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How Everyone Gets Messy About Intimacy Coordinators

Intimacy coordinators are everywhere, from "Euphoria/Euphoria" to "Heated Rivalry," but indefinite delays the intercoordinators and the joys of shaping the honest screen romances

BY BEN BRAUNSTEIN
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Euphoria/HBO

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From the blistering bedroom of "Euphoria/Euphoria" to the BDSM antics of "Fifty" and the cultural phenomena of "Heated Rivalry" and "Bridgerton," intimate bodies are central to a lot of on-screen. It has also put a spotlight on the role of intimacy coordinators, who are now ubiquitous and those who instruct on-screen romances. Their presence can offer a level of creative people (craft, usually directors and actors) commenting on whether they like having them on set.

Only Google knows exactly why intimacy coordinators about their work, since it and the terms and gallery — much of their work on set is meant to be invisible. Still, myths and misconceptions persisted. Let's break down them to help understand what an intimacy coordinator actually does.

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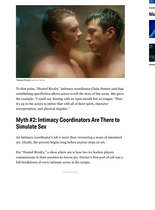
"There's a myth that we're there to say, 'This is exactly what's going to happen from every based to shoulder moment, and nothing may deviate,'" Robbie Taylor-Stone, whose credits include "Hilma" and "Rock, Writer and Royal Blue," said.

Though that may be the case in some productions, Taylor-Stone said, "In my experience, you're creating a container in which it's clear where touch is allowed, and then within that, the actors and creatives are free to move and improvise within a structure of choreography. I will put things in place so that you can explore, knowing that it's not going to cross a line."


Heated Rivalry/HBO Max

To that point, "Heated Rivalry" intimacy coordinator Chelle Hunter said that establishing specificities allows actors to tell the story of the scene. She gives the example of a character who is a left-handed quarterback who is "trying to go to the actress to indicate that with all of their spirit, character, interpretation, and physical impulse."

Myth #2: Intimacy Coordinators Are There to Simulate Sex

Intimacy coordinators (IC) is more than overcoming a scene of simulated sex. Ideally, the process begins long before anyone steps on set.

For "Heated Rivalry," a show where sex is how two ice hockey players communicate in their relationship, Hunter said, "Episode 1 that part of call was a full breakdown of every intimate scene in the scripts.

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"Crown Chronicle, Hunter/Millman[,] and I spoke for hours. We went through all of the actions, scene by scene, in the entire series," Hunter said. "I talked through their consent levels, boundaries, and their feelings about the scenes in immense detail."

That information also translates into the extensive paperwork required for the job, a reality other (an agreement of the actor's consent, scheduling performers at least 48 hours in advance). Instituting confidential questionnaires, "Hot Ones"-inspired questionnaires, and addressing concerns ahead or sensitive set protocols.

Heated Rivalry/HBO Max

As you would imagine, Hunter has a wedded eye on intimate scenes, however, she's also looking at the moment within the show's wider arc.

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"I had a whole spreadsheet action tracking what episode we're in and what kind of intimacy we're in, and I'm constantly looking at the overall arc of the season and items that would impact first-presenting moments, especially important when shooting non-chronologically, the first intimate scene they shot concluded Episode 6.

"I ran them to track these characters' journey and their relationship with each other," Hunter said. "That's how intimacy, as you mentioned, is a tool."

Not unless you think there's nothing sexier than sitting for realistic portraits, perhaps. Intimacy coordinators help navigate between the pack-to-back production schedule, the actors' comfort levels, and the creative moment. For instance, Taylor-Stone crafted explicit dials and can access to "Hilma" as well as the swooning romantic books of "Red, White and Royal Blue."

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"The creative choreography work becomes very different, whether we're talking about a period piece, which is more interested in feeling remotelie and sensual," Taylor-Stone said.

Hunter echoed that sentiment, noting the tone of intimacy (whether graphic or dating) can be wildly radical. "Now bodies move, interpersonal dynamics, mannerisms, and ways of breathing communicate how we're feeling about another person or moment in time."

The permeation of intimacy coordination are much broader than just sexual. "Intimate content" can be any bodily function, from defecation and urination to childbirth and breastfeeding. There are also calls for familial intimacy to be coordinated, and, with child actors being picked up and bussed or cuddled by adult actors.

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Myth #3: Intimacy Coordinators Are Hired to Encourage Vulnerability

One may assume that reality-pics hatal is hard with erotiicon for intimacy coordinators but that wasn't the case for "Wuthering Heights" intimacy coordinator Helen Leite.

"Reality is almost simplest, it's clear," Leite said of Emerald Fennell's adaptation of Emily Brontë's classic. "Everyone's vulnerable, and there is no reality, you've got to make sure it's clear what's going on. It's all about the tension."

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Instead of explicit nudity, the film rests on stars Margot Robbie and Jacob Elordi to deliver the lusty energy. Despite them being established actors, Leite said, "Margot and Jacob were vulnerable in the sense that everybody has experienced." The dialogue can even be reciprocal. Leite said, with actors contributing suggestions about movement or camera angles.

Adelaide Waldrop, whose credits include "Mickey 17" "Wedding," and "Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy," also highlights the importance of speaking up for production and setting ample preparation time and rehearsal.

Waldrop said, "You can have the most signal-heartbreak type-actor who has dials incredibly vulnerable talking for an off because of the expectations of such actors' physiques, it's sometimes just as vulnerable as a female presenting actor showing full nudity of her breasts."

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While intimate scenes can clearly be vulnerable, the work of an intimacy coordinator is not a substitute for a mental health coordinator or psychologist. Though intimacy coordinators are often mental health first aid trained, they are not adequately mental health professionals.

Wuthering Heights/ Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures/Warner Bros. Pictures

Myth #4: Intimacy Coordinators Work in a Vacuum

While much of the dialogue around intimacy coordinators is actor-facing, it's also interdepartmental. Leite said that before the role, producers, makeup, and costume filled the gap. "Then it'd be a naked actor on set, and costume would rush in with a robe and have to hold a get out of the way."

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Now, there are explicit frameworks in place about who, when, and how interactions occur on a closed set for shooting reality. Though cross-department interactions remain paramount. Waldrop offered the example of intimacy coordination and costumes if an actor is in underwear, there are considerations about how the fabric will be cut to expose the skin, or whether the feel (?) about dressing what to look for in a script and how to liaise with other departments about feel.

Myth #5: Intimacy Coordinators Are Only Needed for Romance and Dramas

Romance and drama are the obvious genre vehicles for an intimacy coordinator, but they are not the only genres that require their work. Even body doubles and prosthetics are used. In Bong Joon Ho's "Mickey 17," two Mickey clones (Robert Pattinson) exist simultaneously after an error in duplicating the transformation. Though the role of Mickey's Nasheen, Waldrop also worked closely with Pattinson's acting double, Sam Woodhouse.

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"You have the agency of two performers, but they have to be doing the same thing, so you're negotiating consent levels between both of them to play both parts," Waldrop said.

Mickey 17/Warner Bros. Pictures/Warner Bros. Pictures

Like have a body double represents the actor's body in the audience's mind, the same is true for prosthetics, and as they must be treated with care.

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"There's a lot of paperwork on safeguarding how prosthetics are shot and making sure the actors are aware of it," Waldrop said. "You want to ensure no one is taking a selfie underneath a prosthetic, and that's important for them that they don't have physical boundaries." These measures are also important in a production where, as Taylor-Stone said, "Sometimes actors are hired because their likeness is 'increasingly important in the age of pre-casting and AI.'"

Misconception: Intimacy Coordinators Don't Advocate for Actors and Crew

A high level of sensitivity and coordinated intelligence is necessary for the intimacy coordinator role to ensure they are a vocal advocate for both the cast and crew.

That is proved time and time again, as Leite recalled. "I have been in a situation where I'm on set and I'm saying, 'Actor, I don't think you're comfortable with that person, and they were not.' But, they told me they, and I immediately refused that to the director, who said, 'It's not, we're not doing it.' You always have to have your antenna out."

Even with a growing awareness of the role, not everyone is on board with intimacy coordinators becoming important on production. "You've always going to get some actors who've been around for a long time making comments," Leite said.

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