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(L-R): Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in Episode 104 of *Heated Rivalry*. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

TV

Inside 'Heated Rivalry,' the Gay Hockey Romance Series Changing Queer TV

The stars and creator of *Heated Rivalry* tell all about bringing the queer novel to life on TV.

BY MAX GAO

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Adapting a gay sports romance for television was never really in the cards for Jacob Tierney. But in the summer of 2023, while executive producing *The Traitors Canada*, the Canadian writer, director, and producer behind the small-town comedy series *Letterkenny* (and its own hockey-centric spinoff, *Shoresy*) came across a *Washington Post* article about the proliferation of hockey romance novels.

Heated Rivalry, the second novel in Canadian author Rachel Reid's *Game Changers* series about queer hockey players, was specifically mentioned at the end of the *WaPo* story. "I had this moment where I was like, 'If someone else options this book, I think I'd go crazy,'" Tierney, who had listened to the series as audiobooks during the pandemic, tells *Teen Vogue*. With the support of his producing partner Brendan Brady, he quickly reached out to Reid on Instagram to snatch up the rights to develop her book.

Not only did Tierney get his wish, but he has also created a show that will push the boundaries of how queer intimacy, especially between young men, is depicted onscreen. Written and helmed entirely by Tierney, the six-part series — which premieres November 28 on Crave in Canada and on HBO Max in the U.S. and Australia — chronicles the deeply passionate yet clandestine romance between Canadian hockey superstar Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and his fiercest rival, Russian-born Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie).

The story begins in 2009, when six months after facing off in the final of an international junior competition, Rozanov and Hollander are drafted first and second, respectively, to the "Major Hockey League" — the former to Boston, the latter to Montréal. While the press attempts to manufacture a bitter rivalry between them, the two top prospects are unable to resist the magnetic pull between them, beginning a secret fling during their rookie year. For the next eight years, as they chase glory on the ice, Hollander and Rozanov must grapple with their feelings for each other while only being able to meet up a handful of times every season behind closed doors.

(L-R) Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov, Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander, and Jacob Tierney (writer/director) in Episode 105 BTS of *Heated Rivalry*. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

From the outset, Tierney was prepared to fight for the show he wanted to make, mainly because he knew there was no real equivalent. "I would vacillate between comparing it to *Normal People*, *Friday Night Lights,* and eventually *The Hunting Wives*," he says, adding that *Heated Rivalry* is "gayer than all of them, even *Hunting Wives*." After realizing that there was a "really surprising" amount of interest from Canadian TV executives, Tierney wrote a pilot script on spec and then sold the idea to Rachel Goldstein-Couto, the head of development at national streamer Crave.

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Goldstein-Couto, in particular, understood the unexpected target audience for gay male romance. "These are books written by women, consumed largely by women," Tierney says. "I always said, 'Once you film this, gay men will watch it, but we'll watch anything with gay men in it. We're not wildly discerning in that way, and we're starved for stories. But the secret fan base of this is women, and that is a much bigger target than just queer people or queer men, or whatever the assumption was.'"

Despite reportedly being a billion-dollar industry, the romance genre is still largely underserved in terms of faithful adaptations. "What I said to [Reid] was, 'I want to take this seriously. I don't want to dumb this down. I don't want to condense it,'" Tierney says. That meant making a series rather than a 90-minute, Hallmark-y film that would have inevitably watered down the story. To his surprise, he received little pushback from Crave. "I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop and for them to be like, 'So I know we said sex, *but* ... does it have to be that long? Does it have to happen in real time?' And it did. [But] we did not get that note."

(L-R): Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov and Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in Episode 104 of Heated Rivalry. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

Casting *Heated Rivalry*, however, came with its own set of challenges. The creative team needed to find young actors who had the physicality of a hockey player but were also comfortable with nudity and intimacy. "There was a lot of hesitation. A lot of people didn't want to read for it," Tierney recalls.

As an actor himself, Tierney knows how stressful — and frankly unfair — it can be to shoot sex scenes without any direction. Speaking with the actors who reached the final round of auditions, he vowed to do everything in his power to make the process as easy as possible. But given that there were three sex scenes in every episode, he needed the actors to be fully cognizant of what the gig required. Tierney told his team to "show them everything," and asked anyone who was already uncomfortable to take themselves out of the running.

In the end, Tierney knew Williams and Storrie were the right actors to play Hollander and Rozanov when, after agreeing to take on the sexually explicit material, they did a chemistry read together via Zoom. "Connor was just so confident and so funny. He had all the slyness I wanted out of Ilya," he recalls. "Hudson had all the seriousness I wanted out of Shane. Hudson was also a little more tentative about everything than Connor was."

When the two co-stars reunited earlier this month on Zoom for their first in-depth interview about *Heated Rivalry*, Storrie was surprised to learn that the inscrutable way he chose to play Rozanov actually threw Williams off at first.

"I was briefed that [Connor] was American, but as soon as I got in the audition room with him, I thought I was talking with a Slavic Russian boy. I thought his parents must be Russian because everything he was doing was so perfectly Ilya," Williams tells *Teen Vogue*, with Storrie giggling in an adjacent screen box. "It was frustrating for me because he was going off-script a little bit. He wasn't always smiley, and then sometimes, if I really got to him, it would just be like a [slight curve of the lips] — that's all I got."

It's precisely that dynamic — Hollander's innate earnestness rubbing up against Rozanov's enigmatic, Eastern European-educated nature — that makes each of their interactions come alive on screen. While Storrie believes that Rozanov is charmed by how "Shane is very easy to read" and "gives everything his 100% openly," Williams believes that his character is most drawn to how differently Rozanov chooses to live his life.

(L-R) Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander, Sophie Nélisse as Rose Landry, Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova as Svetlana, and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in Episode 104 of *Heated Rivalry*. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

The foundation of the tension between them lies in Hollander's deep-seated need for order and structure in his life, which clashes violently with his burgeoning love for Rozanov. "I think [Shane's sexuality] doesn't fit his idea of perfection. For Shane, being perfect and being gay — for some reason, those two things don't fit. So the first time he falls in love is with Ilya, there's so many things to reconcile that drive him insane," Williams says.

Rozanov, meanwhile, has a difficult family life that "leaves him feeling very powerless," and being a renowned hockey player is a way for him to reclaim that, says Storrie. That search for power ultimately extends off the ice and into the bedroom with Hollander. "It's like, 'I'm not going to let you know exactly what I'm thinking, because I want to be in power. I'm not going to give you the time of day at first, because I want to be empowered.'"

In the same vein as groundbreaking gay dramas *Queer as Folk* and *Fellow Travelers*, *Heated Rivalry* is largely told, with striking and crucial boldness, through sex. "Because of the way the story is laid out, it takes place over eight years, and these are people who learn about each other through f*cking, so the sex didn't feel gratuitous," explains Tierney, who managed to adapt *nearly* all of the sex scenes from the book. "This is how they communicate: They meet up three times a year and have sex until they hit a point where they're like, 'Oh God, we keep doing this. We must have feelings for each other.'"

"When it starts out and it's sexual, Ilya is comfortable with that. He has no qualms about his sexuality and what that means, which is not the same [as] Shane," Storrie says of the "dance" between the protagonists as they struggle to label their relationship. "But then when it comes to romance, Shane is pretty emotionally regulated in that sense, even if he's not very experienced. He's at least upfront and honest about that, but then that's when it gets too much for Ilya."

(L-R): Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in Episode 104 of Heated Rivalry. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

Given that Hollander has never had any sexual experiences with another man before Rozanov, Tierney was adamant about including depictions of consent and safe sex in the characters' early encounters. "Consent was huge for me, and more so, just concern. It's a huge part of Ilya's character," Tierney says. "He may seem like a carefree playboy, but really he's a very sensitive and empathetic lover. It just adds to how much we learn about these guys from the sex they have."

Storrie and Williams felt an intrinsic trust and comfort with each other, knowing full well just how much of themselves they would have to lay bare — both physically and emotionally — during the two-month shoot. Case in point: On the very first day of filming, after shooting the joint All-Star game press conference during their characters' rookie year, the actors had to jump forward a few years in the timeline and film the racy Las Vegas hotel room scene involving tequila. (Yes, dear reader. They started off with a bang, *literally*.)

On the dailies — the raw, unedited footage — shot during that first day, "you can hear them just checking in with each other, being like, 'You good? You comfortable?' 'You good? You comfortable?' They're so present with one another, and they were down to make this as good as they could right away, which is obviously huge," Tierney remarks. "I think we can hold these shots for so long, because they're so compelling together."

While they didn't necessarily have any trepidation about having to shoot the sex scenes, Storrie and Williams admit they still had their own concerns.

Storrie, a Texas native, did not speak any Russian prior to landing the role. In the three weeks leading up to the start of production in Toronto, he took four-hour lessons to prepare for 25 pages of Russian dialogue, which he recalls were "sprinkled throughout the first three weeks" of production. "I think we killed all the Russian within the first month of the shoot. The second half, I was able to not focus on that, and it was a totally different experience," he says.

Williams, on the other hand, admits that his worries were a little more unfounded. "I just felt it was going to look like *Shoresy* for some reason, but with sex. So I pictured bright lights, no shadows, like you'd be able to see every pore of me in all these [sexual] positions," he says with a laugh. "So I remember going up to Jacob and going, 'Is it going to look like *Shoresy*?' And he goes, 'What? No! God, no. It's different.' On day one, when me and Connor came back to the monitor after doing this scene, and we watched it back, I think we both were going like, 'I did not think it would look this sexy and this moody.'"

Storrie interjects, "I love how you're not saying it looked so good —"

"It looked so good!"

"But you're like, 'It was so nice and dark in there!'" Storrie laughs.

"I was scared about the look, and then as soon as I saw that day one, all my fears were assuaged and I was ready to go."

Jacob Tierney on the set of *Heated Rivalry*. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

(L-R): Christina Chang as Yuna Hollander and Dylan Walsh as David Hollander in Episode 106 of Heated Rivalry. PHOTO CREDIT: SABRINA LANTOS © 2025

Avid book readers should know that Tierney tried painstakingly to stay as true to the source material as possible. He notably chose to maintain Hollander's ethnicity as a biracial Japanese-Canadian, which Hollander actually discusses with his movie-star girlfriend, Rose Landry (Sophie Nélisse), in episode 4.

"I felt like [his cultural identity] needed to be said out loud because his name is Shane Hollander, so you can whitewash him in your brain really easily when you're reading a book or when you're listening in a way that I don't want to with this show," explains Tierney. After all, hockey, he says, is a sport where it is still more common "to be Finnish than to be Asian."

Tierney, however, still had to make little changes. Shane will not have a "f*ck apartment" in Montréal, because "we couldn't afford that many locations." And since he needed to rename all the hockey teams, including the Boston Bruins, for legal reasons, he decided against giving Rozanov a bear tattoo. ("God willing, if there's a sequel, he'll get the loon tattoo," he promises.)

But all in all, Tierney hopes that fans will be "holistically" satisfied with his adaptation. "I think that fans of this genre don't necessarily think they're going to see [their favorite books] on TV. They might want to, but I don't think they're like, 'Oh, obviously, I'm waiting for my gay hockey smut to end up on the TV.' I'm so happy to be able to give them the thing that they never expected."

Since the show was announced merely five months ago, the *Heated Rivalry* fandom has grown exponentially, with a vocal subset even actively campaigning for an international distribution deal. The trailer alone has already amassed a total of over 1.6 million views across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. "I think a lot of queer women, a lot of non-binary people, really feel seen by these people that kind of live in the grey, that live in this underrepresented middle ground that you don't really see in society," Storrie says.

The series will also likely ruffle some feathers in a sport that has developed a reputation for being overwhelmingly white, upper-class, conservative — and, yes, heterosexual. (As of 2025, according to CBC, the NHL remains the only major North American men's sports league that has never had an openly gay player compete at the highest level.)

The buzzy reaction to the series certainly bodes well for a potential second season, which would theoretically adapt Shane and Ilya's sequel, *The Long Game*. Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) and Kip Grady (Robbie G.K.), the protagonists of the first book in Reid's *Game Changer* series, will also appear in this first season, with Arnaud recently revealing that the third episode focuses heavily on his character.

While he is reluctant to reveal his long-term vision for the series, Tierney says viewers will "have a stronger sense of my intention" after watching all six episodes: "I think Rachel created a cool universe, and if people like it and respond to it, we are happy to keep making more — not forever, but there's certainly more road to pave."

Storrie, who sheepishly admits that he loved *The Long Game* more than *Heated Rivalry*, says he would love to adapt Shane and Ilya's sequel in its entirety. Williams, wanting to be more specific with his answer, believes adapting "a particular scene with" Shane's best friend "Hayden's kids would be really rewarding." But there's one character in particular that Williams can't wait to see Shane face off against: the hockey commissioner. "I want to get in that room. I want to be in front of whoever's cast as that commissioner. I want to seethe. I want to see red," he deadpans.

Regardless of whether future seasons ever come to fruition, *Heated Rivalry* already feels radical in its foregrounding of queer joy, particularly at a time when escalating attacks on LGBTQ rights have coincided with the noticeable decrease in queer characters on television. "I'm thrilled, as a queer person, to be putting out a romance into the world that is not punishing and that is not full of dead, miserable gay characters," Tierney says. As he likes to put it, "This is a gay story where no one dies of AIDS, and no one goes back to their wives."

"A lot of the queer representation in films and TV that I've seen a lot of times, there is a tragic element to it," Williams adds. "This story does just drive towards the good. The show is so unabashed. There's no shame. The show is just proud to be what it is."

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