

You know, if there's something that an actor does not want me to share, I do not share it. We have to work a lot with performers who've experienced sexual trauma, who have been victims of sexual assault in the past.

I personally have not had an actor share that with me, but many of my colleagues have. And part of our process with an actor who's willing to share that in private conversation, is to work out a strategy for how we're going to cope, if they start to feel triggered on set. For those kinds of situations, they might not want me to tell the director or their co-star that that they're worried about that, but I'll have a conversation with the director to say "let's treat this scene with some extra sensitivity, and if the actor needs a break, I really want us to be able to take a take a break." And then sometimes we'll build in a code word for the actor that's not part of their regular dialogue, so that they can just say that word and I'll know that they

need to break, to step away, to breathe, and maybe employ some of our strategies to calm down.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

Am I right in assuming that your profession has co-evolved with cultural shifts and conversations that are happening in society at large? I'm wondering how that has affected your work, if at all?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

I was assisting a woman on a production and during downtime, I think the cinematographer came over and chatted with us and he said he said "I'm just curious has your work just exploded since the #TimesUp #MeToo Movement?" And she turned to him and said: "My job didn't exist before the MeToo Movement." So yeah, I would say businesses is up since then... And absolutely the new roles are a direct response to a lot of the stories that started to get shared. Some of my fellow Intimacy Coordinators were involved with negotiating those improvements because they were victims of assault or abuse on set.

Actually, we have a number of people who want to be Intimacy Coordinators who are coming from a space of trauma. I was part of interviewing a bunch of the candidates for our current class that's getting certified right now. Part of my job as an intimacy choreographer is to sense if the potential candidate is still going to get triggered by that trauma. If they are, they're not going to make a good Intimacy Coordinator, they could end up causing more problems for actors who have trauma. But people who have processed it and are in a healthy place with it tend to make really good intimacy coordinators advocating for actors, because they've been there. They've been in that position.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

After reading your bio, I was wondering if you could talk to us a bit about "unconscious bias training" and how that comes into play within Intimacy Coordination?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Sure yeah, I've done a lot of that work in the corporate world, and my specialty was around gender bias in the workplace. But I also work very closely with people who focus on racial bias and different ways in which that impacts our behaviors on an unconscious level.

As an Intimacy Coordinator, I help people to recognize different kinds of power dynamics on set. It's really, really crucial for us to be able to recognize when there's an imbalance of a power being used, or when there's a total lack of awareness or insensitivity happening in production.

For instance, if a gender non-conforming or LGBTQ+ actor is put into a position that is uncomfortable for them, this discomfort might not be recognized by the Director or by Production. We need to be there to step in and explain what's going on.

And I do occasionally lead practice sessions with other Intimacy Coordinators on how to navigate these challenging conversations with Production. One of the scenarios that we've discussed is how to navigate a difficult conversation with a director when a performer of color is put in a vulnerable position. We might ask them if the scene is necessary at all—if we are brought in early enough into the process, we might be able to have an impact on that by questioning the scene's importance to the narrative. Is there a reason to put the actor in this vulnerable position? And if that's absolutely a non-starter, making sure that we have space and an understanding that this could be a traumatizing place for the performer who is being put in a vulnerable position, and for the others around them as well. Our job is to facilitate these conversations in production.

It's not uncommon for performers of color and members of the LGBT Q+ community to feel particularly vulnerable and like they don't have as much power as their white, straight colleagues.

And in the film industry I've found that you have to approach those conversations a little bit more delicately than I might be able to with my corporate clients. Because corporate clients have active policies now that they're trying to implement and they're engaging in this training proactively because they know that they need to do better.

But the film industry is sadly very far behind in this regard. It's just coming into an awareness of abusive practices and biases on set.

I've been very fortunate. I've had nothing but lovely experiences with the people I've worked with, and I've worked on very diverse sets that embrace diversity of storytelling as well.

Nina Sarnelle (She/Her):

It's interesting, my initial concern would be that productions who are ready to have these conversations might hire an Intimacy Coordinator while the most egregious violators would avoid you guys altogether. But with the new union rules, more productions are pressured into intimacy coordination, which is amazing and so important. But with that I can imagine you might be walking into some pretty conflict-ridden situations...

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yeah, well I mean, Intimacy Coordination was originally developed as a profession in response to abuse on set. And so, either you're brought in because there is an act of abuse going on that that production wants to stop, or because you're being completely welcomed with open arms to this amazing collaborative team.

And you never know which one of those it's going to be until that first meeting with the Director. The 10 minutes before my first zoom meeting with the Director or absolutely terrifying, I'm just wondering, which is it going to be.

And, yeah, as I said before, even with people who are very collaborative and want you there and embrace you with open arms, that doesn't necessarily mean that they know what our process is, or how to utilize us on set. So we start by educating them as to where we fit in.

In the film industry we've worked very closely with the union to equate this position with a stunt coordinator.

When you're performing a dangerous stunt on set, the stunt coordinator is there to make sure that the actors are physically protected. When you're performing intimacy on set, Intimacy Coordinators should be there to make sure that they're not only physically protected but also emotionally protected.

All the time and care that you would put into making sure a stunt goes right is the same time and care that you need to implement when it comes to intimacy.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her)

That's an amazing analogy. I can imagine and see the practicalities of why that's such a helpful analogy within the production space.

I'm wondering if you have ever been called into a project where you're coordinating this remotely?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yeah, we've had productions ask if we can do that, and we really can't. If we can't be there to physically see everything that's happening, and to prevent any harm from being done, then we can't do our job.

I was being interviewed for a position that was going to be shooting mostly in Los Angeles, but then moving to another location for six weeks. They were asking if I could do the job remotely because they didn't really want to pay to have the Intimacy Coordinator flown over to Europe for six weeks. The best thing I could do is to tell them they can shoot all the intimate scenes like within a shorter period of time in order to reduce the amount of time that I'm needed... but yeah, it's just not possible to do it remotely.

I can do the preliminary work on a video call. During the pandemic I prefer the one-on-one conversations with actors to happen that way because we can actually see each other's faces better. Right now in person we have to wear the full N95 mask. I want to see their face to be able to pick up on any nonverbal cues that they might be giving me. If they're saying "yeah, that's fine," and sometimes I can see in their face that it's not really fine.

And I need to be able to reassure them that there are other options if they don't want to do something. They have to trust me, you know, I have to build that trust before the shooting begins.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her)

Could you elaborate a bit on the technique of looking for nonverbal cues?

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

For me it's very much about where their focus is. Now eye contact isn't the same on Zoom, and not all people feel comfortable making eye contact with the camera, but actors usually do. And just being able to sense if there is hesitation.

I mentioned that I worked with a performer recently who had a bad past experience. On the video call I can physically hold up the different barriers and modesty garments so that they can see and understand exactly what they're consenting to. I was doing that and this performer sort of cracked a joke saying "I just don't want anybody to see my butt." And I could tell from the way he was joking that he wasn't really joking.

So I told him, you know there are other options we don't have to do this. And that's when he shared with me his past bad experience, the real reason why he didn't want his butt to be shown. And then I could reassure him that that will never happen. That's why I'm here. What happened to you then, I will not allow it to happen now. And in the end he agreed to the shot because he trusted me and he trusted the production. I was able to tell that his eventual yes was genuine because I could tell that he really did trust the Director and his co-star, and he trusted me to make sure that the crew was not going to be in the room.

Selwa Sweidan (She/Her):

You're so great at giving specific examples. It's really coming to life when you're describing the breath and the hesitation and the way that actor shared his experience with you. I'm wondering if maybe for the last 10 minutes we could do a bit of a thought experiment. Since, Nina and I were working through Zoom, but at points we're also working off camera, and we're turning off the video.

So this is a really big leap into a sort of science fiction or future of cinema, or maybe a parallel world where instead of the camera there's sort of a "touch recorder".

But I'm wondering what it would feel like to be dealing with some of these topics of power and consent and comfort and emotional intelligence, and unconscious bias, all of these things. What would happen if the camera wasn't a visual tool? But instead, the experience the Director was creating was a touch-based narrative. I'm wondering what thoughts come to mind or, or what would shift there? I know this is a big leap, but we're excited to brainstorm.

Rebecca Johanssen (She/Her):

Yeah. So if I'm following correctly, what if we experienced a scene of intimacy through just touch without the visual?

So one of the things that we focus a lot on in our choreography workshops is: what's the intention of the scene. What's the feeling that the Director wants to get across? And it usually falls into one of three categories: romance, passion, dominance, and—I've added a fourth category—comedy. So in the "romance" category are feelings of love, intense, deep, long-lasting love and safety. "Passion" is the scene in which the characters are tearing each others' clothes off and physically wanting each other right then and there. And then dominance is more of like a BDSM power dynamic in sexual play. And then for me, comedy is about missed timing and people being out of alignment with each other. That's where humor can come in.

So for each of these four categories, we discuss how to create that through choreography. So for example, "romance" will have a lot of eye contact. There will be soft touching of non-sexual body parts, like the light grazing of a hand over a shoulder, and down an arm or on a neck or face. We call that "feather touch," it's light and sort of tingling, and the breath can be very much a part of it too: long, deep slow breaths.

For "passion," it's much rougher, with lots of grabbing and pulling things. There's less eye contact and more of a need to grab, touch, pull, feel, and the breath can be more rapid. "Dominance" is a little bit more psychological. How do we denote power dynamics between people visually? I can't remember all of the qualities of touch, it's not my specialty area, but we do have people who are specialists in BDSM on our team. And as I mentioned with "comedy" it's all about misalignment, you know, trying to grab for something and then missing or knocking each other in the head—things like that.

So those are the different ways that we approach it. First and foremost, we're asking what's the feeling of the scene, what's the purpose of the scene, and what do you want the audience to learn about the relationship between these two people. How can we tell that story through the quality of the touch, and the places where the performers are touched. What degree of nudity do we need to show in order to get that feeling across? If you're in this deeply romantic relationship with two people who love each other tenderly, you might not be showing a whole lot in terms of body parts, and the touch can happen in non-sexual areas. The sexual positions chosen are also reflective of the narrative and function of the scene.