
Intimacy in the Time of COVID-19

Directing Nudity
and Simulated Sex

**A Quick Guide
for Screen Directors**



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INTRODUCTION

As a follow-up to the Directors UK Directing Nudity & Simulated Sex guide, we have worked with directors Susanna White and Bill Anderson, as well as intimacy coordinator Vanessa Coffey, to update our previous recommendations in light of the added restrictions brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.

These individuals have shared their expertise in order to create a framework that allows directors and other creatives the opportunity to do their best work, safely.

Relationships are at the heart of any story. Scenes involving intimacy – of any nature – have always required skill and a craft-led approach to ensure that everyone feels safe, has given consent and are on the same page when it comes to delivering sensitive content.

COVID-19 introduces a new set of challenges to navigate, from the risks of transmission and infection in close quarters, to the need for increased hygiene and sanitation practices. The pandemic has created new hurdles for directors and production teams to overcome, but it has not fundamentally changed the stories we want to tell or the way we want to tell them. It has never been more vital that directors harness their craft to convey story, character and relationships on screen in ever-inventive ways.

There are, of course, a number of health and safety provisions that producers and production companies must put in place before production can begin again, and we will highlight those in this guidance. However, it is also clear that the director, as the creative lead of the production, has a unique part to play in instilling best practice and making cast and crew feel safe, all whilst telling the best possible story.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT?

What is required of producers and production companies?

Our guidance assumes the following health and safety practices have already been put in place by a producer or production company:

- Comprehensive risk assessments and risk mitigation plans
- Effective, accurate testing before rehearsal and filming, as well as temperature checks on arrival.
- A comprehensive cleaning strategy, detailing appropriate cast and crew sanitising habits, and covering the cleaning and disinfection of props and costumes etc.
- A coronavirus health and safety lead with the authority to send home anyone who is displaying symptoms.
- Mandated social distancing for people not from the same household (sets could even be 'zoned' to prevent cast and crew mixing unnecessarily).
- Closed sets with minimal crews to limit any possible exposure to the virus.
- Where below-the-line crew are in close contact with performers in confined spaces, the crew should wear masks and gloves.

What the director brings

There are also several ways in which the director can support the producer and production company in maintaining the health and wellbeing of cast and crew:

- Supporting and upholding all health and safety provisions for the production (as recommended by [health and safety guidance](#)).
- Contributing to 'rolling' risk assessments to help develop ways to mitigate shooting risks.
- Ensuring health and safety within their own tasks – such as when directing intimate scenes.
- Leading the crew by example when it comes to reinforcing the importance of hand washing, social distancing and the use of masks.
- Always capturing footage in a safe and effective way.

Directors are also responsible for creating an environment in which performers feel safe to articulate when they feel uncomfortable with something. Safeguarding welfare and facilitating the creation of a safe space for cast and crew is not a new responsibility, it has always been central to a director's work.

COVID-19 GUIDELINES FOR DIRECTING INTIMATE SCENES

While directors may have a limited influence on the safeguards listed in the section above, their skills in directing action, building trust with performers, framing shots, conveying perspectives, lighting, editing, shot composition and collaboration with intimacy coordinators, puts them in the strongest position to help tell the story in the safest way possible.

This pandemic and the subsequent return to work has highlighted that craft must be as much a part of the working recovery as risk assessments and sanitising habits.

This guidance details just one area in which this is particularly true: the direction of scenes of intimacy and simulated sex.

Not all of these suggestions will be suitable for every piece of work, but they provide a good starting point for establishing best practice on your set.

1. Working with the script

- Try to see the script as early as possible so that scenes can be prepared for early in the process.
- The director, writer and producer should review the script together and agree which physical interactions *need* to occur between performers and decide whether substitutions can be made. Does a physical act need to be shown? If working within a series format, can the intimacy be delayed? The build up to an intimate scene can sometimes be more exciting than the scene itself. Emotional intimacy can be as engaging as physical intimacy. Any decisions made at this stage should be shared with a performer's agent as early as possible (or with the performer directly if they don't have an agent), so that performers can be properly briefed about the storytelling approach and able to make an informed decision about whether or not to take the job.
- Any agreed physical interactions should be included in the production risk assessment and mitigation agreed by the performing, editorial and production team.

2. Preparation

- You will need to allow extra time for planning shots and storyboarding, given the nature and volume of on-set risks. Work with the producer to ensure that you're given enough time for this additional planning.
- Consider scheduling intimate scenes towards the end of the shoot and assume there will be no physical contact allowed between performers. Plan for that.
- Should it turn out that restrictions are later relaxed while you're still in production, you can always revisit the blocking with performers and an intimacy coordinator (if you have one) as required.
- If/when contact is allowed, performers should sanitise their hands, skin and clothing beforehand and if scenes involve kissing, performer health checks will need to be completed.
- Be innovative and come up with new ways to convey sexual desire or intimacy without resorting to conventional tropes. You may even find inspiration by revisiting classic films such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) or *Casablanca* (1943) – some of the greatest screen romances ever made and all filmed under the Hays Code, which prohibited the depiction of sex on screen. Consider what tools classic works offer for contemporary storytelling.
- Do conversations that might ordinarily have been shot face to face really need to be filmed that way? Could they be done in singles edited together? Or perhaps the performers could be positioned side by side?
- If your production *must* feature physical contact between performers, consider whether the schedule could accommodate putting the actors in quarantine for two weeks. However, this would be extremely disruptive for performers, impacting both them and their families, and may not be the best option. Such options should be discussed with the performers and their agents (if they have one) as early as possible.
- Encourage production to provide extra monitors to allow for appropriate social distancing between you, an intimacy coordinator (if you have one) and any other necessary crew. As always, when filming intimate scenes, you need to ensure that all monitors are screened from view and that only essential personnel can access them, particularly if people are accessing them remotely.
- Consider using longer lenses to create a sense of close-up intimacy whilst maintaining a safe distance.

3. Rehearsals

- As the person with the overall responsibility to create a consistent tone, texture and depth across the production, the director should lead the discussion with cast and crew on what needs to be achieved and how.
- To support the director in delivering their vision, some productions will have the added resource of an intimacy coordinator. Early in the production process, the director should hold a planning meeting with the intimacy coordinator to discuss tone, objectives and to share ideas. The intimacy coordinator should also be present at rehearsals of intimate scenes to help plan blocking.
- Some initial discussions within the rehearsal process could be done remotely. Make sure you're always looking for ways for everyone to minimise their exposure to people from outside their household.
- When rehearsing in person, make sure the rehearsal space is big enough to allow for social distancing and that it has been thoroughly cleaned before you start work.
- Trust between a director, performer and intimacy coordinator (if you have one) is essential even under normal circumstances. Take the time to explain the protective practices that will be in place. Discuss how the scene will be framed and lit, and ideally get consent for the agreed plan in writing. Reassure performers that they can call stop whenever they're feeling unsafe.
- As in the preparation process, do performers need to be positioned face to face, or could they be distanced or appear side by side?
- The production should have procedures in place to enable performers to feedback on scenes that concern them. Performers should always be able to explore narrative alternatives with the director without the risk of repercussion.

Some ideas for showing intimacy whilst adhering to social distancing rules:

Narrative alternatives

- Focus on the characters' reactions (e.g. feelings of jealousy or sensations).
- Convey intimacy through narrative demonstrations of vulnerability and sacrifice.
- Instead of depicting the intimate scene, have characters say what they will do to each other (which would also easily allow for the inclusion of dialogue to do with consent).
- Perhaps characters could have a video call or respond to simulated phone sex or sexting.
- Characters could be shown fixing their own clothes/re-dressing after the event to indicate what took place (rather than showing it). Or you could depict limbs moving under bedclothes.
- Similarly, you could depict the closing of a bedroom door and leave the action to the viewer's imagination.
- Consider a metaphorical alternative, such as objects, silhouettes and shadows, dancing, even the preparation and serving of food and the pleasure of eating it.

Technical alternatives

- Consider whether it's possible for performers to take it in turns to wear masks, visors and PPE whilst off camera. This would allow performers to stay safe whilst still maintaining the shared experience of the scene.
- Use POV shots to edit bedroom scenes together.
- Use angles to 'sell' proximity.
- Use split screens.
- Consider using foley or voiceover over a black screen, object or significant POV.
- Use suitable archive footage.
- Use motion capture and digital performances, greenscreen or animation to composite the required encounter.
- Consider casting real-life couples who won't need to socially distance (although this does present several issues – see boxout on page 9).

Should you use performers' real-life partners for pick-ups and close-ups where contact can't be avoided?

The Nordic Film Guide suggests that real family members may be suitable for certain types of scene work, and the US TV show *The Bold and the Beautiful* has already used real-life partners for scenes where hands touch faces and other body parts. However, there is rightly a debate about whether this is appropriate. Will partners feel comfortable being brought onto a set full of strangers for the sole purpose of being a sex object? Aside from the physical risks of bringing another person on to a COVID-wary set and subjecting them (and colleagues) to another potential source of infection, there are craft issues too.

For one, not all partners would be comfortable doing this. Especially if they aren't performers themselves and aren't familiar with taking direction. You therefore can't assume that they will be capable of acting out that important moment (and if it isn't important, why film it?).

Secondly, not all partners will be a physical match for the on-screen lover they're standing in for.

Furthermore, when you have two performers who have been diligently trying to portray the lived experience of a shared relationship, bringing in their respective real-life partners is unlikely to help. In some cases, it might even inhibit the performances as it crosses the professional/personal boundary. There may be a level of discomfort for performers and crew where real-life partners are being asked to touch one another (possibly sexually), and it is unfair to put them in that position.

Portraying intimacy on screen should be separate to a performer's private life. In exceptional cases the production might want to consider using a real-life partner as a body double for limited intimate moments (particularly if the partner is a performer and is willing to step into 'work mode'). However, our overall advice would be to avoid imposing on a real relationship just to get a shot; it's always better to find a creative alternative for the scene.

4. Shooting

Assuming the preparation and rehearsal steps have taken place:

- Briefly talk through the blocking again in situ to make sure that everyone's clear about what has been agreed.
- Take and record temperatures on arrival and after lunch as an indicator of health status.
- If your production is using aerosol disinfectant such as food grade hydrogen peroxide, ensure that this has been deployed prior to starting work on a scene.
- Don't keep performers or intimacy coordinators hanging around on set; bring them on set only when they're needed.
- Textiles (clothing, bedding etc.) can also be sprayed with disinfectant before a scene.
- Whilst there will be times when you feel it is necessary to be directly within an actor's eyeline, also consider whether it might be possible to use multiple cameras (including locked-off ones) to reduce the number of times a scene has to be played.
- The key thing is to make sure you action and put into place all the things you decided on during the preparation and rehearsal periods, and to make sure you're doing everything you can to make things safe for your cast and crew.

The director has a lot to offer in finding creative solutions to the problems we face in a new post-pandemic industry. These guidelines give directors and other creatives the framework within which to create their best work, safely.

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About Directors UK

Directors UK is the professional association of UK screen directors. It is a membership organisation representing the creative, economic and contractual interests of over 7,500 members – the majority of working TV and film directors in the UK.

Directors UK collects and distributes royalty payments and provides a range of services to members including campaigning, commercial negotiations, legal advice, events, training and career development. Directors UK works closely with fellow organisations around the world to represent directors' rights and concerns, promotes excellence in the craft of direction and champions change to the current landscape to create an equal opportunity industry for all.

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