

TELEVISION

TV Review: "Heated Rivalry" (Episodes 1-2)

The first two episodes of the smash Canadian show are filled with raw passion, simmering glances, and some of the best gay sex on TV.

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Warning: Spoilers

I'm sure all of you are already watching *Heated Rivalry* that I was going to have to write about it. I mean, come on. It has everything I adore in a TV show: queer yearning and longing; two beautiful men as the leads; and, of course, some of the hottest sex to grace the small screen since *Fellow Travelers*. In other words, it's the kind of show that's tailor-made for someone like me.

Based on the novel of the same name by Rachel Reid, the series follows hockey players Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) who, in public, appear to be bitter rivalries on the ice. Behind the scenes, however, they're engaged in a love affair, one that's as volatile as it is passionate. Though neither man will ever really admit it—either to themselves or one another—it's clear their bond is something deeper than just a physical liaison.

To say I loved this show would be a bit of an understatement. Even though we're only two episodes in, it's already become one of my very favorite shows on TV. In a world that seems to grow increasingly dangerous and more queer-phobic by the moment—as I write this the Trump administration refused to acknowledge World AIDS Day—a show like this one is a light in the darkness. All I can say is thank God for the Canadians (and, I guess, for HBO Max, which picked up the US streaming rights).

Obviously a major part of the series' appeal stems from the male beauty on offer and from the crackling chemistry between its two leads, who often seem in danger of setting the whole set ablaze around them. Both Williams and Storrie seem to understand their characters at a deep instinctual level, and this grants their performances a remarkable authenticity that invites us into their world and into their psyches. Both actors excel at giving us moments of raw, unfiltered intimacy, whether that be in a passing glance in public or in the midst of a passionate round of sex in the privacy of a bedroom.

In my experience, very few series really know how to truly capture the essence—one might say the feeling—of queer desire, but it's pretty clear from just the first two episodes that *Heated Rivalry* is going to be one of those shows. The pulse of desire is there the moment our two heroes meet, and it's there in every shared glance, and it's certainly there when the two of them begin their affair. The sex scenes are obviously arousing, and I'll be the first to admit that I love a show that isn't afraid to show just how amazingly hot gay sex can be and often is (I'll also admit that I'm a sucker for a nice butt, and both Williams and Storrie have very nice...assets). Like *Fellow Travelers*, *Heated Rivalry* gives us both the intensity of the act itself and also the lead-up to it and the teasing and joking that follow.

What's particularly striking about the sex scenes, particularly the first one, is just how considerate Rozanov is as a lover. A lazier show than *Heated Rivalry* would have made him a typical alpha top, i.e. someone who's happy to just take his own pleasure and get on with it. Rozanov—or Rozy, as Hollander at one point calls him, swoon—but that's not what we get here. Instead, we get a man who actually seems to care about whether his partner is okay. It's an achingly beautiful display of consent, and I am totally here for it.

Heated Rivalry is about so much more than gay sex, though. It's about a yearning for intimacy, a desire to connect with someone who truly understands you, who finds their soul's echo in yours. While I haven't read the novel (yet), I have read other books by Rachel Reid, and she is truly one of those writers who just understands the complexities, the beauties and yes, even the hurts, of the queer heart.

What's especially remarkable about this show is just how effectively it reveals the inner lives of its protagonists, particularly when it comes to their families. Though we've only seen a bit of her in these first two episodes, it's nevertheless clear that Hollander's mother has a very specific idea of what kind of a hockey player her son is and should be and, while she's clearly trying to be encouraging of his career, it's just as obvious that she's creating an ideal which he can never really meet.

For Rozanov, meanwhile, doing what is expected is a burden he cannot escape. His father is about as stereotypically Russian patriarch as you can imagine, with the added complication that he's clearly in the early stages of dementia. Rozanov's brother, meanwhile, is an unqualified jackass, someone who's happy to exploit his brother's success just so long as he doesn't have to do any work of his own. Clearly, this fraught family dynamic is going to have a significant impact on Rozanov's story going forward, and I'm kind of dreading it.

At the end of the day, a show like *Heated Rivalry* only succeeds because of the strength of the central performances, and we are really beyond fortunate to have Williams and Storrie. It's not just that they have chemistry; they're also just genuinely good at capturing the little grace notes of their characters. Williams is the right amount of sensitive and petulant, and one can easily see how someone like Hollander would be drawn to someone like Rozanov. For his part, Storrie endows the Russian hockey paragon with just the right amount of hauteur and arrogance to make him hot without sliding into toxic (most of the time).

I want to close by saying that this is truly a great show. Queer storytelling is so powerful, and Hollander and Rozanov's story is particularly potent, reminding us of how masculinity—particularly in the world of sports—can be a prison from which queer desire can provide an escape.

I can't wait to see what the rest of the show has in store for us.

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