

SEX ACTS - Britain's first intimacy co-ordinator tells how she choreographs famous sex scenes for

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Ita O'Brien tells how she turns potentially tasteless scenes into high erotica.

A sex scene in Sex Education that Ita O'Brien coordinated

Ita O'Brien is sitting in an office chair, her hands on its arms, leaning slightly forward, her expression rapt and panting, like a dog.

"Huh, huh, huh! OK, now you've got the wild cats," she cries, beginning to wiggle while softly wailing.

"Eeh, oowah, oow. OK. And now let's gently allow that to become human." She exhales. "one could say orgasmically. Er, aah."

Ita is a pioneer, Britain's first intimacy co-ordinator " choreographing sex scenes for the screen.

And through exercises such as the animal ones she is demonstrating, she teaches actors how to be comfortable rolling about virtually naked, apparently in the throes of ecstasy, in front of a film crew.

Some scoff at her job title, seeing her as a kind of Mary Whitehouse product of the filth-shy #MeToo age, intent on censoring any hint of raunch. Yet you only need watch any excerpt from Netflix's mega-hit Sex Education " every take of which Ita was involved in " to see how her input turned potentially tasteless scenes of teenage fornication into a hugely endearing and unusually honest portrayal of adolescent lust.

Britain's first 'intimacy co-ordinator' Ita O'Brien explains her job

Now Ita, 54 " who has a background in musical theatre and movement teaching " has turned her attention to the BBC's new Sunday night costume drama Gentleman Jack, about the 19th century lesbian landowner Anne Lister, played by Suranne "Doctor Foster" Jones.

Suranne has spoken warmly of how Ita helped her through scenes she was "quite nervous about".

"SOMETHING SIZZLING"

Ita says: "I had to do quite a lot of research for Gentleman Jack," as she produces a well-annotated copy of The Whole Lesbian Sex Book, adding: "I used the lesbian Kama Sutra too.

"The important thing was to have a template " if you have a text that explains what positions the women favour and how they make love, then you can really honour that.

A steamy scene for Suranne Jones in Gentleman Jack, thanks to Ita

She spoke openly about body parts, and choreographed the scene through to orgasm, using anatomical language, so everything was dealt with openly in an adult fashion.

Far too often the writer just writes, "They have energetic sex", and you're left thinking, "What do they mean?" It's like if you put in a musical, "They sing". Well, what are they going to sing? How are they going to sing it? What's the melody? What are the words?

As viewers have certainly found, actors' and directors' interpretations of "energetic sex" have resulted in many screen moments that are more comedy classics or just plain dull rather than high erotica.

Take the pool scene in 1995 film Showgirls, when Kyle MacLachlan and Elizabeth Berkley thrash about like dolphins, or Jeremy Irons slobbering up Juliette Binoche's naked back in 1992's Damage.

The much-anticipated but in the end widely-panned scene between Emilia Clarke and Kit Harington in Game Of Thrones

Recently "spoiler alert" smut-hardened Game Of Thrones fans were outraged by the "vanilla" nature of the eagerly-awaited sex scene between Jon Snow (Kit Harington) and Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke). Emilia's explanation was that performing a love scene with long-standing friend Kit was "unnatural and strange", adding: "We're just p***ing ourselves with laughter because it's so ridiculous."

Ita says: "When I heard that I thought, "Oh my goodness, if I had been there I'd have put a structure into place for these actors to really warm up and enter their characters' physicality". Because it's really important to keep a separation between who you are as a person and who you are as an actor.

"What they ended up with wasn't a good scene. It should have been the coming together of his ice and her fire, the sense of her melting him in her, but instead you had intercourse with one on top of the other, which is the least sexy thing.

"If I'd worked on it, you'd have had something that was sizzling."

Maria Schneider 'felt raped' in the famous sex scene with Marlon Brando in Last Tango In Paris

In the past, many sex scenes have resulted in trauma for the participants. Actress Maria Schneider, the 19-year-old star of 1972 film Last Tango In Paris, was not warned by director Bernardo Bertolucci or co-star Marlon Brando about how the film's main sex scene would play out.

She recalled: "Even though what Marlon was doing wasn't real, I was crying real tears. I felt humiliated and to be honest I felt a little raped." More recently, in 2013 the French actress L a Seydoux described filming a graphic lesbian scene in Blue Is The Warmest Colour as "humiliating", saying she felt "like a prostitute".

Nicole Kidman has admitted that the scenes of violent marital rape in her hit TV series *Big Little Lies* left her feeling "exposed, vulnerable and deeply humiliated".

If this is an A-lister's experience, what hope is there for younger actors who, as Ita puts it, "fear if they ever say no, they'll be considered a diva or a troublemaker and that will end their career"?

A-lister Nicole Kidman talked of her 'humiliation' during the scenes of violent marital rape in Big Little Lies

She feels that actors wouldn't be put in this position if sex scenes were rehearsed as meticulously as dance or fight scenes.

She adds: "But far too often, directors are too embarrassed to vocalise what they want, so instead of working on the scene with the actors in advance, they tell them to go away and work things out for themselves. It's completely wrong."

Instead, when Ita is in charge, the team are given unambiguous directions.

She says: "It's anathema to me that people should just be told to do their own thing."

Ita would have fixed the scene where Jeremy Irons is slobbering up Juliette Binoche's naked back in 1992's Damage

"We all have our own sexual expression, but it should be private. Nobody should know what it is."

The animal exercises Ita teaches at her workshops "apart from imitating dogs and cats" involve the actors slapping their bodies against the floor like seals and bouncing and shrieking like monkeys.

"BIG PANTS"

Ita says: "They help to demonstrate moves that they can use, and directors can reference, without anyone having to reveal their sexual tastes or habits."

"It gives everyone a common language, which keeps everything professional. It meant in the lesbian scene in *Sex Education*, for example, the director could say, "Could you thrust like a gorilla and finish off in full-on seal mode?"

Ita would have choreographed the pool scene in Showgirls between Kyle MacLachlan and Elizabeth Berkley to an erotic rather than comedic effect

“Or there’s the masturbation montage in episode six. We had to make the actress comfortable, so we went through all the animals so we had a gamut of different rhythms for this character’s exploration of herself, like the one where she has her legs up the wall being full gorilla, that I absolutely love.”

Ita, who comes from an Irish Catholic background, has two children, aged 21 and 19, and says: “They’re proud of what I do.”

She grew up in South London, where she still lives, and trained at the Royal Academy of Dance and the Bristol Old Vic.

Her passion for her present cause has personal rather than professional roots, because of a moment of abuse she experienced as a teenager.

She says: “If I hadn’t had that incident, I wouldn’t have the drive to be doing this.”

Compelled to explore the subject, Ita wrote and directed two plays about abuse that set her thinking about how to ensure her actors’ safety and comfort. She discovered there were intimacy co-ordinators in the US and says: “Our principles are very similar, but they come from the stunt side of the business, while I come from the place of character.”

In 2015 she began campaigning for a British industry code of conduct which would recommend that all intimate scenes be identified upfront, keeping actors’ “personal intimate expression” out of rehearsal rooms and agreeing in advance which body parts can be touched.

The industry is a far cry from the days when Sean Connery would joke to a partner before a James Bond sex scene: ‘I’m sorry if I get aroused’ and ‘I’m sorry if I don’t’

Initially the suggestions were mainly treated with indifference, but with the dawn of the #MeToo movement in late 2017, Ita suddenly became the go-to woman for an industry scrambling to clean up its act. Her guidelines have been endorsed by campaign group Women In Film And TV, while recently HBO announced that it would no longer shoot sex scenes without an intimacy co-ordinator on set at all times. With more Brits training as intimacy co-ordinators, Ita and her colleagues are also devising accessories to help to make nude scenes less daunting.

She says: “We have big pants stuffed with lambswool, so in a simulated sex scene there’s a cushion between the actors that won’t be seen by the camera that provides an extra barrier. It’s like a stunt co-ordinator using a crash mat.”

It is a far cry from when Sean Connery played James Bond and would joke to a partner before a sex scene: “I’m sorry if I get aroused” and “I’m sorry if I don’t.”

Ita says: “Erections are natural when there’s rhythmic energy, but they are not suitable in the workplace, so an actor needs to have the autonomy to halt the action and go away and splash water on himself or whatever.”