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For the *Heated Rivalry* Stars, Selling Sex Comes With Strings Attached

Hudson Williams and Connor Storie open up about the storytelling behind those eye-catching scenes.

BY MICHAEL CUBY

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Sabrina Lantos/Bell Media/HBO Max

Warning: Spoilers for the first four episodes of Heated Rivalry to follow.

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It didn't take long for *Heated Rivalry* to become a national sensation. Jacob Tierney's steamy series adaptation of the popular novel by Rachel Reid — about two star hockey rivals who duke it out publicly on the ice while fucking it out privately in hotel rooms — has quickly developed a rabid fanbase thanks to its hot and heavy sex scenes and, well, mainly that. Even people who haven't tuned into the Crave original series (now airing every Friday on HBO Max in the U.S.) have no doubt stumbled upon a screenshot or two of cocksure Russian Ilya Rozanov and disciplined Asian-Canadian player Shane Hollander engaging in some manner of passionate coitus.

Luckily, the show's stars don't seem to mind the attention. "I feel really blessed, because even though there is a lot of attention on our bodies, I feel like, for the most part, people are being really nice," Connor Storrie, who plays Ilya, tells *Them* during a recent interview. Hudson Williams, who stars as Shane, agrees, stressing that *Heated Rivalry* provides a welcomed counterargument to the belief that sex scenes aren't necessary for good storytelling. Sure, "butt" is now one of the first suggested results when Google-searching Storrie's name, but that also means people *are* searching for him. The show has turned them both into overnight stars.

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Not that *Heated Rivalry* doesn't have other things going for it. Between the plentiful sex scenes, the show does make room for side plots about Ilya's complicated relationship with his domineering Russian family and Shane's ambivalence about being paraded around as the National Hockey League's token non-white star. (Last week's episode even took the brave step to sideline Ilya and Shane entirely, using its runtime to tell a self-contained, significantly tamer story about a *different* professional hockey player and his private relationship with a smoothie bar-working aspiring art historian.) And because this is ultimately a *love* story, it was inevitable that "feelings" would start to interfere with the sex — something that came into play in this week's episode, which found Ilya and Shane finally behaving like boyfriends (sleepovers, cooking for each other, cuddling on the couch in front of the TV) while getting jealous like them, too.

Ahead of this week's new episode, *Them* spoke with Storrie and Williams about the show's shift from pure sex to something resembling love, what their characters' dom/sub dynamic reveals about their lives outside the bedroom, how they feel about being objectified on the internet, and why they think women have gravitated so strongly to this male-on-male romance material.

In the latest episode of *Heated Rivalry*, your story escalates from the more lusty, sex-heavy nature of previous episodes into something deeper." By the end of the episode, when Ilya gets visibly jealous after seeing Shane share an intimate moment with someone else, it's pretty clear that they've moved past the "casual" stage of their relationship. Given how quickly your characters launch into a sexual dynamic, what do you make of this shift to more deliberate "emotional" territory?

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Connor Storrie: I think we felt, even before knowing the edit, that these moments felt very different. So even though we had been filming for a month and a half by the time we started filming these segments, it was just about reminding ourselves who, what, when, and where [we were in the story]. Like, *This is the first time you're doing something like this. This is the first time you're in this person's house. This is the first time you're having this person over to your house.* It was just fun to discover a new side of them, too, because up until that point, we hadn't done that.

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Hudson Williams: It's also the structure of shooting. Other people get that shift [in Ilya and Shane's story]. A linear progression is how it was written. But our show was kind of unusually block shot. It was shot like a giant movie, which means we were shooting parts of episode 5 in the beginning, parts of episode 4 early on. The shooting was unassembled. And so we had to...

CS: ...take it moment by moment.

HW And know every little moment [that] we're jumping in. In the same day, we're going from multiple scripts, so we didn't really get the benefit of going linearly. We had to hold the entire story and then go in on command to these different points that these characters are at.

For the last few years, there's been this ongoing debate online about whether films and TV shows even need sex scenes to tell a complete story. But in the world of *Heated Rivalry*, the sex is, quite literally, *the story*. Both of your characters are growing through the sex they're having with each other and their arcs are inextricable from the intimacy they share. As actors, how do you map out a character's emotional arc when it's largely playing out through this act of sex?

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CS: I think what really anchors them is not the sex itself, but what's going on in their life outside of that and how that affects the sex. For Ilya's journey, it was like, *Okay, so this is the part of the story when this happens with his family,* and then, *This is the part of [the story] where you lose this game.* We see that [in] episode 2. After the Olympics, and then after winning the Cup, you see how that affects their dynamic and how that affects the sex for that moment — and in turn, how that affects them *after* the sex. So I think it's kind of the reverse. It's mapping their lives outside of the sex, and then [determining] how they show up sexually and romantically because of *this*, *this*, and *this*. Well, for Ilya, at least. I don't know if he feels the same for Shane.

HW: Yeah. I always knew where I stood on that sort of debate. I always felt that, when handled the right way, sex does have a huge place in storytelling. And with this show, we got the benefit of the sex scenes being treated as deliberately as the conversation scenes — almost even *more* because we had rehearsal for them. We had conversations about the conversation that's happening within them. Hopefully, this show proves how if you skip the sex scenes — or you kind of go, "Oh, this is for the people who just want to see some raunchy sex or lust" — you miss the story. Like, in episode 1, I think it's like 29% intimate scenes. So some people could be like, "Oh, so that means there's 71% story." But that's not true. Most of the story is in that 29%.

Given how much of a role sex plays in the storytelling, how long would you say it took for the two of you to establish that chemistry and get used to being so intimate with each other?

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CS: We had a rehearsal day where, for a half-day, we literally just walked through every intimate scene in the script. And I mean, let's be honest: There was a little bit of nerves going into that and being like, "Oh, we're going to have to kiss. We're good friends and now we have to kiss!" But the moment we started doing that, we were kind of like, "Oh, I can do this."

But it's kind of like that with any part of acting. Honestly, I think I was more nervous for our first speaking scene than I was for our first intimate scene, because that's also super vulnerable. You still feel really...naked because you're just putting yourself out there and being like, *Well, this is how this character shows up. This is what the character is.*

I saw a recent interview where both of you agreed that, in your real lives, you're both more aligned with each other's characters than you are with your own. It's a testament to your acting abilities that you still embody these characters so well, but how did it feel to be yourselves interacting off-set and then have to reverse roles when the cameras started rolling?

HW: We spoke to that even before we started shooting. Connor was telling me how, sometimes, when you're acting and someone starts doing a character in front of you, it's hard to take in and your brain can't quite handle the difference. But I found the sort of departure, the mutual shift of both of us playing things, [to be natural]. I would speak about [aspects] of Ilya that I related with and that I understood that [Connor would be] like, "I'm not sure I like this about Ilya" or, "This feels weird." And then, it would be vice versa. With Shane, I would be like, "Oh, what does this mean?" And Connor would be like, "Oh no, this is what I *love* about Shane." So I think [the role-reversal] helped us. There was a curiosity that led the ship, which was really nice.

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CS: I mean, I stayed with my [Russian] Ilya accent whenever we were filming. If we had a filming date, I was in that [accent] from the time I showed up to my trailer in the morning until we called cut on the last shot. So I think that helped a little bit to keep us in a space [for our characters]. I mean, our energy would go crazy. We would do something very serious or dramatic or whatever, and then two seconds later, we would be laughing and clowning around.

But speaking to your point, I have a really hard time acting with people that I'm very close with or that I know because my brain does this backflip where I'm like, *Why are you lying to me right now?* But for whatever reason, I never had that with Hudson. I think that's a testament to his really good acting, but also to both of our abilities to click into these characters and be like, *Not only do I get where I'm coming from, but I understand why you're doing what you're doing*. And it just makes it feel 10 times better.

There's this dom/sub dynamic between your characters, which obviously informs the sex you're having, but also seems to reflect certain aspects of your characters. Shane is very passive in the bedroom, which also seems to be the case with his parents. On the other hand, Ilya is very aggressive in the bedroom, which he also seems to be with everyone around him (except for maybe his father and brother, of whom he seems to be slightly afraid). How did you work out those aspects of your characters?

HW: I think Shane loves control. Outside of his life, he likes steering the thing. He likes dominating to a degree in his sport. He likes to do everything to be able to *continue* to do that in his sport, and I think that's his whole life up to this point. So I think that, with Ilya, [he likes that] there's an element of control he can give up while still being reinforced that he's doing a good job — and I think that, at the end of the day, Shane loves to do a good job and make people happy and perform. So, with [his relationship to] Ilya, I think it's both. Shane's sexual urges are, yes, more submissive. But also, for him, that's the joy of how he can perform right now.

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CS: I was about to say, I actually think it's kind of the opposite of what you said. If you take Shane's character, for example, he *is* so in control and he *is* so domineering and he *is* controlling so many elements of his life [while dealing with] the pressure to be the performer, the hunter, the "man," for lack of a better term. And I think, sometimes, sexually, people seek out the opposite of the energy that they want in their real life. It's like those highfalutin businessmen who love to be dominated and have a dominatrix and want to be treated like a little sissy.

I kind of think it's the same thing with Ilya. I mean, if I look at his emotional journey separately from our arc and the love story in the show, he is totally out of control in terms of what he's allowed to be in his country. He is totally out of control in how everything goes down with his mother. He's so out of control with his father. I've said it before, but I actually don't even think that Ilya gives a shit about hockey. It just so happens to be something that he's good at, and so he's thrust into this thing. And what's the opposite of that? It's being in control.

I saw that the two of you stopped by HiTops, the popular gay sports bar in West Hollywood, last night, where you thanked the fans for tweeting about your butt so much. That kind of posting has obviously helped the show stay in the cultural conversation and it's also turned both of you into stars in your own right. But how do you deal with that specific brand of attention? How does it feel to know that everyone suddenly knows your name at least partially because of their obsession with your bodies?

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CS: Well, I live in West Hollywood, so I feel like I'm in the "Body Central." Hudson is obviously just visiting for this, but I was telling him, "We're in a place where men's beauty is a huge topic of conversation." I feel really blessed though, because even though there is a lot of attention on our bodies, I feel like, for the most part, people are being really nice. Let's be honest: people can be *really* cruel online — like horrible, horrible, horrible. But people have been really nice. And not only nice *to* us, but also protective *of* us. So I just feel blessed. Honestly, it could have gone really, really bad. People are evil sometimes. But I haven't been experiencing that, so it feels good. Keep it coming!

This is the kind of show that I think anyone could have predicted would be a hit with gay men. But because it's based on a book series that's been very popular with women, we're also seeing how much it seems to be resonating with women. As you've gained new fans, have you been surprised to see such a strong response from women? And do you have any specific theories about why women would be drawn to these kinds of stories?

HS: We've talked about this a lot, both with Jacob and between ourselves. And yeah, on the surface, it's confusing, like, *Why would straight women like this?* But also, Jacob has said it — that there's so little care into that thought. The fact that [people] are now going, "Wow, straight women like this?" It's like the first time they've cared about what women actually want and like.

I was talking to [Connor] about this. I think there's a statistical element [that doesn't exist in stories about] straight relationships. So if you're a straight woman and you don't fancy the gent in the story or maybe you're not attracted to them, it's like, "Oh, the Shane guy's not doing it for me. But that Russian? Goddamn!" Or vice versa. So this might be a double chance that there's an attraction there. But also, I think there's an element of possibly women who have a desire to give up control [enjoying it]. That is scary and there's a lot of fear there. There's a fear of violence because men are big and they're scary. But if they can live vicariously through the Shane character, they know there's an inherent safety. I think that's possible, too. I'm a little bit theorizing.

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Though the show is fictional, it provides a wink to real-life events.

CS: I was talking to Hanna [Puley], our costume designer, about that exact thing. I was like, "Wow, it's predominantly women [who are already fans] from the book." Obviously, I think the gay men demographic has gone up because of the show, just because of the visibility and not [because they knew] of the book beforehand. But she was like, "Well, I think there's something about this type of story and this type of love and this type of sex that has a lot to do with this almost prolonged foreplay and yearning, which kind of differs from this more pornographic idea of sex, and I think that's what the female audiences are really drawn to." She was like, "I think it's more so geared towards a feminine gaze," which is super interesting because it's true. I mean, that's why we like romance. It's not just the sex or whatever. It's the moments in between, where you see desire and this pull towards vulnerability and connection.

HS: Also, it made me think [about how], in a straight, hetero, normal romance, you usually fall into tropes and stereotypes where the woman is the communicator and the guy is the closed-off one. That's usually the archetype we see. So I think that, when it's two men, it's like, "Well, *someone* has to do the talking. Communication *needs* to happen. So which one of you motherfuckers is going to do it?" That's sort of enticing because they're like, "Ahh, so men *are* capable of having communication. They *can* get somewhere. They're not completely incompetent."

CS: Right! I saw something online that was really interesting. It was an influencer or a BookTok personality talking about this, and she was like, "The reason why women are so into stories that involve gay men is because they are so exhausted by the idea of straight men that this is the only way that they get to see a form of masculinity that feels accessible and interesting to them." I think that's such a cool point, because it does turn the normal idea of masculinity on its head in a lot of different ways.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Heated Rivalry *premieres new episodes every Friday on Crave and HBO Max.*

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