



EXPLAINER: INTIMACY COORDINATION

Employing an intimacy coordinator to guide scenes that contain sex or nudity has quickly become standard practice in Australia. However, given ICs are still relatively new, there are misconceptions about the role. ICs are not “white knights” or policemen, and their role is often creative. Jackie Keast reports.

Chloe Dallimore was an intimacy coordinator on Netflix's 'Heartbreak High'.

Actress Madeleine Magee Carr has performed intimate scenes both with and without intimacy coordinators, describing the difference between each situation as “chalk and cheese”.

In the hectic environment of a set, she notes that if actors feel uncomfortable, they often don't want to speak up, lest they jeopardise their casting or are seen to be slowing production down. The IC is there, however, to prioritise actors' boundaries, offer support, ensure consent is met and act as an advocate between an actor and production.

“There are actors that maybe wouldn't have a problem standing up and saying, ‘No, I don't want to do that’ or ‘This is not okay with me’. But I struggle big time doing that,” Magee Carr tells IF.

“I think a lot of people probably struggle as well, because it's hard when a camera is pointed at you and they're like ‘Okay, this is our last shot, we have to get this’.

“You feel like you're going to ruin the whole thing by saying, ‘Wait, hold on. This isn't really what I thought was going to happen or I'm not feeling very comfortable.’”

Having an IC on a production means that any intimate scenes – involving things like nudity, simulated sex, sexual violence, kissing, or touching – are discussed in depth from pre-production, with actors, the director, producer

and appropriate crew, just as with stunts. The IC ensures scenes are then performed within the actors' boundaries, assists in their blocking/movement direction and that the shoot is safe.

The IC is also there to serve story – within the parameters that everyone is comfortable with.

Magee Carr notes this process enables actors, feeling safe and supported, to be more creative.

“Once you're like, ‘This is the movement, this is where I'm going to be touching you, this is the line on my leg I don't want you to go past’, then you can be like, ‘How do we make this real? What would I do in this moment? What would my head be doing? What would my hand be doing? It can be fun, and you can have a laugh about it.’”

Stephanie Power, who has been an IC for projects such as *Five Bedrooms*, comes to the role with a background as an actor and performance welfare specialist.

Her stated mission as an IC is to create a comfortable and supported performance space so everyone can do their best work.

“Having come from an acting background where I'd done nudity, kissing, and sex scenes myself, I knew how uncomfortable that was in the old way it was done – which was pretty much no conversation, just ‘Figure it out for yourself’.

There weren't even therefore creative discussions happening,” she tells IF.

“I often say to people, I love these

scenes, because they have so much meaning in them that informs and tells the audience about the character, about the relationship, about what's going in a subtextual sense for those characters to feed the story.”

Earlier this year, *Game of Thrones* actor Sean Bean came out against the idea of intimacy coordinators, arguing in an interview with the UK's Sunday Times that they would “spoil the spontaneity” of a sex scene.

“I think the natural way lovers behave would be ruined by someone bringing it right down to a technical exercise,” he said.

Michela Carattini, who runs company Key Intimate Scenes and has worked on projects such as *Blaze*, has come up against similar opinions, but counters: “A lot of people get worried about spontaneity and chemistry and improvisation. All of those can exist within parameters.”

She tells IF many people think the IC “comes with tea and holds hands”, but it can be an incredibly creative position – coming up with ways to help reveal character in intimate moments the way that they're revealed in real life.

WHAT IS AN IC?

The role of the IC is relatively new globally, emerging to prominence in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

In Australia, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) released its first ever set of intimacy guidelines for stage and

screen in late 2020, which were then incorporated into the National Guidelines for Screen Safety in mid-2021.

The guidelines actively encourage the use of ICs as best practice and in guiding a producer's broader risk assessment. If a scene has simulated sex, nudity (including partial nudity), sexual violence or other sensitive factors, it is expected that an IC is employed by the production.

The guidelines note that what is considered ‘intimate’ will vary, shaped by cultural background, ability, gender, age and sexuality. Intimate scenes can include, for instance, romantic caresses, handling an infant, or bathing a frail aged character.

Carattini believes that since 2020, the title of an “intimacy coordinator” has become reasonably well-recognised in Australia and considered a normal part of OH&S procedures.

However, she says there is yet to be a “deep and nuanced” understanding of what an IC does – there can be a sense that an IC is a box to be ticked.

In particular, she would like to see a deeper understanding of the relationship between power dynamics, identity and intimacy, particularly as they relate to cultural background.

“Fundamentally, when you're talking about consent, you can't remove yourself from those power dynamics that exist in the world and

in the industry,” she says.

“It's a lot harder to say no to a role or to say no to an ask if you've got fewer opportunities in the industry, friends and networks and chances for your story to be told.”

Carattini set up the first training program for ICs in Australia – recently SAG-AFTRA accredited – so there would be a program specifically targeted at local cultural considerations. As someone of Latina, Indigenous Central American and European background, she felt there was not enough diversity in those who were taking up IC positions.

“The very first people I started training were a First Nations Australian woman and an Arabic man. There were spaces where I saw artists not being heard; where I saw there was a lot of trickiness and nuances to those intimacy situations that people weren't seeing or understanding.”

WHEN SHOULD YOU BRING ON AN IC?

Former federal president of MEAA Equity Chloe Dallimore helped to spearhead the union's intimacy guidelines, and now brings her 25 years of experience as an actor, singer and dancer to work as an IC, with recent credits including *Heartbreak High* and *Last King of the Cross*.

She notes that initially, ICs tended to be brought on set as a form of “crisis management”. However, she has seen over the past three to four years a better understanding of the need to have an IC on board from the outset.

“All the awkward conversations that need to be had have happened well in advance... There are no assumptions and therefore everyone is on exactly the same page on shoot day and then it goes quickly, seamlessly and everyone is able to do their best work.”

After reading the script, the IC will typically sit down with the director and the producer to discuss creative vision. They would then conduct a risk assessment, cataloguing input

from the producer, director, actors and as appropriate, HODs. That assessment determines what the risks are and what measures need to be in place to mitigate them, and the agreed parameters of those involved. They will also determine if productions need an IC to be on set during the shoot or whether rehearsals/discussion beforehand are sufficient.

This process also includes sitting down with actors confidentially one-on-one to discuss needs and concerns, boundaries, mental health risk mitigation and appropriate closure practices. Depending on the needs of the actor or production, the IC may help with confirming the wording of the nudity and simulated sex waiver.

Once the IC has determined the parameters in which a scene will be performed, they assist with rehearsals and blocking. Ahead of shoot day, they would also hold a meeting with, typically, the producer, the director, the 1st AD (as they will be the person allowing the IC to check in with the actors on set and enforcing the close set lists) and the cinematographer (as they will be responsible for framing, shots, the lighting used and have input into the kinds of modesty garments that can be used and not appear on camera). This meeting covers the boundaries of the scene, the options of how to tell the story, and if the set is to be closed, who needs to be there and who doesn't.

On set, the IC is on hand to check consent throughout and offer support. If things change on the day, like shot framing, the IC will also check in with actors. Following on from the shoot, the IC would then typically follow up with the actors and crew as appropriate.

In that sense, Carattini says she can't be called on set the day before. “Some people think we just show up on set and that's our job, to police what is going on,” she says.

“Actually, the bulk of what I do is in pre-production.”

When a script features nudity or semi-nudity, or simulated sex, there

is a consensus that an IC must be brought on. Dallimore notes there is also the idea of ‘hyper-exposure’, a broad term that can encompass things such as miscarriage, a body in the morgue or a birthing scene.

Everything else comes to down risk assessment that considers the needs of the production and the people within it.

“That assessment can have many factors involved. It can even come down to the people that you're working with and their previous lived traumas and identity vulnerabilities, and what those people need to have a safe space to play,” Carattini says.

If a producer is unsure, all urge the best thing to do is to pick up the phone, call an IC and ask.

CONSIDER THE RIGHT IC FOR YOUR PROJECT

ICs come from a variety of professional backgrounds, though typically have experience as actors, dancers, fight choreographers or in mental health. It is not an ‘entry level’ role.

With now around 40-50 ICs operating in Australia, Carattini urges that producers consider the background of who they employ, and how that aligns with the needs of who is working on the project and the creative vision.

For instance, Carattini is an actor, filmmaker and dancer, with

a background in psychology and criminology. She notes that her background in mental health means she can often cross over into areas that other intimacy coordinators wouldn't or shouldn't. Dallimore has often referred productions onto other ICs who have more appropriate skills, such as those with backgrounds and experience in disability or LGBTIQ+ issues.

“We're really looking at: What are the risks here? Who are the people involved? What kind of intimacy is involved? And so, who is the right person for this project?” Carattini says.

ICs who have completed training certificates have done mental health first aid training. However, Dallimore cautions that productions should not conflate ICs with mental health professionals, just as stunt coordinator should not be conflated with a doctor. However, an IC can lead the bringing on those professionals onto the production as appropriate.

Power urges that for violent or otherwise traumatic scenes, actors and crew will also need broader mental health and wellbeing support. She would like to see MEAA draw a clearer boundary about where a mental health professional needs to be brought on alongside an IC; she has been pushing for production welfare coordinators to be implemented in Australia.



Michela Carattini on set.



**SERVING VISION**

When writer-directors Jack Clark and Jim Weir began to ready their debut independent feature *Birdeater*, set during an uncomfortable bachelor's party weekend, they knew the content required them to bring on an IC.

Mostly, they thought an IC was a box they needed to tick so they could have a safe set. What they hadn't expected was that the IC they hired, Carattini, would also collaborate with them on story and invest in how those scenes served their creative vision – within the boundaries of the actors. They noted that many of her ideas were better than their own.

"She was saying, 'What are you trying to achieve here?' She would bring different ideas on how to do certain things related to intimacy," Clark tells IF.

Birdeater had an extended pre-production period due to COVID. During that time, Carattini continued to check in with the actors.

At a certain point, she reported back that the actors' intimacy parameters had changed; they consented to scenes having a level of nudity that was not on the page. It was mutually agreed by all parties that nudity would elevate the meaning of that scene; Clark and Weir altered the script.

For *Birdeater* star Shabana Azeez, working with an IC made preparing for and shooting intimate scenes feel more like an equal collaboration. She notes so often actors are instead put into positions where they have to say 'no' – making them feel that they are letting the team down by taking something away from the project.

"The directors had these more intimate scenes in their minds, and only once they had expressed consent did they put them in the script. It was incredible," she tells IF.

For Weir, it was surprise that they were able to take scenes further with Carattini's support, having initially had the "childish perspective" that an IC was there to "batten down" the script.

Clark agrees, noting his assumption was that the IC would question the need for nudity or explicit content – which Carattini did do – but she also encouraged the creative within the parameters everyone was comfortable within.



Steph Power on the set of 'Prawn'.

"It was nice to see Michela thinking about the value of being explicit in scenes," Weir says. "There wasn't the case that she was pushing for less. She was almost pushing us for more, but just in the boundaries that she was creating."

SERVING CHARACTER

During rehearsal, Dallimore works with actors to give them tools so that in performing intimate scenes they are making character choices – not leaning into their own experiences.

For instance, on *Heartbreak High*, on which she worked with a lot of young actors over a long period of filming, one of the first things she did was workshop from the outset a shared consent language. Then, she worked with actors who had relationships with each other in the show to create a 'toolkit' of sorts.

"If they've got certain relationships within the production that are ongoing, we can explore what their relationship's intimate touch might be, so they're not just depending on default touch when they walk on set. The relationships and the physical contact will [then] hopefully already looked lived in, and as if those relationships have existed for whatever period of time is written into the script. The actors then have the same process you have in a fight scene; they know how to talk to one another, when they need touch one another and when they need to improvise."

As for making it a technical exercise, Dallimore says pulling apart the physicality of an intimate scene helps it feel like dance moves, which actually frees the actor on set to focus on character.

"They don't have this internal monologue going 'Oh my god, [does she] think that I put my hand on the side of her head because I want to? No, it's a choice I'm making as an actor'... No one is worried they're

going to be misconstrued."

While things can change on set on the day – the lighting might be different than anticipated, for instance – Azeez says that when there is an IC, you have thought through so much, you don't feel sprung upon, and you are able to shift creatively.

"Creatively, you're way more able to play when things pivot and change."

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT WOMEN

Given the work of the IC was catapulted forward by the #MeToo movement, there can be a perception that they are a "white knight on the sword out to protect the women".

Carattini counters that the IC emerged organically to create cultural change for the less powerful, which includes a broader spectrum than just women or female-identifying actors.

"I am in this work for the sole purpose of helping to create cultural change, in order to help make our industry a genuinely joyful space to work in, a genuinely safe space to play for everyone," she says.

Further, having an IC on set for those who identify as male is often a relief. "They're no longer being put into a position to have to decide where they're putting their hands, how far they're taking that kiss or moment; that's not something on them," Carattini says.

"They can be given these parameters and know that the other person has consented and is safe within that, and they can really lose themselves in the character."

Male actors can also be asked to take on roles within intimate scenes that may be distressing. Many ICs canvassed by IF pointed out that performing as a perpetrator within a sexual assault scene is often hard to navigate.

"If we take a non-consensual sex scene, how does that male actor feel about being the perpetrator of violent sex? He feels just as horrific as the female actor feels having the act done to them," Dallimore says.

"They are both having to be vulnerable and are both stepping out way outside of their choices that they would usually make as a human."

NOT A 'LUXURY'

Weir says that as a director, having an IC on set was not only crucial, but reassuring.

"Actors don't feel pressured to agree to certain things just because the directors are asking them to do it. They're a third party whose main job isn't to make a movie; their main job is to make sure everyone feels safe and is only doing things that they're willing to do."

Working with ICs has helped Azeez feel more confident and settled within her boundaries and better able to express them – something that has benefitted her on other projects.

"Even when I go into things without an IC now, I can advocate for myself. It's better to have someone there definitely... but I am much more comfortable in what I am and am not willing to do, and comfortable in intimate spaces as an actor."

Clark feels it beneficial that creatives receive a deeper level of education at a film school level about shooting intimacy.

"It's very difficult if you're writing something, even moderately adult drama, to avoid any intimacy. It feels a huge blind spot – at least when we were in film school – that it was never really an essential part of the curriculum that everybody had to go through, because it I think it's something that everybody's going to have to face."

He adds that while ICs are an added cost, it is a role that all films, including independent films, must consider – it is not a "luxury".

"I think it is particularly important for an independent project where the days feel so short and there are compromises being made every day. You're always under pressure, and I think in that environment people... don't want to voice their concerns, they don't want to raise issues because they already know how much pressure the production is under." **f**

**THE PARDY SUITE**

Colouring facilities suited to a wide range of projects are available in Sydney via THE PARDY SUITE.

Set up by experienced film colourist Daniel Pardy at the beginning of the year, the suite incorporates a full Baselight TWO system and is also set up for 4K, Dolby Vision and HDR. Pardy's own experience in the industry spans more than a decade, with the freelance colourist working on an array of projects across long form and commercial.

He operates in a sizeable space capable of housing creative teams that also includes a DCI cinema projector.

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