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Cut IT'S JUST "SEX"

Things can get ugly when onscreen intimacy raises the hackles of an actor's real-life mate. What to do? Lay down some rules—or pay the price

By Gina Piccalo

Los Angeles magazine, October 2009

Evan Handler has pretended to have sex with lots of women. His wife, Elisa Atti, knows all about it. Before the 48-year-old regular on Showtime's edgy comedy series Californication gets busy onscreen, Atti runs lines with him. And when the torrid scenes featuring Handler, best known as Charlotte's bald husband on Sex and the City, are broadcast, Atti often snuggles up with him to watch.

But there's one thing the couple rarely do together: talk about the fake sex on the day of Handler's performance. "That would seem particularly provocative," he says.

Diane Farr spent 13 episodes on FX's wry firefighter drama Rescue Me having a steamy affair with a man she described to her husband as "superhot": the actor Daniel Sunjata. But just as she did when she nibbled the ear of a costar on CBS's crime series Numb3rs, Farr followed a self-imposed rule: If feigning lust inspires the real thing, save the sizzle for later. "You have to make sure that when that button is pushed," Farr says, "you bring home the response."

Or else. For actors in committed relationships, love scenes can be the craft's most treacherous terrain. It doesn't matter that the heavy breathing summoned by the command "Action!" is often awkward and humiliating to perform, what with dozens of crew members on the set, counting down to lunch break. Sex scenes can hammer away at a couple's sense of trust, revealing old fissures and making room for more.

Think of a humid greenhouse, which fools plants into pumping out the plumpest, juiciest tomatoes. That's what film and TV sets can do to emotions. Actors often work 20-hour days, sometimes far from home, tucked inside windowless soundstages, fending off boredom between takes by trading intimacies. The bonds that form may be fleeting, but they're intense.

"It's kind of like if you go to war with somebody," says actor Scott Conte, a visiting assistant professor at UCLA's School of Theater, Film, and Television. "I've done one-day shoots where I've gotten to know the person in a more intimate way than some acquaintances I've had in my life because you're asked to show all these emotions in such a short amount of time. It almost makes you feel like you're further along in the relationships than you actually are."

The better the actor, the more convincing the sex scene—and the more potentially wrenching for the actor's mate. No wonder so many couples devise rituals, some subtle, others more concrete, that they hope will ease the pain. Where there's smoke, yes, there's often a spark. But that doesn't mean you have to burn the house down. Thus: ground rules.

Actor Michael B. Silver, whose many credits include recent episodes of the TV series Heroes and Brothers and Sisters, fell in love with his wife, Katie Mitchell, in an acting class after the two did a sex scene from the 1977 film Looking for Mr. Goodbar. So they know better than most that when you engage your libido in the service of drama, you sometimes can't unring the bell.

For that reason, Mitchell and Silver have always been careful to pay close attention to how they talk to each other about their love scenes. Even scripted passion can stoke real chemistry, they say. You'd have to be dead not to react. So discretion is key. Silver might mention whether his costar was flirty or shut down, but he skips the details. Mitchell returns the favor.

"We both know it's not natural to be in bed with somebody or to kiss somebody for months where the whole thing is you're in love, and then turn it off when you leave



Illustration by Yuko Shimizu

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the rehearsal hall," says Mitchell, who has appeared in the TV shows *Criminal Minds* and *Bones*. "It's not natural. And yet you can do it. Ultimately the technique is more about ethics. If I do get turned on by someone while I'm kissing them, [I know] that's all it was. And then I just walk away."

Of course, there are those—some of them A-listers—who didn't walk away. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt infamously ignited their romance on the set of the sexy action film *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (while Pitt was married to Jennifer Aniston). Richard Burton met then-married Elizabeth Taylor on *Cleopatra*. Katharine Hepburn met the married Spencer Tracy on *Woman of the Year*.

David Duchovny, who plays a sex-addled novelist on *Californication*, checked himself into rehab for sex addiction and separated briefly from his wife, Téa Leoni, after the show's second season. Asked recently about performing sex scenes, he said, "You punch in the clock, you go into work, and you're playing a character. Personally, I'm not somebody that takes it home." (Maybe that was the problem.)

Sam Mendes couldn't stomach watching the love scene between wife Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio during the shooting of *Revolutionary Road*, even though he was the film's director. So Mendes viewed the romantic reunion of the *Titanic* duo on a video monitor in a neighboring room, shouting out suggestions from afar.

Mendes may have been wise to keep his distance. (After all, did you see his wife get it on with Patrick Wilson in *Little Children*?) Later Winslet told reporters she was pleasantly surprised to find her chemistry with DiCaprio so powerful, they could just "slip right into it, like muscle memory."

Hot Flashes

There are plenty of sex scenes on film that look real or actually were (and no, we're not talking about porn)



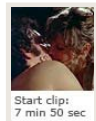
The Brown Bunny (2003)
 » Chloe Sevigny has confirmed in interviews that she was not acting (no kidding!) in a scene in which she performs fellatio on Vincent Gallo. Reportedly the four minute shocker was filmed with remote cameras and no one else on set.



Wild Orchid (1990)
 » Mickey Rourke and Carré Otis were an item when this romantic drama was shot; they later married and divorced. Even though the tie didn't bind—man, there was heat in those couplings, which are rumored to be real.



The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea (1976)
 » Kris Kristofferson and Sarah Miles so enjoyed their sex scenes in this movie that they staged some additional ones for Playboy. Kristofferson has said he regrets the dalliance, which ended his marriage to Rita Coolidge.



Don't Look Now (1973)
 » Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie starred in this horror film about a couple whose daughter has drowned. Many have asserted that their famous lovemaking sequence, which had to be trimmed to avoid an X rating, was not simulated.

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