

Reimagining consensual engagement in drama education: the possibilities of intimacy choreography in a “post”-COVID-19 world

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COVID-19 has brought forth new risks for students and teachers as they navigate how to engage safely with each other. It becomes necessary to consider the role of consent as a daily practice in “post”-pandemic life and explore what consent may offer young people as agents of their own bodies. In this paper, I consider how the emerging field of intimacy choreography (IC) illuminates new possibilities for engaging ethically with others. I situate this exploration in the context of drama education, guided by the following questions: how may IC provide practical tools for fostering consensual interactions amongst students, their peers, and their teachers? How may IC shed light on new ways of living more ethically with others?

This paper discusses the potential of IC through the five pillars of rehearsal and performance practice identified by Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (Percy, 2020), supplemented by IC scholarship and professional literature (Ates, 2019; Lehmann, 2018; Morey, 2018; Pace, 2020; Purcell, 2018; Sina, 2014), and reflections on my experiences as a drama teacher working with an IC apprentice and high school students to share observations of how IC promoted consent in rehearsal. This paper will conclude with suggestions for how IC can help teachers support students in a “post”-COVID-19 context.

Keywords: *drama education, consent, intimacy choreography, ethics*

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Introduction

The lived realities of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought forth new physical and emotional risks for students and teachers as they navigate how to engage safely with each other. Social life and forms of expressing affection previously considered to be “easy” have now become rife with real and perceived danger, awkwardness, and emotional consequences. Young people have been left out of conversations about safety at school and are expected to navigate these complexities independently while following new rules and protocols, such as social distancing and masking regulations. Currently, these regulations have changed: those who live in Ontario now have the option to wear a mask in public spaces, thereby placing the onus on the individual to make this decision rather than following a provincially mandated rule as a collective. It then becomes necessary to consider the role of consent as a daily practice in (post)-pandemic life and critically question what an intentional focus on consent may offer to support young people as agents of their own bodies. In this paper, I consider how the emerging field of intimacy choreography (hereafter referred to as “IC”) may illuminate new possibilities for engaging more ethically with each other in drama education. This theoretical paper explores the following questions: How may the pillars of IC provide practical tools for fostering ethical and consensual interactions amongst students, their peers, and their teachers? How might a framework of consent promote individual agency and collective care within and beyond the classroom? Finally, how may IC shed light on new ways of living more ethically with others?

I will reflect on my experiences as a drama teacher working with an IC apprentice and high school students to share observations of how IC promoted consent-based practices in rehearsal. This paper concludes with suggestions for how IC can assist teachers in supporting students returning to the classroom in a “post”-COVID-19 context.

Literature Review

IC is an emerging field of practice within professional theatre, film, and television industries that seeks to make rehearsal and performance processes safer when choreographing intimate scenes. The definition of “intimacy” in this field is purposefully left quite open, and production companies can hire choreographers to assist with directing anything from two characters holding hands for the first time to group sex scenes and everything in between. IC blossomed out of the field of stage combat, in which professional choreographers are hired to ensure safe directorial and rehearsal practices while staging scenes of hand-to-hand combat, fights involving weaponry, or scenes of sexual violence. As a trained stage combat professional, Tonia Sina (2006) recognized a notable gap in artistic practice: intimate scenes often require similar forms of close physical contact and vulnerability as fight scenes, but there were no official protocols or organizations guiding intimate work.

Sina (2006; 2014) is credited as the original founder of IC, as she developed a working series of best practices for intimate work through her MFA research “Intimate Encounters: Staging Intimacy and Sensuality”. In collaboration with Clare Warden and Siobhan Richardson, Sina founded Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), a professional organization that operates with the goal of “pioneering the best practices for performed intimacy, simulated sex and nudity for theatre, live performance, tv and film. [Intimacy choreographers] aspire to create safe and harm-free environments for the production of intimate scenes” (Intimacy Directors and Coordinators, n.d.). IDC provides a set of five pillars to guide rehearsal and performance practice: context, consent, communication, choreography, and closure (Percy, 2020). Choreographers and researchers are interested in bringing this practice to young people through youth theatre programs and mainstream classrooms (St. John, 2021). IDC has recently begun offering free consultations

for K-12 teachers to guide teachers in creating consent-forward classrooms. Researchers and working artists alike have documented the value of IC for professional theatre, television, and film industries and have advocated for including IC in artistic processes and rehearsals (Ates, 2019; Lehmann, 2018; Morey, 2018; Pace, 2020; Purcell, 2018; Sina, 2014). In this paper, I will reflect on my experiences working with an IC apprentice to choreograph intimate scenes in a high school theatre production. Through these reflections on professional practice, theoretically informed by Emmanuel Levinas (1989) and Hannah Arendt (1958), I propose that IC as a consent-focused pedagogical practice in drama education can open new possibilities for students to learn how to engage ethically with others.

Theoretical Frameworks

The impacts of COVID-19 have brought forth new questions about what it means to move through the world ethically and responsibly, and these questions hold implications for youth and those who work with them. How do we promise to keep the young people in our care safe? As the experience of living with COVID-19 has necessitated adults and young people alike to re-imagine how to interact with each other, I question what a consent-based framework may offer to these interactions as we (re)learn how to engage with others. Emmanuel Levinas (1989) maintains that to work towards living ethically together, we must first acknowledge that the Other will always be unknowable to us. Despite this unknowability, we are called to take responsibility for Others. This responsibility is at the heart of education: adults are responsible for the care of children and youth that—as Levinas (1989) would claim—we cannot know, and young people must learn, as well, how to care for each other. My understanding of consent is situated in Levinas' (1989) conception of ethics as an entry point for framing relationships amongst youth, as well as between young people and their teachers. While IC cannot serve as a remedy for unknowability, the core pillars

open space for participants to take responsibility for Others through mobilizing a lens of collective care and communication. Unknowability is accounted for at the beginning of the IC process when all members of an artistic team collaborate to establish a working set of community agreements to frame how they will engage with each other in rehearsal. While creating these agreements, the team typically discusses specific practices that they will use to honour each participant's ability to offer, refuse, or negotiate consent as a catalyst for establishing boundaries, engaging in creative work, and holding space to explore ambivalence.

This paper is informed by Hannah Arendt's (1958) proposal of promise-making as a remedy to the unpredictable nature of engaging with Others and by her conception of forgiveness as a framework to address transgressions, which are likely unavoidable in collaborative work. Arendt (1958) maintains that promises and forgiveness, together, are necessary to enable our capabilities to be and do in the world (p.237). I apply these concepts by exploring what IC can offer young people in mobilizing promise-making and forgiveness in the pursuit of creating live, embodied theatre together. While beyond the scope of this paper, it is also important to acknowledge Arendt's positioning of art as sourced from humans' capacity for thought, thereby signifying that creation requires thoughtfulness and can encourage creators and consumers alike to be thoughtful about the creative process and the art itself. She additionally conceptualizes art as immortal (p.168). Therefore, it is generative to consider the impacts that theatre art situated in IC can have on present and future thinking about consent in public life.

Reflections on Professional Practice

The pillars of IC offer a framework through which to engage in intimate scene work. During my time as a drama teacher, I worked with an IC apprentice to help myself and my co-director choreograph and rehearse scenes of intimacy in our high school play, which included

handholding, physical closeness, and stage kisses. We began by sitting in a circle and reviewing the five pillars of rehearsal and performance practice: context, consent, choreography, communication, and closure (Percy, 2020). As a group, we discussed what each of the pillars meant to us and created agreements for how we would use these pillars during our time together. Next, the IC apprentice led us through drama games and activities centred around consent and physical engagement with each other. For example, we played a game where the group was divided into “Askers” and “Answerers”. All students walked throughout the rehearsal space independently, and Askers would ask the Answerers for consent to put their hand on their shoulder, hug them, or engage in some form of non-romantic physical contact. The Answerers could reply with a “yes” or a “no”, and students were encouraged to experiment with offering both answers if they felt comfortable doing so. Students then switched roles to ensure everyone had an opportunity to practice asking for, giving, and refusing consent. While simple, this activity was necessary to help students become accustomed to rehearsing a language of consent in preparation for choreographing intimate scenes.

In rehearsals that followed, the IC apprentice helped students choreograph and rehearse intimate scenes with partners. He helped students establish a ritual for “tapping in” and “tapping out” of the scene as a way of signalling a mental shift towards the creative work at hand and as a cue for students to get in character. Once students had tapped in, he worked with them to identify the goal of the scene based on the story’s context by asking critical questions such as: What is this kiss trying to tell our audience about the relationship between these characters? How can we use our voices, facial expressions, gestures, and body language to tell that story? Do we both feel comfortable consenting to this blocking? Once these questions were answered, the IC apprentice helped students break the blocking down into specific steps and movements. A simulated kiss, for

example, may include an actor placing her hand on the back of her scene partner's neck, a step forward to close the space between them, and a turn away from the audience to make the "kiss" look authentic. Once the steps were chosen, tried out, and agreed to, students rehearsed the choreography until they felt that they understood the steps well. They then rehearsed the entirety of their scene, including all other stage directions and dialogue, to integrate the intimate moment effectively into their performance.

In working with an IC apprentice, I witnessed my students practicing consent throughout the rehearsal process without prompts from adults. It seemed as though engaging deeply with the processes of negotiating consent gave them a framework to communicate their needs and opened space for students to consider their physical boundaries. My students were also attuned to their peers' needs and were mindful to check in with their scene partners to see if they were comfortable rehearsing the choreography as planned or if adjustments were needed for rehearsal that day. My students' interactions with each other illuminated the potential of consent-based practices to serve as a framework for caring for those we do not know and—as Levinas (1989) would argue—we cannot know. Consent is not about knowing what the Other wants and fulfilling that desire but about staying open to communication as a way of caring for others. The pillars of IC make it possible for theatre artists to collaborate in ethical ways that prioritize well-being and physical and emotional boundaries which often result in dynamic, high-quality performance pieces by curating a safe theatrical playground where actors can engage in exploration and creative risk-taking (Sina, 2014).

Findings

Consent as one of the five pillars of rehearsal and performance practice mobilizes Arendt's (1958) concepts of promise-making and forgiveness quite literally. Through creating agreements

and following specific practices for rehearsing intimate work, promises become a crucial part of the artistic process, and forgiveness necessarily follows as a way of responding to broken promises. Arendt (1958) stresses the importance of promises and forgiveness to enable our abilities to form connections with others:

Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart...a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel. Both faculties, therefore, depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others (p. 237).

Here, Arendt (1958) articulates the need for plurality to enable our capabilities to be and do in the world. This excerpt expresses an emotionally affective need *for* others that seems to have become exacerbated through the pandemic. For young people, school is a space where they engage with others, and as they return to in-person schooling at different times, school becomes a space in which they continually re-negotiate *how* they engage with others. Drama education offers a particularly unique context for this learning, as the nature of embodied, creative work requires that students embrace differing and deeper vulnerabilities than is required in other subjects. These vulnerabilities are brought forth in myriad ways, such as through participating in improvisation activities, embodying various characters who experience a wide range of emotions, or giving and receiving feedback about their performances with their peers. Infusing consent-based practices in drama class can give students and teachers tangible strategies for engaging ethically with each other amongst the lingering impacts of living with the pandemic in our social and public worlds. While drama education is a hospitable environment for this learning, developing a language of

consent is a transferable skill that students can bring into other aspects of their lives. This learning also resonates with Arendt's assertion in her letters to Karl Jaspers (1951) that to engage with the political, we should look towards the arts as authentic, non-theoretical spaces of political insight and lived experiences to inform conceptual, political theory. Drama education informed by the pillars of IC holds generative potential for reimagining how consent can become a core part of living in plurality with others.

Conclusion

In some ways, we have begun to see consent brought more prominently into the social world through COVID-19 since we have had to learn how to communicate differently. From making decisions about who is welcome in our social "bubbles" to asking people we socialize with if they are comfortable spending time together unmasked, consent seems to be more at the forefront of our interactions with others than before. Drama education can play a small part in working towards consensual and more ethical engagement with others. IC specifically offers generative ways of helping students and their teachers (re)learn how to engage with each other in a way that facilitates the making and fulfilling of promises as a way to show care for others. IC can be an effective catalyst for leading young people back to engaging with each other in ways that inspire excitement, deep connections, creativity, and hope. The pillars of IC can work within the parameters of living *with* COVID-19 and help us curate our interactions with each other through a consent-based framework. The safety that consent offers can lead us away from negotiating our interactions with others through feelings of fear and instead move towards a conception of ethicality that approaches these interactions through collective care, taking responsibility for others, making promises, and being generous with our forgiveness.

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