

Let's TALK About That Kiss: Staging Kissing in a COVID World.

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This article revisits the author's previous piece, "Let's TALK About that Kiss in Acting Class!" which was published August 28, 2017, on Theatrical Intimacy Education's official blog.

About the Author:

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Skeleton Crew (2021) at Bristol Riverside Theatre. Joell Weil as Shanita and Malik Childs as Dez. Intimacy Choreography by Laura Rikard. PC: Mark Garvin.

Welcome back to live, in-person theatre! It is happening! Over the past few months, it's been a pleasure for me to fly around the country and be welcomed into rehearsal rooms to choreograph intimacy once again. And theatre folks are doing their due diligence to help minimize the spread of COVID-19 and its many variants. I have been in rehearsal rooms with masks, screens between actors when singing, and folks waiting until their daily rapid test declares a negative before coming to rehearsal. It's a new world for making theatre. And one of the biggest concerns when it comes to staging intimacy in this new world is *the kiss*.

"How do I stage a kiss?" has always been one of the questions we at Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) receive most frequently from teachers, directors, and actors, even as the industry has begun to embrace and implement the practices that intimacy specialists and TIE teach, and as audition disclosures and using "placeholder" (Pace 2020) have become the norm. However, the matter of staging kisses, understandably, seems to be causing quite a bit of anxiety in the COVID world. There are solutions to help lessen this anxiety. But first, let's remind ourselves about how to stage a kiss.

**Remember: COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO PERFORMING ALL THEATRICAL
INTIMACY.**

First, talk to the actors. Before staging a kiss, invite the actors to communicate consent and boundaries for working on staging the action of a kiss. If consent is not given, the story can be told or poeticized another way.

Once enthusiastic consent has been given, mark the kiss with a placeholder: a high five. The standard placeholder is the high five, and the actors can mark the timing and occurrence of a kiss with that gesture until there is time to stage the kiss with care.

When the time arrives to stage the kiss, do the following:

Talk about the scene with the actors and the director. Before working on the scene, clarify the story being told through the performance and make sure everyone is in agreement that a kiss is needed. Start the choreographic process by asking the following questions:

- Which character initiates the kiss? (Who closes the distance?)
- Which character ends the kiss? (Who opens the distance?)
- How long do you think the kiss will last? (Counts?)
- What is the level of touch for the kiss? (Skin or Muscle?)

Instruct the actors to modify the placeholder. That is, to experiment with performing the choreographic choices discussed, using only their hands as a stand-in for their faces, touching palm-to-palm rather than lips (Pace 2020). If the actors don't consent to putting their palms together, give them each a prop such as a squishy ball that they can hold; they can still modify the placeholder to do what their faces will eventually do, practicing choreography by creating prop-to-prop contact.

Once the actors are ready to stage the kiss, let them know they do not have to put their mouths on each other right away. The actors can use the modified placeholder as long as they

wish during the rehearsal process. When working on a production, give the actors a date at which they are expected to drop the placeholder. I suggest the date of the first dress rehearsal.

The actors can move on from the placeholder whenever it works for their boundaries to do so. They need to communicate with each other about when they are ready. Of course, they can go back to using the placeholder at any time during the rehearsal process if their boundaries change.

Important ground rules about staging kisses:

Closed Mouth Kissing *Only*

All kisses for theatre and film are going to be staged as closed mouth kisses. Open mouth kisses can be staged as long as there is a conversation and clarity about the reasoning and purpose beforehand, and the actors enthusiastically consent to do so. In this case, during staging and rehearsal with the placeholder, they represent when the mouth opens by interlocking the fingers. Tongues stay inside the mouth.

Sometimes *in film*, the tongues may change locations, but again, this should be discussed days or at least a day before filming and all parties must consent.

Hygiene

Provide the actors with a hydrogen peroxide mouthwash, such as Colgate Peroxide, to disinfect their mouths before kissing. According to Ather, Parolia, and Ruparel's (2021) study on the efficacy of mouthwashes in combatting transmission of SARS-CoV-2, this will help medicate viral germs for up to twenty minutes. As the COVID-19 pandemic and virus have evolved, additional studies have been—and continue to be—conducted. Mouthwash company Listerine (n.d.) summarizes these studies, reminding us that while antiseptic mouthwash can decrease viral load, it is not a treatment and cannot be guaranteed to eradicate the virus. We should all remember that nothing fully guarantees prevention!

It has always been important to have good hygiene with kissing, because we do not want to cause anaphylactic shock. Goodness forbid one actor has eaten peanuts, not knowing that their scene partner is allergic to the food, and they “just kiss each other” without having used a mouthwash or communicating this information. Hygiene and mouthwash are not merely preferable, but necessary, especially in a post-COVID world.

The film industry has been using hydrogen peroxide-based mouthwash for almost two years now, and theatre companies are getting on board. I have worked on some productions that have set up mouth wash stations in the wings with single use cups and trash bins so actors can quickly rinse their mouths before they have to kiss a different actor, or if more than twenty minutes have passed before kissing again. I worked on one musical where this was provided for all the actors to do before they were on stage singing together.

Plan B is *Essential*

The major change for kissing in the COVID world is to always have a plan B staging. A “Plan B” is an alternative way to stage the moment that does not require the actors to place their mouths on each other. An effective Plan B is fully staged and rehearsed. The actors and stage manager should all be made aware that at any time during the run of the production, the actors can decide to do the plan B without having to seek the approval of the Stage Manager. For example, if the actors are about to go on for a scene where they kiss in and one is worried that their throat feels scratchy, switch to plan B. They can even come up with a physical signal to each other that can signify that they need to switch to plan B. This can be incorporated into the intimacy choreography.

Some examples of go-to choreographic moves for plan B kissing moments are (if these work for all actors’ boundaries):

- Closing distance with the foreheads.
- Closing distance with the noses.
- Closing distance with the cheeks.

- One actor closes the distance with their nose to the other actor's cheek.
- One actor places their head on the sternum of another actor, and they place their arms around each other. (My favorite)



The Nether (2021) at The Wayward Artist. Wyn Moreno as 'Papa' (left, both images), and actors Jacqueline Jade (left) and Patrick Vest (right) as 'Iris'. In this production, Jade performs the scene as Iris, an avatar; the moment is recalled and restaged later by Vest, revealing the human character behind 'Iris' to the audience. In this production, the actors and intimacy choreographer staged and rehearsed a plan B. In performance, if any actor signaled to use Plan B choreography, the Plan B choreography was utilized in both scenes. Intimacy Choreography: Amanda Rose Villarreal

If the actors want a plan with no touching at all, work with seeking and avoiding eye contact. Or, relocate the actors so that the narrative action of the kiss occurs behind scenery, props, fog, or other characters' onstage action, allowing the two performers to not actually perform the action. This is especially useful if a character has a line that says, "I can't believe we finally kissed." If two actors pop up from behind a couch and one of them says the line, "Wow, you're a great kisser!" the audience is going to believe they kissed. *Like fight choreography, it is the reaction that sells intimacy not necessarily the physical action.*

In the classroom, especially during COVID and in the post-pandemic world, please use placeholder only. If the students want to show in the scene how the kiss will look if they *could* perform it, have them modify the placeholder as stated above. Read more about this process in greater detail in *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* by Chelsea Pace, with contributions from me (2020).

The best intimacy choreography is choreography that honors the actors' boundaries and that tells the story. No moment in a play where characters kiss is really about the moment when

the lips come together; it is about the *story* behind this instant. Once the story is clarified, you will see that the moment and its meaning can be choreographed in many different and creative ways. Please do not feel obligated to *do the kiss* simply because it is indicated in the script. Always ask what the story—the emotional and narrative context of the characters’ journey—is, and tell that story while working within the actors’ boundaries.

The pandemic has shown that theatre folks are adaptable artists, brimming with ingenuity. Kissing in the COVID world requires flexibility and caution. Take care to not pressure anyone to do a kiss. State at the audition that plan Bs will be staged for all kisses. Ensure mouthwash is provided by the production. When no one is pressured to kiss, that provides space for the creative ideas to flow.

References

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