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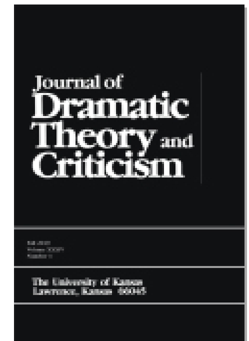

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Intimacy Choreography and Cultural Change: An Interview with Leaders in the Field

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In preparation for editing this special section, I had the opportunity to sit down with three leaders in the current field of intimacy choreography: Tonia Sina, Laura Rikard, and Kaja Dunn. Sina is the founder, executive director, and head of pedagogy for Intimacy Directors International (IDI). Rikard is co-founder and head faculty of Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) as well as an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina Upstate. Kaja Dunn is a consultant on issues of race, equity, and theatre. She is affiliate faculty for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) with Theatrical Intimacy Education and is an Assistant Theatre Professor at University of North Carolina Charlotte. Below is an edited version of our conversation.

Keywords: *consent, actor training, stage combat, critical race theory, stage movement*

Joy Brooke Fairfield: What performance traditions and techniques are you building upon in the work you're doing with intimacy choreography?

Tonia Sina: The work is definitely influenced by stage combat. I had been a stage combat teacher, choreographer, and fight director for quite some time when I fell into intimacy direction, not by mistake, but because the need was there. I'd been choreographing a lot of sex scenes—it wasn't called intimacy back then, they were just sex scenes—especially for student-directed shows, which is often where all the sex is. At the time, I was getting a degree in theatre pedagogy to become a stage combat teacher. I was trying to research who else had been doing this work and I didn't find anything. So I decided to take stage combat exercises and techniques and modify them—I turned duels into sex scenes, and mass battles into orgies. I was using almost the same exercises, but twisting them for consensual work instead of nonconsensual work. I found that it fit really well. In addition to stage combat, I'm also influenced by the work of Steven Wong (who I studied with at NYU) as well as Grotowski, Laban, Anne Bogart's Viewpoints, and clowning, specifically Lecoq's complicity with the audience.

Laura Rikard: What really started the connection for me was teaching acting class in tandem with stage movement classes: helping students understand that their bodies tell stories in space, and that intimate stories can be told more clearly through embodied technique than through believing that you have to really be in love with your scene partner. So in that way we're heavily influenced by dance choreography, stage combat, and especially different physical acting techniques, particularly the availability and vulnerability of stage movement, the centering

work of biomechanics, as well as Lecoq, mask work, commedia dell'arte, Laban, Viewpoints, and Margolis work.

Kaja Dunn: I also have a background in combat and I went through three conservatory training programs: some that didn't interrogate the intimacy of the acting work they were asking students to do. Before I started doing intimacy work formally, I had been thinking a lot about pedagogy techniques, specifically with theatre students of color. So much of it had been damaging. I was looking at the work of Barbara Ann Teer and others, but also looking outside of theatre for answers, because theatre can sometimes hide behind its assumed liberalness. I have spent the past four years looking at educational theory, where scholars have been thinking about cultural competency since the 1980s. And actually theatre has too: in 1984 Roberta Uno convened a conference in New York called "Theatre Training for Students of Color," where some of these same issues were brought up. The more I talk to teachers who've been teaching for thirty or forty years, it becomes clear that all of these things have been brought up already.

One of the tools I use a lot is critical race methodology. Tara J. Yosso and Daniel G. Solorzano talk about five tenets, one of which is the validity of lived experience. You have to count lived experience as a kind of training, a methodology. Part of my interest in consent, even before it became theatrical intimacy, was that so much of it had been denied. As a woman of color, I was told at eighteen that I was going to play a lot of prostitutes and people being raped. Indeed—my very first scene in undergrad was being told to do the roughest sex scene in the play *Beirut*, whereas all the white students were doing plays like *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.

I went to a faith-based graduate school and because there were many sensitivities there, one of the our professors wrote in the syllabus: "If any of this work is not agreeable to you in any way, come to me," and I thought, *Oh, you can do that*? It's funny, because people often think of faith-based schools as highly conservative, but it was one of the most validating spaces I'd ever been in. They saw people as human and gave us the option of saying no. I had never encountered that in a training program before, and I'd gone to two before that one. As soon as I started teaching, I started incorporating that practice and I got pushback from colleagues, who said, "They're actors, they need to learn to do what they're told." Then #MeToo happened, and I was like, "Yep, this is why I've been doing this."

So some of my influences are from lived experience, but other aspects come from critical race theory and critical race methodology. I'm highly influenced by Africana studies and the ways that Africans and African Americans have been oversexualized. I'm thinking about the history of how Black women have been sexualized through the white gaze since Venus Hottentot but also about how Black male bodies get oversexualized by white women. A lot of this work on theatrical intimacy is focused on the female body as particularly vulnerable, but consider the position that my Black male students have been put in time and again. Sometimes

people can see the violent impacts of the patriarchy on women very clearly but don't see the ways that white women sometimes perpetrate that patriarchy in a racialized way with Black men.

TS: Along the lines of lived experience shaping your perspective, I also have to say that a big influence for me has been being disabled, and being in a lot of medical situations where you're laying naked on a table in front of strangers and you have no control. You don't get to decide what they're doing. They get to touch you, and some of them ask, some of them don't, and you get to learn what's the best way to navigate that. I think just being disabled and having that perspective in a room full of abled people changes things.

JBF: Can each of you talk a bit about how you developed your techniques, protocols, and approaches to choreographing onstage intimacy?

TS: I started as an actress and realized just how many times I'd been victimized by being asked to perform an intimate scene without any direction. I grew up in an abusive home, so I was able to recognize bullies all through my career. There's a lot, especially in academia. I was always resisting bullying from the get-go, and that always got me in trouble as a woman. If you're *that* woman—the one resisting—you become a scapegoat immediately. All through college I was pushing back and trying to figure out why this is so uncomfortable. Then in graduate school, I was cast in *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, in a role in which I had to kiss my partner, and he and I didn't have "chemistry," according to our director. So he asked us to rehearse in private to find chemistry, which we did—we found chemistry very inappropriately without a third party. The repercussions of that still reverberate, even today. I thought, *I can't put anyone through what I've been through, I cannot stand by and watch people be abused anymore. I physically can't do it*.

When I went to my mentors in graduate school, saying, "I want to study this, do you have any resources?" They said, "Not that I know of, I don't think anyone's doing this." I searched the internet, I went through everything I could that might help make sense of how do you do this *properly* and I found *absolutely* nothing. My mentors assigned me to go to New York City to study Merce Cunningham and *Pilabolus* and modern dancers like Pina Bausch, because they include a lot of physical contact. So I studied all these things, and started devising a show that was *all* intimacy so that I could challenge myself to find a technique. I developed many of my approaches with those actors as I was choreographing them, and through the writing of my thesis on this topic. Through three years in graduate school specializing in intimacy, I decided that this is I wanted to do. No one else was doing it, and in fact, everyone was telling me it was stupid: "Tonia, nobody in the theatre is getting harassed or assaulted. They're all doing it of their free will." And I was like, "But I was assaulted twice this week. What are you talking about?"

To fast forward, I've called myself an intimacy choreographer since around 2006 and was working in universities in Oklahoma to refine it. At first, I wasn't

ready to share it; I wanted to make sure it was peer-reviewed and that I had gotten feedback. I really was doing my best to just try and then make mistakes, and try and then make mistakes, and then try more. Eventually I was able to get to a point where I wanted to share it. That's when I ran into Siobhan Richardson and Alicia Rodis, my co-founders, who had been doing similar work in the stage combat world and they agreed that we should start an organization. We knew people were out there doing this work, and if we lit the beacon and got them to come to us, we could all learn from each other to create better, more cohesive methods. We wanted to avoid the guru thing. I didn't want it to be "the Sina method." I didn't want to trademark it and say, "Intimacy direction, copyright." The whole point was that this needs to be shared, this needs to be a new specialty in performance.

When Alicia, Siobhan, and I got together around 2015 and founded Intimacy Directors International (IDI), we devised the pillars, our foundational document. We started with three—consent, communication, and choreography—and then we added context and closure in the next year, and it became five. The five pillars have been a good foundation for the method, knowing that there are other methods that can build on and around them. We encourage people that we certify to develop their own methods and subspecialties. The work is so new and evolves so quickly. Our workshops change every single time we teach them because we're constantly learning, constantly applying the feedback we get from every workshop.

JBF: Laura, your work with Theatrical Intimacy Educators has also been a collaborative endeavor, yes?

LR: Yes. I had been working with students in the classroom since about 2008 on developing better self-care practices for actors, and as a director I had begun working on systems for staging intimacy. I started getting asked as a stage movement specialist: "Hey, can you come work on this scene in my show?" and I would go, and it kept being the love scenes. At the same time, I started presenting about what I call "vulnerability practice" and actor self-care work at the American Theatre in Higher Education conference (ATHE), and I kept being placed on programs alongside this then-graduate student Chelsea Pace, who was also a member of ATME, the American Movement Theatre Educators focus group at ATHE. At the 2017 conference, we were paired together once again. Chelsea and I checked in and it turned out that directors and professors had been reaching out to both of us for training and consultation. We realized we needed to make a place where people can find us. So we talked through everything there at the conference, and that's how it got started. Because we had been working on our own for a long time before finding each other, we married our techniques and learned from each other. When we teach a workshop we try to honor that by saying: "This came out of Chelsea's work, this came out of Laura's work." Part of the reason we do that is so people don't get caught up in the guru idea. Now, as we're developing techniques, we'll start by sitting down to talk, coming up with exercises that we try

with each other. Then we'll both take those exercises back to the rehearsal room in academic theatre settings.

Working in academic training programs, we've had the benefit of our classrooms being a laboratory for the tools of TIE. We also have the opportunity to choreograph our shows with actors we are training in these techniques, so we get to see how the tools work onstage. We are privileged to have undergraduate research assistants in our classroom laboratories with whom we can work through new material in safer ways. My husband is a scientist, and I watch him work in the lab with undergraduate researchers in similar ways.

Central to our approach is the boundary-establishment practice that Chelsea Pace developed in graduate school, which was based on the premise that "first we need to show, then tell." In boundary practice, actors pair off and demonstrate with their own hands on their own body which areas are available for contact on a particular day with a particular scene partner. The exercise not only shares critical information but also positions each performer as the authority on their own body, over and above the priorities of the text or director. Part of TIE's philosophy is that any story of intimacy can be told in a variety of ways, and that an actors' boundaries are perfect just where they are. This philosophy works well in connection with TIE best practices, such as audition disclosure forms articulating the intimacy plans for each role, and a trained intimacy choreographer with expertise in the vast possibilities for how intimate stories can be conveyed. Chelsea's version of boundary practice was purely physical—in fact, the idea for this was born when she was teaching lots of skateboarders at Arizona State University as a graduate instructor. They would come to class every day with a different elbow or knee scraped, so she developed the practice as a way to help manage their changing boundaries. When we started working together, I added the verbal component, and now there's an established version that we share with others.

We start with embodied research so we know what works, and then we start looking into other fields, like human behavioral psychology, to see why it might be working. For example, we knew we wanted a word for boundaries that set up a concrete image of a boundary to reduce confusion. Just saying this area of the body is "cool" or "not cool" wasn't specific enough, and adds societal pressure to "be cool" and not be honest or thoughtful about your boundaries. We decided on the word *fences*, and then we spoke with a psychologist and she validated the use of the word for us through the study of psychology. You can read more about this in Chelsea's book *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (London: Routledge, 2020). We also look into theatrical roots as to why we haven't had these systems in place, or why there's been resistance to certain interventions in the past. One historical question I'm looking into right now is: When did the voice of the actor go from being a collaborative one to being an

obedient one? When did an obedient actor become the expectation? And how can we transfer that back?

When Chelsea and I started Theatrical Intimacy Education in 2017, we made a point of reaching out to IDI to have a conversation to say, "We want to make sure that however this goes forward, we are not in competition with, but in support thereof." We had someone in our recent New York workshop who had done a number of IDI workshops and she was like, "Okay. I'm using deroling from you with my freshmen, and I'm using something I've done for years with my sophomores, and I'm using this other thing from IDI with my seniors." And I was like, "Exactly. That's how we make a culture change."

JBF: Kaja, how have you developed your approach? How are you thinking through this work with the equity, diversity, and inclusion lens?

KD: I worked with Laura first on a diversity panel years ago, and had been thinking about consent in how I was teaching classes and choreographing scenes as a director. I'd noticed I'd been having more inexperienced students in my classes. I'd had multiple eighteen- to twenty-year olds saying, "I'm sorry, I've never kissed anyone before." And of course instinctively I said, "I'm not going to make you have your first kiss in an acting class." So I'm wondering: How do we negotiate this? How do we negotiate touch with students who came of age with the internet, with a completely different access to pornography, to online dating? And then there's this whole other layer about race and ethnicity. How do you take what we're doing with intimacy choreography but also look at the dimension of differential racial embodiment. How do I have to think about consent differently when I'm working with Black and Latinx and Asian bodies on stage in relation to these white bodies onstage? Because it says something different than if I have all white bodies. And this is a conversation I've had with Laura and Chelsea a lot, why are these spaces where intimacy choreography is being developed so white? What does it mean when there's a space that's predominantly white and female? There's a reason that directors of color are not coming into these spaces, and how do we investigate that? It's not because they don't believe in consent.

Often when diversity gets "added" to things, it's sort of the sprinkles on top of the frosting. *But it can't be an extra, it has to be one of the core things*. There's something about cultural experience that can't just be added on. You can learn and you can be aware but also until there are more people of color in this space with actual power and ownership, it stays this bastion of whiteness with an extra add-on. If we're talking about consent, and if we're talking about empowerment, then at the center of that discussion should be people of color.

Indeed, most contemporary acting methods were borrowed by Europeans from non-European sources. Chekhov studied Eastern methodologies. Stanislavski borrowed from African theatre traditions. These things were appropriated. And when you say that, and when you call it what it is, you make yourself vulnerable.

When I speak truth to power and I'm on a grant-funded position or I'm an adjunct or on a contracted position brought in by an organization to look good for a grant, I have no real power. I can't say to you: "Actually, these roles are demeaning," or, "This isn't appropriate. This isn't an accurate representation of my people, this is a minstrelsy of my culture. And you're putting it in the Black slot." So if that's the big picture context of making the play, and then an intimacy director is brought in who says, "Yeah, we're gonna have this discussion about consent," something is off. We might be talking about consent in the micro context, but we're not yet speaking truth about where the economic realities lie. Power is money. So when sixty percent of all funding that's coming from the federal government and private donors is going to the top two percent of arts organizations, and those top two percent continue to perpetuate the same problems, even after thirty years of EDI initiatives, something is off. You can't say, "Oh, these Black students gave me their consent to do this" if they feel like they're in a disempowered position. The same thing with actors. People want to work, so they will say yes. If the rooms that are making the decisions don't reflect the people who are in the shows, then I don't care who you cast. It's going to stay the same.

JBF: I appreciate you bringing larger questions of arts equity into the conversation. I know that IDI just formed an equity and diversity task force, and that TIE just announced its Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Intimacy initiative, which includes an upcoming summit of practitioners and scholars at Princeton University in March 2020. I'd like to talk more about connections between the work of intimacy choreography and big-picture projects of anti-racist or anti-colonial theatre arts practice. Do you feel like these classroom spaces and rehearsal rooms that you're leading can be places of resistance not only against rape culture but also against white supremacy and settler-colonial supremacy? This movement is gaining momentum because people are hungry to push back at these oppressive systems that we're stuck within, right?

KD: Can I push back on that a little? About people being hungry for change at this moment in time? I'm a little bit cynical about that right now, because I've just come out of Black Theatre Network, where people are like, "No, for forty years we've been asking ATHE to create guidelines about what it means to study Black theatre, and the special considerations that need to go into our review processes for tenure and promotion, and that still hasn't happened." Or there's another theatre organization that I was invited into to help create a safer space and then I talked to someone who was like, "Oh no, two Black people helped found that organization, and then we had similar initiatives in the 1970s and then in the 1980s." And I realized that they just keep burning out people of color who are working with them. So one of the questions for people of color doing anti-oppression work is: how much are we allowing our bodies to be used as cover for racist organizations? So—when you talk about decolonization, and whether intimacy choreography is inherently

aligned with anti-racist practice—I don't know. I'm cynical about diversity work. My colleagues and I sometimes say, well, diversity is about the commodification of bodies and inclusion is about allowing you into a system that is itself dysfunctional. And even equity is about putting you on par with others inside this existing system. We're talking about blowing things up and starting in a way that fundamentally allows us to obtain some power at the table.

One thing I've appreciated about Theatrical Intimacy Education is whenever they've asked me questions, there's been compensation. Chelsea and Laura were really clear, "No, if you talk to us, we will compensate you for that." So when we talk about power, again, I'll go back to money. Who's going to benefit from the knowledge that I gained from years of lived experience? I didn't come out of the womb understanding critical race theory. That was work I had to do because I saw students being hurt and I needed to explain it in a codified way that my administration and other people would listen to.

So yes, there's research happening now, and also there's been research that you could've accessed. That's the other thing I think people have to understand: because intimacy choreography is dealing with sexuality, women are often like, "Great, that's our issue." But race has to be dealt with really specifically, and anti-blackness needs to be named very specifically. Saying "people of color" or "communities of color" clumps everyone together in a way that it doesn't recognize differences. It's the same thing as saying "not white," which again, puts whiteness at the center. I think one of the big open questions going forward is: if this does become a movement that is relevant to all people, it cannot be centered on whiteness. And I think that's going to be really difficult, because it challenges fundamental goodness structures in people.

For example, this work needs to be very clear about the ways it deals specifically with choreography for Black men. There's often a really uncomfortable dynamic between white women and Black men. So if it's a white woman coming in and staging an intimate scene, saying "You're doing this, this and this... "well, that has to be maneuvered carefully and not with a blunt instrument, not a one-size-fits all technique.

JBF: Thank you. What do you think are the best ways to share this work with others and, if we do it in a good way, what could this field look like in a hundred years?

KD: I think about a show I did two years ago at my institution, a Caridad Svich play, that had intimate touch in it between myself and my colleague Carlos-Alexis Cruz. I think it's good for our students to see. It's one thing to talk about it and another thing to do it, and then to talk openly with them about what the experience was like and how vulnerable I felt having to do it with another faculty member. Even though I know principles of intimacy choreography, it was really awkward. So I

was modeling for them my vulnerability. That seems like a good way to share the work: to acknowledge that we're in this process too. This isn't easy for any of us.

LR: I think the best way to share this work with others is to make it part of our practice as theatre artists and, when people are interested, share. I think introducing specific techniques and practices in training programs is the most efficient way to integrate the work into the industry because the industry advances through incorporating the ideas of those entering it. I think it is important to not be precious about the work, but make it a practical, applicable tool. In a hundred years I hope that best practices are common practice and the positive principles of this work have been so integrated that it does not have to stand apart as its own specialty but rather, it's incorporated into the way we make theatre.

TS: My dream is that we offer methods and techniques much like other forms of acting with more and more specialties and flexibility in perspectives. I imagine intimacy directors one day won't have to educate on consent while choreographing because consent will be such an ingrained part of our culture, it would be a glaring omission to have it lacking in a professional process. We are already worlds ahead of where we were when I started doing this work, but there is still much that can be done. I hope this work continues to cross over into other fields as abuse and harassment are exposed and expunged from our daily experience, especially in academia and places where power dynamics put disadvantaged people in situations of coercion. After all, this movement is only half about technique. The majority of it is about creating art that evolves us into better humans.