

Reading the End

before I read the middle

Anatomy of a Sex Scene: Heated Rivalry Edition

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Heated Rivalry, AKA the gay hockey show, has been getting a lot of buzz for its explicit-ish sex scenes, and a lot of that buzz has been coming from viewers and critics whose experience with the romance genre is such that they are charmed by the novelty of the two protagonists calling each other by their surnames. This is to me immensely sweet, like a video of a baby having their first taste of ice cream or kimchi and falling into paroxysms of elation. I am happy for anyone who is experiencing romance genre conventions for the very first time right now. I am so excited for you all to feel the warm fuzzy emotions that will occur when they use each other's first names for the very first time. This show has generally been well received, and I am excited to see newbies to the romance genre get their first taste of how fun it can be.

I am less charmed by these same romance-unfamiliar critics opining that the show is all sex, no plot; that its quality can't be judged or understood, because all the sex is throwing off the scale; and that it's not doing anything new or interesting, just sex. Since I've gotten tired of howling *the sex is the plot!!!!!!* at my computer screen, I'd like to take a few minutes to explain how these sex scenes are working to advance the, yes, plot.



Specifically, I want to push back on the impulse to dismiss the skill that goes into creating effective sex scenes. It requires a particular competence to create sex scenes that are hot instead of ridiculous, and a competence on top of that to create sex scenes that tell us things about the characters and the relationship. Each of those things, individually, is hard to do, and Heated Rivalry is doing both of them very, very well. We don't have a line into what these characters are thinking about each other or their relationship, as we would when reading a romance novel. It all has to come through in the writing, the staging, and the acting.

The first of sex scenes occurs after Shane and Ilya film a commercial together—Ilya's idea—and cruise each other in the showers after—Ilya's initiative. The scene occupies a solid quarter of the episode's run-time, and it establishes a lot of the dynamics we'll see between these two characters going forward.

The keynotes for Shane here, and throughout all their sex scenes, are that he wants to do a good job, and he wants a break from the rigid self-control that governs his life outside of Ilya. He puts on a suit (!) because it's a special occasion, changes into casual clothes, sits in the dark, turns on the TV, turns off the TV, turns on a lamp. This is a kid who wants to be the valedictorian of losing his virginity. When Ilya puts his thumb in Shane's mouth suggestively, Shane takes the hint immediately and kneels down to blow him. He frets about doing the blow job wrong, doesn't know what to do with his hands (in later scenes, we'll see him copying what Ilya does with his hands), and folds his clothes after taking them off, like an extremely silly little baby.

Ilya finds this charming—he rarely smiles as openly as he does when Shane is folding his fucking pants—and he has a good read on when to reassure Shane and when to challenge him. He pushes Shane to admit he likes sucking dick, but when they actually get into bed together, he makes space for Shane to choose what happens next. As much as he's been performing cocky asshole, Ilya's very sweet to Shane in practice, and it's obvious he cares a lot about making sure Shane's comfortable and having a good experience. He also likes getting a rise (heehee) out of Shane, so after he comes, he pretends he's going to leave without reciprocating. Shane gets very soft eyes when he realizes that he got got, reminding the viewer that Shane likes it when Ilya teases and challenges him. He's allured by Ilya's don't-give-a-fuck vibe because he wants so badly to give less of a fuck himself. Sex with Ilya is a space where he can cede control and still be safe—something that's not true in any other area of his life.

After they have sex, Shane gets freaked out. This was fun, a good time was had by all, but he really *really* cares about being the golden boy of hockey and doing everything perfectly, and he orders Ilya not to tell anyone. Ilya's sarcastic about it at first ("Yes, Hollander, I'm going to tell everyone"), but gentles when he sees that Shane is genuinely upset. This pattern repeats over and over in their sex scenes: Ilya likes teasing Shane during sex, but only if it's fun for both of them. Any time he hits on something genuinely sensitive, he meets Shane with sincerity and assurance.

Their second hook-up navigates slightly more contested feelings and moments of disconnect. Shane is again trying to balance his need to be a good boy against his growing feelings for Ilya. He's horribly stressed about being in the room next door to one of his hockey idols, but he also really wants to build on the intimacy he and Ilya are establishing. So he can't quite say that he wants to bottom for Ilya, or that he wants to be in contact with him beyond the context of their hook-ups, but he's relieved and grateful for Ilya to push on both of those things—for it to be Ilya's idea and Ilya's initiative.

We also see a little hiccup in their established dynamic of Ilya challenging Shane, and Shane letting himself be challenged. Ilya asks—very very gently—if Shane wants to try anal:

Ilya: Have you ever?
Shane: No.
Ilya: Do you want to? [Shane doesn't answer] You are scared.
Shane: I'm not scared.
Ilya: No, is okay.
Shane: I'm *not* scared.

Ilya clocks that Shane is nervous about anal but does not want to be *seen* to be nervous about a new sex act (whomst among us). He shifts into a different register, refocuses on a sex thing that's potentially *new* to Shane, but *not scary* to Shane (fingering him), and pulls them back to the familiar territory of him teasing Shane and Shane pretending to be mad about it. It also gives Shane enough space to express that he's interested in bottoming but also to say a firm no about doing it right now—which Ilya accepts gracefully. Again here, we're seeing that Ilya's attentive to when Shane wants to be pushed vs when he needs Ilya to let up a bit.

The first episode's sex scenes establish Shane as the less experienced one and Ilya as the confident, boundary-pushing one. In the second episode, though, the cracks in that dynamic begin to show. The two of them finally get to hook up again, after two literal years of Ilya relentlessly hitting on Shane via text message. This sex scene is the most happy and relaxed we've seen them—they keep grinning at each other in the lead-up, which is especially notable for Ilya, who doesn't let Shane see a lot of his emotions.



every other gif I could have included in this post is NSFW lolol

Ilya checks in with Shane before they do anything, and then he *keeps* checking in with him throughout. It's sweet and hot, and I am frustrated we don't see this kind of thing in media more often. Shane feels safe in these encounters because Ilya is doing everything he can to make sure Shane feels safe. After Ilya showers, he checks in *again* ("worth the wait?"), and Shane kisses Ilya's mouth and then (fatal mistake) his forehead. Alas, this causes the whole train to jump the track. As we've seen elsewhere in the show, Ilya doesn't have a good home life. His mother's dead, his father's an asshole who is also getting dementia, and his brother is constantly hitting Ilya up for money. Shane has two supportive parents, and even though he feels anxious about living up to his mom's expectations for him, he always feels *loved*, and he responds to Ilya like a person who's always been loved. The second he does the sweet forehead kiss, Ilya panics, takes off, and doesn't speak to Shane for six months.

(Being in your twenties is terrible. Nobody should do it. We should all just get to fast-forward those years.)

The last sex scene in these episodes takes place after Ilya wins MVP at that year's hockey awards?, and Shane comes up to his hotel room after. The music is jittery and tense, and the action of the scene is a major departure from what we've seen before. Ilya wants to drag the two of them into an emotional register that feels comfortable for him, to maintain the pretense that this is a straightforward, no-feelings hookup, and that Ilya is in control of what's happening between them. It opens with Ilya dragging a chair through two rooms of his penthouse, with a highly unpleasant screeching sound that mirrors the screaming discomfort they're both going to feel in the sexy but emotionally terrible experience that ensues.



Superficially, this scene looks like they're following the same script as always, where Ilya's pushing Shane, and Shane's yielding control to Ilya. But for the first time, Ilya doesn't meet Shane's trust and vulnerability with gentleness.

Ilya: Touch yourself.
Shane: What?
Ilya: Show off for me. I want to watch you....
Shane: I've—never—
Ilya: No shit.

Until now, Ilya's never been shitty about Shane's relative inexperience, and you can see Shane struggling to parse it. He's visibly relieved when Ilya teases him about the Stanley Cup, because that's in line with a dynamic he recognizes, and he's hoping it means that Ilya's going to be normal with him again. Through the rest of the scene, even though he's nervous, Shane stays open and vulnerable, doing what Ilya tells him and articulating what he wants ("Are you gonna fuck me?" "You. I need you."), while Ilya tries very hard to remain unaffected. Wide camera shots emphasize the physical distance between the two of them, and we see very little of the actual sex. Instead, the scene cuts quickly to the aftermath, when Shane is drinking vodka he doesn't like and Ilya is disengaged from him to the point of dissociation. In the elevator on his way home, Shane writes and deletes the saddest little text message: "We didn't even kiss."

This is the plot of the show. The plot of the show is the push and pull between these two guys, the things that draw them to each other (Shane's anxious perfectionism, Ilya's brash arrogance), and the things that push them away (the pressures of being star hockey players, familial expectations, Shane's internalized homophobia and perfectionism, Ilya's fear of intimacy). We're seeing all of that play out physically between the two characters when they're fucking. This is *craft*.

If the viewer were receiving this narrative via a medium other than sex scenes, it would be obvious what was happening. It would be the will-they-or-won't-they format that critics insist this show isn't doing. But—and please hold my hands and look me in the eyes when I say this—this is still a will-they-or-won't-they format. It's just that the following verb is different than what you're expecting it to be: it's not will-they-or-won't-they *fuck*. It's will-they-or-won't-they *find happiness with each other*. That's the thing the show is building up to, the climax it's building tension for.

If I've gone into slightly tortured detail to explain how TV acting and writing work, it's because I, as a scholar of boning, know how hard it is to produce sex scenes that convey story and character while also being hot. Everyone who watches this show understands that the second thing is happening, but the first part is often elided or dismissed, as if sex scenes are illegible texts from a craft perspective.

Still, I care about this particularly because [it's been reported](#) that the show struggled to get greenlit because of showrunner Jacob Tierney's staunch refusal to dial down or scale back the sex scenes. We continue to exist in a culture that devalues sex and the work of sex, especially sex that challenges normative heteropatriarchal scripts and structures. Many spheres of cultural production continue to treat sex as an embarrassment or an afterthought, and it's no accident that romance—which is streets ahead of other genres in its ability to write interesting, sexy, compassionate sex scenes—has long been the target of contempt and dismissal by critics and other cultural gatekeepers.

In their book *Dubcon* (MIT Press, 2021), Milena Popova writes of the challenge of affective responses to viscerally physical writing: "We feel [the response] in our bodies before we get a chance to emotionally or rationally process what is going on." I suspect that many consumers of sex scenes simply never arrive at the second step of rationally processing the craft work that's going on in a well-written sex scene. We often want to disavow the physical response (arousal, embarrassment, disgust, whatever) a sex scene induces by maintaining an ironic distance from it. And while I understand that impulse, I'd like for us not to let it numb all our critical faculties. Showrunner Jacob Tierney is putting so much work and care into these scenes. They're not just integral to the story he's telling. They *are* the story.

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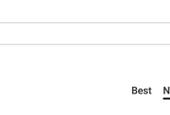
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