

How Heated Rivalry's casting directors found the show's perfect Shane and Ilya

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Connor Storrie, left, plays Ilya Rozanov and Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in hockey romance TV series Heated Rivalry.

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When the trailer for Crave's red-hot hockey romance *Heated Rivalry* dropped in early October, few could have predicted the Canadian streamer's steamy queer series would become the breakout television hit of the fall.

Early social media buzz for the show, a screen adaptation of a series of romance novels by the Halifax-based author Rachel Reid, helped earn a pickup by HBO Max, which acquired the show for the U.S. market just three weeks before its premiere. Similar deals followed, and now, the season one finale of *Heated Rivalry* is streaming on Crave, and the show is also available for horny hockey fans to watch everywhere from Ireland to Singapore to New Zealand.

Wolf Parade's Spencer Krug on his music's viral moment, courtesy of Heated Rivalry

What Heated Rivalry's success reveals about fan fiction's cultural staying power

The Canadian series is a global sensation and Crave's most popular original program debut ever. The streamer has already greenlit a second season thanks to rabid fan response. But the show's success was heavily dependent on one key factor: finding a pair of hockey hunks to play Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, the characters whose love story is the central story engine of *Heated Rivalry*.

That task fell to Jenny Lewis and Sara Kay, a pair of veteran casting directors based in Toronto. Lewis has worked with *Heated Rivalry* creator Jacob Tierney many times over the years, including on *Twist*, his 2003 cinematic debut as a writer and director.

Both women also worked on the comedy *Letterkenny*, which Tierney starred in and executive-produced. This spring, Tierney came to Lewis and Kay with the task of finding actors to play two very specific characters: a brooding, wild, cigarette-smoking Russian and a gentle, well-mannered and tightly wound Canadian. They helped Tierney and Crave find Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, who have been thrust into international stardom since the show's debut.

Lewis and Kay spoke to The Globe and Mail about the *Heated Rivalry* casting process and the show's runaway success.

Casting Heated Rivalry was a pretty tall order. The leads needed chemistry, to be comfortable portraying gay sex – and they needed to ice skate.

Lewis: We looked at the descriptors and were like, "Okay, this will not be easy." We looked worldwide for Ilya, and we looked for Shane as well, but we didn't have as much of a response on that character worldwide. We did see a slew of guys from Europe. We didn't get any – not surprising – submissions from Russia itself. We were hoping for Ukraine. We did a lot of outreach and saw people from Germany, from London; we did audition tapes from all around the world. We lucked into Connor, and lucked into Hudson being here in Canada.

Let's talk casting Shane. What were the key factors you were looking for with that role? Was it essential he was of Asian descent?

Lewis: Yeah, definitely, just to be true to the story and true to Jacob Tierney. Those descriptors, Ilya being Russian and Shane being half-Asian, and all of that was there in our character descriptions when we put out the search. I don't think there was ever a question that we were going to give on those things. Luckily we didn't need to, either.

Were they both able to ice skate when you met them?

Lewis: I mean, were they hockey players? No, not particularly. As far as we were told, Connor had been on the ice when he was younger and I believe he was a trained gymnast. So that athletic physicality and willingness was there. I think that's a huge part of it. And Hudson definitely knew how to skate.

Kay: I mean, you have to! It's a rite of passage if you're Canadian, I think.

Connor and Hudson are such a winning pair, both onscreen and on their press tour. What was their initial chemistry testing like? Was it an instantaneous thing?

Lewis: Those guys were dialled in. But that sexual spark, I think they were feeling it when they were in the Zoom. I don't know, it certainly didn't come off the way it does when you're watching the show.

Kay: Nobody could have seen that coming. That's lightning in a bottle.

Lewis: I don't personally feel like I've ever seen a moment like this in real time in my career, and my career has been pretty long. It's really something to watch all of this happening. It's very exciting.

What's your approach to casting queer characters?

Kay: Obviously, we do try to give the opportunity to the queer community first, this is their story. So we always do that, but we simultaneously see all different types of people.

Rachel Reid, the author of the books, has raved about Connor and Hudson – she wrote a blog post talking about what it was like to see her characters come to life. What was it like to have her be so pleased with how her characters were portrayed?

Kay: That's huge for us, obviously.

Lewis: A huge compliment.

Kay: I mean, I don't know what she had in her head. Jenny looked at thousands of audition tapes and you never know where you're going to land, frankly. If Rachel is happy with it, really thrilled with it, that's high praise.

What has it been like to watch Heated Rivalry become such a sensation and to watch these two lead actors turn into overnight celebrities?

Kay: We're proud mommies, obviously. We're very proud of them. You can't not be. It's so incredible and they're such good and sweet guys.

Lewis: Everybody talks about it, but considering how much has been thrown on these actors so quickly, I think they are handling it really beautifully. It's not easy, I imagine, to be dealing with the onslaught, so kudos.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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