



SERIES BUSINESS

‘Heated Rivalry’ Casting Directors On Finding Connor Storrie & Hudson Williams: ‘Lightning in a Bottle’

Jenny Lewis and Sara Kay detail the backstory of the stars' self-tapes and chemistry test: 'You want to watch how hot they are together'

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ICY HOT Heated Rivalry's Sara Kay and Jenny Lewis found, from left, Connor Storrie ("He just sort of had the it of the character," says Lewis), François Arnaud, Robbie G.K. and Hudson Williams. (The Ankler illustration; Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max)

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I cover TV and host *Ankler Agenda*. I interviewed Blumhouse president Abhijay Prakash about TV strategy, reported on film schools' scramble to address industry disruption and dug into agents' concerns about a Netflix-Warner Bros. deal. I'm elaine@theankler.com

Overnight success in Hollywood very rarely happens overnight. It's almost always the result of a behind-the-scenes effort in the recent American film and TV landscape. But the rocket-ship rise of Hudson Williams, born in 1998 in Old Saybrook, Conn., is the closest analogy to the Spaghetti Factor. Storrie was like a duo becoming a star adapted from *Blade Runners*. It was originally a pickup from HBO Max as a distributor in the 11th hour. (HBO chief Casey Bloys told *Q&A* it was "a very easy yes.")

EYE FOR TALENT Kay, left, and Lewis won the Canadian Screen Award for casting on Letterkenny in 2019. (Isaiah Trickey/FilmMagic)

"Discovering stars now in 2026 — it's not like what happened with Connor and Hudson is going to happen like over and over again, because we have a lot of successful shows here where someone will be the lead of a show that goes on 10 seasons on Canadian television, and they're still not considered a star," says casting director Sara Kay, who alongside Jenny Lewis conducted a far-flung search for the show's stars in the spring of 2025. The Toronto-based casting directors — who've also worked on Prime Video's *The Boys* and FX's *What We Do in the Shadows* — spent a mere six to eight weeks casting not only the two leads but many other parts, including roles that would eventually go to François Arnaud and Robbie G.K.

The fact that *Heated Rivalry* is a Canadian series is a big part of why fresh voices and relative unknowns were given a chance to shine.

GOLDEN BOYS Storrie and Williams joined the torch relay for the Milan Cortina Winter Games on Jan. 25. (Instagram/@Olympics)

"If we are allowed to actually cast Canadians as our leads, then we see everybody," says Lewis. "You're not tied down to the whole, 'Oh, there has to be a star who's going to bring this kind of box office to the show in order for the show to be greenlit or get made.' Crave backs a show, and it may become a vehicle for so many people to have amazing careers. We get to actually consider any actor... If you allow yourself to just find the magic and trust the good actors out there, then look at what happens."

Related: [Why Bell Media Execs Went All in on 'Heated Rivalry' — and How the Bet Paid Off](#) LESLEY GOLDBERG · DECEMBER 17, 2025 [Read full story](#) →

(*Cough, cough:* Take note, risk-averse studio and network executives.)

Lewis Kay Casting is again responsible for choosing a new class of hockey hunks to join the current cast for the next season of *Heated Rivalry*, already greenlit. By email after our initial interview, Kay says they're "getting a lot of really beautiful heartfelt messages as well as some questionable topless photos :). We are thrilled that people are so excited and want to be on the show."

Today, Kay and Lewis walk me through the process of casting *Heated Rivalry*'s Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, how they worked with show creators Jacob Tierney and Brendan Brady, plus details on their set visit in Toronto where they were some of the first people to see the magic happening between the cast.

- Our chat, condensed and lightly edited for clarity, gets into:
- Self-tapes and Zooms: Exact details on the casting process and who — and what — they looked for first
 - Why it was "nerve-wracking" to cast Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, and what caught their eye about Storrie and Williams
 - Their first chemistry read and what might surprise you about it
 - The playbook of what casting directors really look for in a chemistry read
 - Why Kay and Lewis had to tamp down their enthusiasm about the two young actors at first: "You just play it cool"
 - The casting directors' history with Jacob Tierney and how that powered their process
 - What Kay and Lewis saw on their first visit to the *Heated Rivalry* set that shocked them

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‘Beyond Chemistry. They’re Hot Together’

BLADE RUNNERS "This is lightning in a bottle," Lewis says of Storrie, left, and Williams' instant stardom. "I wish we could claim that we'd seen this coming" (Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max)

Tell me how you approached the casting for Heated Rivalry's two leads, and how you worked with creator Jacob Tierney on this.

Jenny Lewis: So we actually go back with Jacob quite a long time. I cast his very first feature, *Twist*, and then we cast (Tierney's series) *Letterkenny* and *Shoresy*. When we took this script, we were like, *gulp*, because those were tall orders! The specificity of the characters is not just like, "Oh, those people are just out there." The hockey and language, and Russian and half-Asian — it was a lot to stay true to the story.

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That's a very specific set of criteria. Did they have to know how to skate?

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