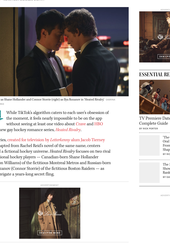
How 'Heated Rivalry' Became the Internet's Favorite Show — Before It's Even Aired

The romance series centered around two rival professional hockey players is based on the Rachel Reid novel of the same name.

BY NICOLE FELIX | NOVEMBER 25, 2025 8:25AM



Hudson Williams (left) as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie (right) as Ilya Rozanov in 'Heated Rivalry' COURTESY OF CROAVE

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The series, created for streaman by Lawrence Hunt and Jacob Tierney and based on Rachel Reid's popular romance novel, centered a fictional hockey universe. *Heated Rivalry* focuses on two rival professional hockey players — Canadian-born Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) of the fictitious Montreal Metros and Russian-born Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) of the fictitious Boston Raiders — as they navigate a years-long secret fling.

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"I saw a love-to-the-romance-genre person, I'll admit," Tierney told *The Hollywood Reporter* a little over a week before the show premieres Friday on Bell Media streamer Crave. Until last week, the show had yet to find an international home. However, shortly into this conversation, Tierney and his producing partner and fellow executive producer Brendan Healy shared that CBC Max acquired the show in the US, and Australia.

"I thought *[the book Heated Rivalry]* was great. I did not ever verifiably think that it would be a TV show, or that it would be a TV show because of the level of sexual tea," Tierney continues. Which is also considering Reid's prologue begins with and never really lets off the gas in that regard. But he called Healy after reading about the romance genre's popularity to tell him about his "crazy" idea. "I was like, 'If somebody who options this, I'll feel crazy because it's gay and hockey.' That's one. I should be the [one to adapt the book]. And so I called Brendan."

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Tierney and Healy always knew there was a built-in audience — a largely queer, largely female-skewing audience. The writer-director stresses that they knew the numbers were there, but because it's considered outside of the mainstream, it would take some explaining. Tierney's pitch was that it would be "a little bit of a risk" for Crave, but the audience is women-either, he says of the book's core fanbase. "We were like, 'But these fans are really into it.' Then you make the thing and you're like, 'Yeah, I hope they are.' I hope they respond to this because it's all delivery. There's no math."

Luckily for the pair and Bell Media, the fans are really into it — and the show hasn't even officially aired yet. There's plenty of reasons why that might be but *Heated Rivalry*'s arguably perfect casting of its two leads in Williams' Shane and Storrie's Ilya likely has something to do with it.

The pair's chemistry is palpable in the trailer — released last month on Crave's accounts and last week on HBO Max's accounts — and that chemistry only increased tenfold in the sneak peek released last week. Not since Matthew Macfadyen Mr. Darcy have we seen such intentional hand acting.

Hudson Williams (left) and Connor Storrie (right) in 'Heated Rivalry' COURTESY OF CROAVE

But as with any adaptation, there's always fear that the built-in fanbase won't see eye-to-eye with the show's creative decisions. "I was scared for [Williams and Storrie], I wasn't scared for them once people saw the show, but in the lead up — in general, people aren't nice — so I was very ready for people to [say] all kinds of stuff," Tierney says, pointing to critiques that can come when an adapted character isn't exactly how fans imagine them.

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He says they spoke with the two actors about the potential for backlash. "What I know is that they are both very grounded, and they were cast because of a chemistry read where we were all like, 'Holy shit.' So I knew that they would be so supportive from the beginning. It was a huge ship."

Healy adds that the cast and crew had been in a bit of bubble. "We also had the benefit [of] nobody knowing that this was really happening until after we had shot it," he says.

The show's 1st over 90-second official trailer has spawned a genuinely enormous amount of TikTok edits considering the limited material to work with. Tierney's Instagram Stories, which highlight fan-made edits to The Weeknd's "Out of Time," Lana Del Rey's "Video Games," Billie Eilish and Charli XCX's "Guess" and Sabrina Carpenter's "When She You Get Her?" Tierney describes an edit he particularly liked to Olivia Rodrigo's "Get Him Back."

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in 'Heated Rivalry' COURTESY OF CROAVE

The social media fanfare only seems to be growing as the show's premiere grows nearer. Tierney and Healy certainly feel pressure; they're not shying away from that. "I'm a fan. I love these books. I'm not trying to fuck with them. I'm not trying to change them," Tierney says plainly.

"We wanted to live up to the expectation for the fans," Healy adds. The executive producer says the show has mooted so much "misdirectness" over the last month since the trailer was released, leading to the show's eventual sale to HBO Max. "The fans deserve that we don't mess with them. We've had much better timing opportunities. It just feels like we've had a really good time getting to help bring [the *Heated* to a community that wants it."

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Tierney notes that Shane and Ilya aren't exactly fellow your typical romance structure, but the series director wasn't looking to make a "romantic comedy" out of it. "It's a fling," he says. "I think the thing I want to do with it is make it seriously, which to me I don't want to do what I think a lot of people do when they look at adapting romance, which is stupidly truncate, shorten," he says. Adds Healy, "[We] wanted to elevate this to the level that it deserved."

Reid's novel, presumably the same as the series, takes place over seven years, beginning when Shane and Ilya are teenagers and taking them into their mid-20s. The timeline was a big reason why Tierney thought the story could work as an one-hour episodic.

"This could actually stretch it because part of this [story] is that they're not together right away. They are people who meet up and fuck three times a year. Then suddenly they discover they can't shake each other," Tierney says.

"The emotional resonance of that requires an accumulation of meaning that you can't fake," he adds. "It wants an. It wants to breathe."

While the steamy nature of the story has likely helped fuel some of the social media love — some of those TikTok edits are soft, but lack of a better term, demonstrably hairy — it was also, as Tierney mentioned, a lot of emotion he felt it came to adapting. But the series director quickly found his footing.

"What I loved about [the story] and why I did ultimately think it was adaptable is because sex is the language of their love. So it lose you with the story because Brendan, Connor and Hudson get to know each other, so they get to know themselves," Tierney says.

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"This thing grows and you watch them fall in love. They don't just fuck. They fuck and then text, and that's what I love about this, dy which feels very contemporary and real too," he continues.

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in 'Heated Rivalry' COURTESY OF CROAVE

As for show prospects for its release — *Heated Rivalry* will air in Canada and in the US, simultaneously — Tierney and Healy are ready for fans to jump into the world of Shane and Ilya. "Come for the emotiiiiion, stay for the romance," Tierney jokes.

"What's funny about episodes one and two is they are the setup episodes. There's not all the way through. I'm not going to pretend they don't, but they're kind of, in a way, the most horny or whatever," Healy says. "Episode three and episode four are where the romance, much like in Reid's novel, sets in as the story goes on."

Tierney promises to keep it spoiler free — as spoiler free as one can get for a story that by all indications seems to be a faithful adaptation of the source material. "I'm so excited to see how people react to the show's overall coverage.

"The thing that we really don't get as queer people is a happy fucking ending where we're allowed to exist, fuck and smile at the same time. Usually it's like, pick one," he laments. "You get to have it all in this one."

Heated Rivalry's two episode premiere releases Friday on Crave in Canada and CBC Max in the US and Australia, with new episodes dropping weekly on Fridays.

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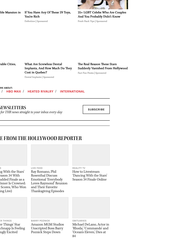

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