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# First a Waiter, Then a Clown, Now, Connor Storrie is a Hollywood Heartthrob.

Before landing a lead role in *Heated Rivalry*—the Texas-born actor made ends meet by serving tables and cut his teeth performing in Los Angeles's underground theater scene. Now, he's a newly-minted leading man and the patron saint of leg day.

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Connor Storrie wears a swimsuit by Speedo.

Trust the algorithm. I had yet to even watch the pilot of *Heated Rivalry*—the "sex-fueled romance" that took the internet by storm this winter—when I began to encounter clips online: fan edits set to Nelly Furtado, Beyoncé, Tego Calderón, French-kissing videos of viewers parsing the subtext of certain scenes, and charming interviews of the show's chummy co-stars, actors Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie.

On screen, they play Shane Hollander (Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Storrie)—professional hockey players who become secret lovers, despite being rivals on the ice. Their romance, which ignites between them snarky, often several times per episode, in stairwells, bathrooms, and on rooftops—whenever and wherever they can steal a moment alone. In scarcely more than two months since it premiered on Canadian streaming platform Crave, it has become the most watched on HBO Max, where it was snatched up for U.S. distribution—the series has eclipsed the limit of viewers, received sound campaign that no marketing budget can buy, catapulting the actors into sudden fame and proving the Internet's power to vind new celebrities overnight.

For 20-year-old Storrie, who was working 40 hours a week as a server in Los Angeles before tackling *Heated Rivalry*, the past few weeks have been "surreal." In a cutthroat entertainment landscape, there was no reason to think that an NBA romance, based on a steamy novel by Canadian author Rachel Reid, would become a cultural phenomenon. Yet it did. Storrie's co-star, Williams, said that I get asked more than people stop me and know me by name." Storrie echo one-ups Zoom, "the more I'm like, Okay this is actually something."

Connor Storrie wears a sweater and accessories by Bottega Veneta.

Something, indeed. It would be impossible to distill the exact formula of *Heated Rivalry*'s inexplicable success, though industry execs will inevitably try. It's a gay show that speaks equally to young women—a romantic fantasy of burgeoning years and eleven glances and tailoress and sex—that nevertheless captivates, with startling clarity, the motivation and breathless pains of first love.

While the sex appeal is crucial, part of the show's genius also stems from form. These episodes are packed with nostalgic, quick cuts between Rozanov and Hollander (as they call each other, even in intimate moments) on ice and in bed, set to the propulsive beat of bangers like Rihanna's "We Found Love" and Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road." Yet, for all the hockey and sex scenes, from six-mile to-hand-only, Storrie's sweet-tooth-tender—caring, thrust, shield, scared.

> The more that I get recognized, the more that people stop me and know me by name, the more I'm like, Okay, this is actually something.

These cinematic flourishes are grounded, however, in the palpable chemistry of the pair onscreen. Storrie recalls the first time they met, in an audition over Zoom. "I remember being like, 'This is going to be good,'" he recalls, noting that Jacob Tierney, the show's creator, left the pair alone on the call. "He was like, 'Alright, guys, whenever you're ready.' And then clicked off his screen. Hudson and I looked at each other for like five seconds and had this moment of taking each other in."

Connor wears a full look by Tom Ford.

As interviews began to trickle in, many fans were shocked to learn how much Storrie differs from his character. Shane is a cocky, cold-blooded hockey player who's closeted to his teammates and family. Texas, Storrie took an early interest in acting, watching *The Wizard of Oz* for lifetime of ages and thinking, "I want to do that." He has a taste for horror—the dark, the uncanny—and he cites Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* as formative influences.

After moving to LA to pursue acting as a teen, Storrie grappled with an agoraphobic predicament. "I was getting no traction at all," he recalls of those preparedness years, when he would do two or three auditions a week without booking a thing. "I realized that, given the numbers, it's almost impossible to make it in Hollywood. I was so, so, so, so, so scared that and really do like, Okay, knowing that, what are you going to do?" Urban film regardless.

While he toiled his time, Storrie threw himself into the city's alternative theater "queer scene," which he credits with teaching him to be unflinching in the face of exposure, both emotional and physical. (He recalls a live performance in which he played a birthday stripper who gets hit by a car en route to a gig. "I was so terrified to be all naked and of all my limbs all broken," he remembers, laughing.) Though Storrie's "dirty boy" in the scene's spotlight was whom he most liked, he also found himself drawn to the performers who were whose of their bodies. Storrie is his embodied performance, an intuition for the character that guides everything from voice to gait to posture. "There are certain characters that are super easy to get into, but in one of them," he explains. "It was such a departure from who I am that the role may as well have been, like, a hobbit or something. I can't help but be this totally altered thing."

Connor wears a full look by Tom Ford.

That isn't to say that becoming Ilya didn't require some study. As soon as he booked the role, Storrie began working with a dialect coach every day to master the Russian dialogue, which Sara Ruell in the language have relied a strikingly convincing long taped called him the "Meryl Streep of accents." Storrie's mother, who is Irish, helped him "get the rhythm of it," and he ran the lines growing up—though as a child, he displeased enough latent as a gimmick that a Russian figure stealing coach once tried to "poach" him.

Online, much attention has been spent on Storrie's physicality—his physique, nearly the canonically accurate "hockey butt" that's spawned a million TikToks and made the actor patron saint of leg day. Yet Storrie's performance is equally striking. Ilya's tortured sex and romantic ends are the more in his and Hunter scenes. He grows the impression of wearing his body as more of a tool than an object of art. "Making things that are taboo comfortable—that's very much a part of my personal artistic interest," he says of the show's steamy sex scenes.

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As his Instagram following skyrockets by tens of thousands daily, Storrie is trending his time online. "You know how some people can't drink because of their body chemistry?" he says. "When I'm online and the dopamine starts flowing, I'm like, Okay this is a little too good. I need to get out." Yet he's also cognizant of the opportunities that social media presents. "It can be a really slippery slope for any creative, no matter what scale you're being enhanced at."

Connor wears a sweater and jeans by Zara.

Of course, not all of that attention has been positive. In recent weeks, gay romance writers like Alexis Hall have criticized the show's depiction of Shane's family, which Hall characterizes as "a past decades-then Love, Simon to Heartstopper to that *White & Royal Blue*—were adapted from novels not written by gay men. And when actor Jordan Firstman made headlines for his critique of the romantic decision to remain tight-lipped about their sexualities, Francois Arnaud, one of the show's co-star members, defended their choice, noting that Storrie and Williams "have been very open about their lives." Online, Storrie's and Williams's private lives have raised questions around ownership, authenticity, and who gets to tell gay stories.

But in the eye of this storm of attention, Storrie appears calm. He's trying his best to stay present. In fact, he tells me, it's only in the past few days that any of it has begun to feel real. And with season two of *Heated Rivalry* recently confirmed, Storrie is proving himself adept at leveraging its success toward other creative pursuits. (The actor also writes, photographs, paints, and makes "bizarre, experimental" music that "will never see the light of day.") Presently, he wrapped his performance in Netflix's upcoming rom-com *Ever After*, which he describes as "a fairytale romance" form. A slipping road in the spotlight would make most artists nervous, cautious to chart the most palatable path possible. Not Storrie. Grinning, he tells me, "I'm sitting over here big and mess the more than I try to please someone."

Connor wears a shirt, shorts, tie, and shoes by Saint Laurent with sunglasses by Jacques Marie Mage. Socks are talent's own.

*Grooming by Chloe Iannet*
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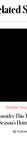

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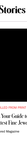

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