

Stripping Down a Sex Scene

By Lucy Wilcox

DirectHer speaks to leading Intimacy Coordinator, Kate Lush and actors Antoinette Louw and David Chevers to discuss how the grain is changing post #MeToo, actor empowerment and how to create passionate on-screen sex.

The film industry is experiencing a new age after the dawn of the #MeToo movement shifting attitudes around sex, boundaries and respect. One major cultural shift is SAG-AFTRA's recent requirement to have intimacy coordinators on set, changing the way intimate scenes are performed. Getting naked on camera, kissing someone you've never met or having to relive past sexual trauma, these scenes can be particularly complicated to navigate as safety and wellbeing needs to be looked after. Kate Lush co-founded Safe Sets in 2020, a global intimacy coordination company. Lush curated and developed the framework now used by Netflix paving the way for intimate scenes in their productions. Lush said: "I think sometimes directors think they've got an idea that they do intimate scenes really well and they're really respectful and great with their actors, but they're not

“actors are intrinsically programmed to say ‘yes’ the whole time.”

taking into account nuance or power dynamics and how actors are intrinsically programmed to say ‘yes’, the whole time. This relationship doesn't give space to allow any articulation of actors' boundaries because they're worried, they're never going to get employed again." Bridging the gap between those at the top and the actors is where the role of intimacy coordinator fits, acting as a mediator whilst empowering actors of their rights. Intimacy Coordination is a somewhat new career within the stagnant craft of cinema, sparking Lush's interest in 2018 after her career as an actor and movement coach.

Lush said: "I first stepped out on stage at 3 years old, I've worked every single department of theatre, I've trained in Poland, I've

toured the world, I've been nominated for best actor, I've done my days, intimacy coordination may not have existed 20-30 years ago, but my understanding of actor process is a lifetime's work, and that's what I bring to the role of intimacy coordinator."

With her long history of starring in low-budget horror films, Lush speaks about what one day at work looked like.

She said: "I was performing in one film and there was a young actress who came in because she was doing a scene of sexual violence, she got introduced to her screen partner, she got told that she was going to do the scene in the front room and that they should just go for it. "So she basically went in that room to be sexually assaulted, simulated but for the scene.

"Meanwhile we had a male senior actor who had simulated sex with the much-younger lead actress, it was a fully nude scene, and they had no genitalia covering for him at all, so he literally took his sock and placed it on his penis, and then he did the sex scene. I was like, gosh that's quite a day, I'm sure there's probably other ways to do this."

What do intimacy coordinators do?

Before shooting they consult actors through meetings where actors are asked about their personal consent with regards to touch, nudity and sexual boundaries.

When the actors meet for the first time on set, the intimacy coordinator orchestrates a workshop where they work on eye contact and touch.

It's now the intimacy coordinator's responsibility to block and choreograph intimate scenes, fitting with the actors' limits but also appreciating the director's creative vision.

Even after the director shouts cut! Intimacy coordinators remain on call allowing actors to check in if they feel affected by the intimate scenes.

THE VOICES



Kate Lush
INTIMACY COORDINATOR
Co-founder of Safe Sets based in South Africa with employees across Europe.



Antoinette Louw
ACTOR
Award-winning South African actor who starred in An Act of Defiance.



David Chevers
ACTOR
South African actor and model known for Primacy and The Vault.



BETWEEN THE SHEETS
Antoinette Louw with Louw Venter in 'Die Laaste Tango'

This unregulated and dangerous process pushed Lush into the world of Intimacy Coordination. From the characters she had to play, to her work in drama schools, her direct connection with acting allowed her to understand the complex emotions that arise around intimate scenes. Lush said: "Actors don't get much power, they don't have autonomy over their choices, they tend to get shunted around set and actually on an intimate scene with an intimacy coordinator they get treated really quite well, there's someone taking care of them for once."

“there was actually somebody to talk to.”

Antoinette Louw is an award-winning South African actor who has worked with Lush on several films and television shows. Louw started out as an actor at 28, her experiences of set prior to the integration of intimacy coordination left her feeling more than uncomfortable. She said: "I remember there was a director on a movie that I worked on who made

sexually inappropriate jokes all the time, he was an older man which always made me feel like I couldn't say anything because of what I would be perceived as, that I'm not fun and that i'm not likeable." Louw always felt that the culture among everyone on set was to not speak up over anything from sexual innuendos, bullying and assault. This suppressed her own voice leading to her boundaries often being crossed.

She said: "I was scared and vulnerable when I had just met someone on the day where I was expected to be intimate on camera, we weren't prepped with intimacy coordinators back then. I'm human

so either my body would react, or the male actors' body would react, emotions would come up, and things would start to get blurred. "My body, is so interlinked with my emotions and at the end of the day it's just so much, I just didn't have the skills, I was in such a confused and anxious state because I had someone at home who was

waiting for me and then I'm walking around with all these emotions: am I having a crush on this person? Am I falling in love? I could not speak to anyone about it. Before having an intimacy coordinator, I suppressed those feelings that would come up during intimate scenes which was dishonouring and disrespecting what was going on within me.

"Intimacy coordination showed me how I could be supported and respected as an individual and as an actor. There was actually somebody I could talk to."

Whilst working with Lush on the television show, 'Dam', Louw at nearly 50 felt that she no longer met the industry's standards of beauty especially when she had to be naked on screen.



TOOLKIT
Items from Lush's kit, from left to right: condoms, roll of tape, boob tape and cutting tool

ON SET
Louw listens to director Dian Weys on set of 'Coffee and Cigarettes'



Louw said: "I was so aware of my body changing and I have hips and I don't have a flat tummy but oh shit this is also going to be exposed to the world and people are going to see. It was also part of my journey, to be comfortable in my body and it was incredible to work with Kate who also understands that part of being a woman." David Chevers is a South African actor with over 30 years of experience across film, TV and musical theatre.



Chevers performed in his first sex scene alongside Louw in a film set to be released next year, they were both accompanied with intimacy coordinator Lush.

He said: "It was a really comfortable and safe position to be left in, feeling like wow she's on it and she knows exactly what might come up, even covering base that didn't come up but the fact it was

"I don't want to know what people were doing before."

discussed really demonstrated a real tenderness and great care about being informed as a person, not just a character. We did these exercises where we faced one another and we stood there staring at each other to really work on eye connectivity and spoke to each other about our bodies allowing for this cathartic, beautifully constructed moment to happen when we went to shoot."

From attending drama school throughout his teens to entering the film industry during the early 2000s, Chevers experienced first-hand the cultural shifts #MeToo

ignited. He said: "I think intimacy coordination has brought about this whole awakening for actors, it is so necessary and I don't want to know what people were doing before. I have noticed that there's less toxic control towards actors, there's less fear mongering and more information about what your rights are as an actor in every situation."

Chevers' experience highlights how intimacy coordination is becoming standardised practice across the industry. Those who are just entering the industry are now on set with the knowledge that it should be a requirement. Although the crux of the job is supporting the creation of intimate scenes, Lush said: "The role is really being able to understand the actor process but also completely valuing the work that actors do and actually genuinely caring about their wellbeing to make them feel supported."



TAKE TWO
Louw and Chevers with Co-star Hilda Cronje shooting their upcoming film, 'Die de konstruksie von Retto Blom'

