

## In defence of Ariana and Cynthia's PDA friendship

There's nothing wrong with being tactile, says Charley Ross, who met the *Wicked* BFFs

**HANDS CLASPED TOGETHER,** eyes wide, hanging on each other's every word, palpable chemistry filled the tiny press room. I could only be sat opposite *Wicked* co-stars Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo, whose incredibly close – and tactile – friendship has prompted more memes as they promote the second instalment, *Wicked: For Good*.

'I've learned so much about generous strength and fierce protection of others [from Erivo],' Grande tells me. 'The list of what she's taught me is endless, we don't have enough time!' When I ask about how they took care of their mental wellbeing during a demanding filming schedule, as Erivo talks, Grande reaches for her hand

and holds it for the rest of the interview. They tell each other 'I love you' twice, both emphasising the importance of keeping your friends close. 'This film is about love, friendship and acceptance, and when you feel those deeply you can't help but to connect,' Erivo says.

By now we've all seen the viral video of Erivo leaping to protect Grande at the *Wicked: For Good* Singapore premiere, when a man – now named as Australian Johnson Wen – charged at Grande on the red carpet. Wen is a serial celebrity 'rusher', known on social media for jumping barricades to charge celebrities from Katy Perry to The Weeknd. He has since been sentenced to nine days in prison for the incident in Singapore.

Erivo's quick reaction to protect Grande follows many a viral moment between the pair. Who can forget when they spoke about 'holding space' for each other? Or when Grande held Erivo's index finger to soothe her during a confusing interview moment? It was a charming demonstration of love and connection.

It's true that their bond is seemingly beyond any other celebrity friendship we've seen lately. And yet, there has also been scepticism around their authenticity – whether it was constructed or exaggerated for the benefit of two behemoth press tours. But I saw firsthand the closeness and connection between them – it's undeniable. And how could they not become so close, navigating the level of scrutiny

and pressure that comes with being in one of the biggest Hollywood movie franchises of the decade?

As a very tactile friend, I'm all for platonic public displays of affection, whether that's a hand on a friend's arm as she recounts an awful break-up story or stroking a pal's hair while watching trash TV. It's a meaningful way of conveying closeness and giving reassurance, particularly in an age where so much of our communication with friends only exists through screens, and coordinating calendars to meet up can often feel like a military operation.

For me, showing someone some real intimacy through touch – if they want it – is an indicator of a deep friendship. Congratulatory hugs when you smashed it at work, snuggling together on the sofa when you're feeling sad, holding hands in public when you're feeling unsettled, anxious or just because it's lovely and calming to feel that physically close to a friend.

Of course, I have friends who aren't so touchy-feely. My own sister hates physical touch and has only ever given me the most awkward hugs possible. That's fine, too – but to judge a tactile friendship like Erivo and Grande's is to suggest that only some types of loving touch are socially acceptable, needlessly centring romantic love as the key means of finding intimacy.

Given that in certain seasons of our lives our female friends are the closest allies that we have, our sounding boards, our deepest connections through all of life's ups and downs – why shouldn't we express that physically?

Grande and Erivo's tactile connection might make for a great meme, but it is also clearly an essential part of how they express their affection and love for each other. So go out and stroke your friend's finger every once in a while! You might feel closer than ever and, at the very least, you'll get a good laugh out of it.



Left: there for each other at the eventful Singapore premiere