

Interview with Vanessa Coffey by Iga Dziedziuchowicz for Gazeta Wyborcza: [Vanessa Coffey, koordynatorka ds. intymności: W scenach z nagością łatwo o kontuzję \(wyborcza.pl\)](https://www.wyborcza.pl/koordynatorka-ds-intymnosc-i-w-scenach-z-nagością-latwo-o-kontuzję-wyborcza-pl)

Why does the theatre need a nudity scene coordinator?

DO NOT PUT YOUR HAND THERE!

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IGA DZIECIUCHOWICZ TALKS WITH VANESSA COFFEY, BRITISH INTIMACY COORDINATOR

In my reportage "The director and the starfish" ["DF" from February 8th], actresses accused Paweł Passini of "harassment without touching". The director reportedly locked the room and forced them to be naked during individual night rehearsals. Has he overstepped the boundaries of intimacy?

- He has definitely crossed personal and professional boundaries. I was shocked to learn that it happened in a European country, at a public art college. The director did not deny that the actresses were naked, and confirmed that he locked the door and filmed them. He maintained that there was no coercion in it. In my opinion, he fundamentally does not understand the dynamics of power, which immediately appears in such situations and works to the detriment of actresses. They are explicitly saying that they acted against their principles and felt intimidated. Moreover, a lot of bad things happened in the verbal description of sexuality and the language used by the director during the rehearsals.

You are the first person in the UK to be hired as an Intimacy Coordinator. What is this job about?

- I help safely create such scenes. On-stage and on-screen nudity can help the viewer better understand the character's perspective or develop a narrative. But all creators must be aware of the rules of the process, in which they participate. They have to be agreed in advance between the director and the actors. We are kind of mediators. We also make sure that theatrical rehearsals involving nudity take place in a safe space and without pressure. We would not allow a private, intimate rehearsal between two actors or a director and an actress. We always want to make sure that personal and professional boundaries are not overstepped.

What is the definition of intimacy in the world of theatre and film?

- It may include kissing and caressing, sexual simulation and performing nude or partially nude.

I can't imagine any "sex coordinator" setting a scene for a director in a Polish theatre...

- I am smiling because a similar discussion took place in the UK a few years ago after the *MeToo* scandals. Directors were afraid that we would interfere with their competences and relations with actors. But we are not there to prevent intimacy or nudity or to influence the shape or message of such scenes. Our role is the same as, for example, a coordinator in combat scenes, who makes sure that no one gets physically hurt on the set. In scenes with intimacy it is easy to get injured too, but mentally. So why not entrust it to someone who knows this job?

How does it look in practice?

- After reading the script, we talk to the director to find out more about the nude scenes and the way he would like to approach them. We communicate with the actors individually and convey the director's vision. We collect their doubts. If there are any concerns, we return to the director to work out a mutually beneficial solution. Then we arrange a closed rehearsal: the stage manager, director, actors and I are present. The costume designer prepares clothing that will allow the actor to cover his body as quickly as possible. We practice all rehearsals fully dressed, except for the last few ones. It is the actor who decides when he has the courage to perform a given scene naked. Later, we ask the actors how they feel and whether there are any corrections to be made, to increase their sense of comfort.

Does the coordinator have to be specially trained?

- I am a lawyer by education, but also a dancer and actress, so I embrace all these worlds. This, however, is not enough. It is worth completing a first aid course in mental health. It is important, for example, to quickly identify the risk of trauma, but also know how to work with LGBTQ + artists and be their ally, because art still presents the heteronormative perspective. These are serious barriers to scenes with intimacy, and the coordinator needs to understand them well.

After the reportage was published in "Duży Format", there were voices that an actress is a tool in the hands of a director and should do what the director expects. Otherwise, she is not suitable for a profession where crossing the limits matters.

- Oh, I know these arguments. I bet they also said: "The body is an instrument, and the actress takes money for these scenes. And if she does not want to, there are hundreds of others to take her place.

Yes!

- I have one answer to that. The director will get a better and more authentic artistic effect when the actor or actress knows the rules of the game they are taking part in. They can be very creative, but only within these rules. Do we let people onto a football pitch and expect to see a great game where there are no rules? Boundaries must be set and the actor must feel safe. Otherwise they will not give a good performance. The most important thing is not to violate anyone's dignity. Forcing or intimidating someone to perform a nude scene is completely unacceptable and unethical. Therefore, I am not surprised that the actresses who worked with Paweł Passini want to take legal action. The report shows that they were also mentally harassed, offered illegal substances, someone was filmed naked without consent. I hope that Polish theatres will introduce clear regulations that will prohibit this type of activities. The same should be included in contracts with directors. And the film industry should do the same.

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Since when has the intimacy coordinator been a profession in the UK?

- This job actually rose in prominence in the United States after the Weinstein scandal and as a response to the *MeToo*. In Great Britain, Vicky Featherstone, artistic director of the Royal Court held a 'Day of Action'. 150 anonymous reports of sexual assaults in the industry were collected. These accusations led to the public demise of several prominent directors. As an industry, we had to admit that we all knew about these behaviours but did not take any collective action to stop them. The slogan of the changes was "We all knew". We had to acknowledge the complaints made by the actors of "The Last Tango in Paris", "Blue Is the Warmest Colour", "Game of Thrones" or "The Affair". The list was long and the problems systemic. To prevent further harm, the role of the intimacy coordinator has increased. We are here to prevent physical and mental abuse of actors.

How many intimacy coordinators are there in the UK today?

- 19 people, and 30 in all Europe.

What's the hardest part in this job?

- In schools, we teach actors how a given character thinks, talks, moves, dresses and stands. But we do not know how to teach an actor to build the intimacy of their character. It ends with actors taking advantage of their private experiences and of what they do in their bedroom. And that is not the point! These conversations are always difficult and require openness. If actors are going to have simulated sex then it is necessary to talk about how many thrusts there are to be, call the nipple a nipple and the penis a penis. At first, directors did not want these conversations. We explained that it was necessary. Directors expect intimate scenes to have the appropriate emotional charge, but they are ashamed to discuss it themselves. I was working with a director on an opera, and there was a strong masturbation scene there. The director was embarrassed, tried to be funny, and said when the actress was supposed to have an orgasm. Yet, many questions arise here. How do we disguise it? Why can't the character have an orgasm? Actors expect the director to know the answer to them and to use the language that does not offend or humiliate anyone.

How do directors and actors assess your role after these few years of work?

- Actors have often found it difficult to say "no" directly to the director, and we mainly help in an open dialogue about expectations. Especially since we are outside the power that exists between actors and directors. The actors can tell us honestly what they will and will not do. There is much less tension and ambiguity on sets and in theatres. Directors often tell me, "It's great that you're here because I didn't know how to talk to the actors about it. I didn't know if they were saying yes, because I'm the director, or if they were just afraid to say no". I have read today about Kate Winslet, who sometimes takes on the role of intimacy coordinator. She supported an actress in a kiss scene and this young girl then thanked her because she finally felt comfortable. I hear it a lot too. It is easier for actors when I am leading the conversation and say: "Don't put your hand there because it wasn't agreed." Keira Knightly has recently said that she will no longer work in nude scenes with directors. If need be, with female ones only. This decision comes from difficult experiences. Today, young actors and actresses in Great Britain have a much greater sense of security. I am sure that there would have been no abuses in the diploma play directed by Paweł Passini, if the intimacy coordinator had participated in the rehearsals.

