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Entertainment

Everyone's obsessed with Heated Rivalry. Could it change how we see gay sex on screen?

The show's intimacy feels more true to life than others, fans and critics say

Abby Hughes · CBC News · Posted: Dec 24, 2025 4:00 AM EST | Last Updated: 4 hours ago

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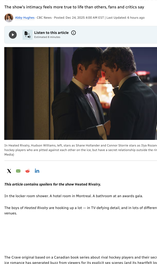


Jo Adams Rhodes, Hudson Williams, left, stars as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie stars as Ilya Rozanov. Male hockey players who are gifted against each other on the ice, but have a secret relationship outside the rink. (Bell Media)

This article contains spoilers for the show Heated Rivalry.

In the locker room shower. A hotel room in Montreal. A bathroom at an awards gala.

The boys of *Heated Rivalry* are hooking up a lot — in TV-defying detail, and in lots of different venues.

The Crave original based on a Canadian book series about male hockey players and their secret off-ice romance has generated buzz from viewers for its explicit sex scenes (and its heartfelt love story alike).

TikTok is awash with users who obsessed with the show to think about anything else, spicy edits of heartthrob characters Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, and those fans watching the series with their parents.

The show's stars — Hudson Williams, who plays Shane, and Connor Storrie, who plays Ilya — got matching "sex selfie" tattoos to mark their work on the production. And they seem to be dead right.

Crave says *Heated Rivalry* became its most watched original series debut within the first week of its release, with more than 2 million viewers for its second episode and 77% of all time on HBO8. A second season of the show also got the green light earlier this month.

But fans and TV critics say the show is more than just good entertainment. It's resonating because it pushes the boundaries around how much queer sex can be shown on popular TV, while also feeling more true to life and maintaining a compelling love story — while still being incredible sexy.

WATCH | Why *Heated Rivalry* is sorting big with viewers:

The Canadian streaming sensation Heated Rivalry — which centers on two gay professional hockey players — has been a big hit with viewers, who have worked it among the highest-rated episodes of all time on HBO8.

Gay sex on the small screen

One reason the show stands out is because it isn't shy in its depictions of gay sex. It's something that's rare for a mainstream production.

"Traditionally ... it's a lot of suggestion, perhaps a lot of fading to black," said freelance culture writer David Mack. "It's like the [1950s] with people lying in bed with a cigarette afterwards or something like that."

That makes *Heated Rivalry*'s scenes "very shocking" in comparison, he said.

- **Heated Rivalry is getting a 2nd season on Crave**
- **Why are women so into the man-on-man romance in Heated Rivalry?**

For example, the first sexual act takes place a mere 14 minutes into the first episode. Many of the scenes are long, with a few unfolding with no cutaways for the duration of the act. That leaves little to the imagination, said Mack, who co-reviewed *Heated Rivalry*'s spicy scenes for Slate. (He gave them a 10/10 on the scale, if you were curious.)

"From the moment [Ilya] opens the door to the moment he leaves, you are there in that room with them," Mack said of the characters' first hookup. "So it feels incredibly intimate to be witnessing it."

Brendan Shoull, a Canadian fan who is gay himself, said he's enjoying how the show's director, Jacob Tierney, included a wide range of intimate encounters. He's been excitedly following the series after first bingeing the books by Rachel Reid in the spring.

In particular, he said, he appreciates the differences between the main characters' love story, which is sexual from the beginning, and that of Scott and Kip, which starts with a meet-cute at a smoothie shop before developing into a full-fledged romantic relationship.

Williams, left, and Storrie attend the premiere of Heated Rivalry in Toronto. The two actors have been propelled into fame following the breakout success of the show. (Harold Ricks/Getty Images)

"The way they presented them in such a contrast, I think, was really interesting," Shoull said. "And I don't think [Tierney's] done anything that's unrealistic."

Shoull said the show reminds him of Queer as Folk, a TV series from the early 2000s seen as one of the first to candidly depict the sex lives of gay men.

"I definitely think [*Heated Rivalry*] is going to be one of those shows that moves the needle."

Moving beyond a subculture

Adam Vaughan, a film and TV professor at Southampton Solent University, agreed, pointing to *The L Word* as an example of a show that similarly tracked viewers at the time.

But outside of those shows, queer intimacy has often been couched in fantasy worlds — think *Game of Thrones*, or depictions of group sex in *Sense8* — allowing viewers to separate their queerness from reality, he said.

Cast of the American version of Queer As Folk attend a 25th Anniversary Reunion event for the show during the TV Academy's Paley Center Festival Los Angeles 2 December 2023. (Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images)

Heated Rivalry also reaches the mouth it can't by bringing queer intimacy to the very hetero world of professional hockey, said Karen Tongson, a gender and sexuality studies professor at the University of Southern California.

"What it's doing is moving gay sex beyond the realm of the subculture of queer life," she said. "This is about understanding gay sex is happening well beyond those enclaves and in places that you might not expect, but where it surely happens."

There has still never been a publicly queer hockey player in the NHL, the only major North American pro men's league. Tongson said *Heated Rivalry* could be a step toward more gay pro players under NHL control in 2026, but he hasn't yet competed in the league. It's a stark contrast to female pro sports leagues, which tend to have more LGBTQ+ players.

LISTEN | Meet the intimacy co-ordinator for *Heated Rivalry*:

Sex first, romance second

Ilya and Shane's love story begins with sex and later leads to a loving relationship, rather than the other way around — something that happens in real life, too, and isn't always seen in a love story like this, said this magazine series editor Mel Woods.

Storrie, left, and Williams in the show, Heated Rivalry. In the show, the characters form a secret, complex relationship before discovering deeper feelings for one another. (Crave)

That the first sex scene is a moment of cruising (a way of soliciting casual sex common in the gay community), for example, is "exciting" to see, Woods said.

And the sex still serves the story, that is, it's not just for titillation, she said. The intimate moments aren't just there to titillate — like a fight sequence in an action movie, the sex scenes reveal details about who the characters are and their evolving feelings for each other.

"It tells a story throughout those scenes just the same way that any of the dialogue scenes tell a story, or the hockey scenes tell a story," Woods said. "[Intimacy] is as integral to the plot as those other aspects of these men's lives."

WATCH | Why *Heated Rivalry* is tasty, funny and real:

While Woods doesn't like to characterize anything as "good" or "bad" representation, they said the direction by the show's director Tierney, who is gay, comes through in the show's sexier moments, even though the original source material was written by a woman.

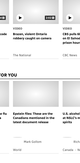
"The way that these guys are looking at each other, the way the camera is looking at them, the way their bodies are shown ... you can tell that a gay person made this."

A place for PG and steamy queer stories

Not all viewers have found the show to be realistic, however. Actor Jordan Firstman of HBO's 2 Lives 1 Job Future Ex-Friend Finds Your Dad on Lyft — through he's since walked back his comments and posted videos online featuring Williams in an effort to show there were no hard feelings.

Regardless, Woods said it's important to depict all kinds of queer stories on screen so audiences can find one that resonates with them — especially in a time when those narratives are at risk of disappearing.

WATCH | *Heated Rivalry* cast and crew describe the show in one word:



Imagine a world where the two best male hockey players in the country weren't just rivals, but were also in love with each other. The new Canadian TV show Heated Rivalry brings the idea to life.

GLAAD's 2025 "Where We Are on TV" report, which annually tracks LGBTQ+ characters on TV, found that there were 400 queer characters on scripted, prime-time series, but over 40 per cent of those characters would not be coming back, either because the show was cancelled, a character is leaving the show, or because the show was a limited series.

- **"Cancel Your Guys" trend sees 20LGBTQ+ characters disappearing from TV**

"I'm glad that we live in a time where we can have [PG-gay romance] Heartstopper, which is this incredibly lovely, gentle, calm, warm thing. And then we have this very spicy, hot, fiery other thing," Woods said. "The gay experience is broad ... and it's great to see that sort of diversity of perspectives showcased."

Shoull, the Canadian viewer, agrees. While shows like Queer as Folk were groundbreaking, the characters suffered adversity in part because of their sexual orientation, losing their jobs, experiencing physical violence and, in the American remake, dealing with HIV/AIDS.

Compared to that, Shoull said, he's glad to have Useful gay stories where we can have sex and we can have relationships and we could have that happy ending."

"I'm just be able to watch gay content and know it's gonna be OK — we don't have to wait for the hammer to drop — is a big relief."

The show's season finale is set to premiere on Crave this Friday, Dec. 26.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Journalist

Abby Hughes is a writer with CBC News based in Toronto. She came to the city to study journalism at Toronto Metropolitan University and has been here ever since. She covers news from the worlds of business, entertainment, health, science and education, and her favourite stories focus on the real people in those areas — the customers, fans, patients, citizens and students. You can reach her with story ideas at abby.hughes@cbc.ca.

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