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'Heated Rivalry' Star Christina Chang on Loving Yuna and Who She's Most Excited to Share Scenes With in Season 2

The star who plays Yuna Hollander also shares the words of wisdom she's given the show's breakout leads played by Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams.

BY NICOLE FELL
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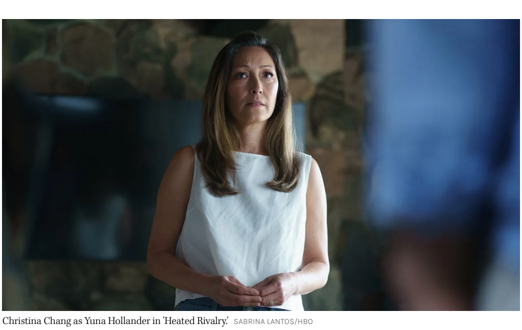

Christina Chang as Yuna Hollander in 'Heated Rivalry.' SABRINA LANTOS/HBO

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Christina Chang loves playing Yuna Hollander. It's evident seconds into hearing the Taiwanese-American actress speak about the character.

In HBO Max's breakout hit series *Heated Rivalry*, Chang's Yuna serves as the show's matriarchal figure. A slightly more-nuanced version of the mom-ager role, Yuna spends much of the Jacob Tierney-created series fiercely devoted to her son, Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), one half of the show's rivals-turned-lovers pairing.

"[Tierney] strikes the balance well [of] a loving mom who is concerned about her son's wellbeing, but is also like, 'How do we capitalize on your growing success?'" Chang explains on a Zoom from her home in Canada to *The Hollywood Reporter*. "She wants to make sure, as a fierce advocate of her son, that he's not missing out on any of these wonderful opportunities."

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Yuna's biggest moment of the series came in the show's finale when, after seven years of hiding their more-than-complicated, not-quite-relationship, her husband David (Dylan Walsh) finds Shane kissing rival professional hockey player Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), leading Shane to come out to his parents.

It's an emotional moment for the show — and frankly, for anyone who has been in the shoes of coming out to a parent. "That scene was a large part of why I took [the role]," Chang says.

Below, the actress shares behind-the-scenes moments of filming the emotional coming out scene, why she loves playing Yuna and which character she's hoping to have "mama bear" time with in season two.

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How are you feeling with the success of the show? I have to imagine it's a little strange.

It is strange. Honestly, I've not been a part of something that's been a phenomenon like this. I've done a lot of projects I've felt really good about that have gotten some recognition, but not on this level, so it's different. I'm sort of in awe and just kind of sitting back. I'm in Canada, so I just live in Zoom boxes. Essentially, I'm along for the ride with everybody else. We're all watching Connor [Storrie] and Hudson [Williams] and all the fun things they're doing.

What was it about Yuna as a character that you related to that made you want this role?

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When I read the script and came to the last episode, that scene was a large part of why I took it. It's a good representation of other people's experiences, too. It reflects other experiences and also provides a template for parents and their adult children or younger children moving forward.

I was hoping it would be something that could help normalize that kind of experience and conversation. This isn't to say the other experiences we've seen played out more in television and film — the more violent, traumatic, grief-stricken experiences — aren't real. Those are very much a part of the LGBTQ+'s community. I don't want to take away from that. But I think it's really nice too to see something joyful and sexy with people riding off into the sunset.

I'd love to hear more about that finale scene where Shane and Yuna talk.

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It was originally written differently, and then Jacob rewrote that. I don't know if you've heard, but on the day, he changed the scene — [not] intention-wise, he just distilled it with less words; the way he felt that Yuna and Shane could handle that moment better. He fine-tuned it, and I think it was brilliant.

It was fantastic to begin with, and filming it was as easy as it could be because the structure, the words, the script were so good. It wasn't challenging in terms of trying to get there or make it as good as we possibly could. Hudson was a great scene partner.

Something that really stuck with me was Yuna saying she's sorry to Shane and instead of him saying "it's fine," he says he forgives her. That feels like a pretty big distinction and something we don't see often.

When you're in the scene doing that, you're not thinking about how gratifying it might be or how the public or the viewers will receive it. So rarely as children and adult children do we get to hear "I'm sorry" from our parents. It was really important for me to be able to play a character who can do that, and be as vulnerable as Yuna can in that moment. Instead of being defensive or angry, she gets right to the point, which is her grief about it. Because underlying all of those things is usually sadness, and I'm so glad she was that person in that moment for her child.

Heated Rivalry – (L to R) Christina Chang as Yuna Hollander and Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in Episode 106 of Heated Rivalry. SABRINA LANTOS/HBO MAX/CRAVE

The character of Yuna is really interesting because of her evolution from the book. Jacob was able integrate your character more in the series. She's certainly a big part of what's to come. How familiar were you with the books?

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I didn't read them because I came to the project a little bit later, so there wasn't time to ingest all of them. Yuna is still Yuna, but Jacob had really flushed her out. There are scenes in the show that aren't in the books. I really loved what he did with her, so I'm straddling the line because I really want to read the books, but I'm scared. There's a responsibility being a character who already exists in so many people's imaginations. I'm actually really glad I hadn't read it going in. The pressure… When I met Rachel [Reid, author], I was like, "OK, I want to know, but I don't want to know."

I really want to [read the books], but there's a part of me that's like, "It's also really nice to just receive the character on the page that's been fleshed out by Jacob because I trust him." He knows the books inside and out, so whatever vision he has for the character is what I want to do, but I'm going to talk to Jacob about it. I take it you read the books?

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I did. Before I wrote that first story about the show's internet popularity prior to the HBO pickup, I went and read both books.

So you understand what I'm saying. From everything I've heard from people that have read, [Yuna]'s a little bit different.

She definitely is. Jacob leans more into that mom-ager aspect in an interesting way. It's easy to go down that road and have it feel tired or like a trope. Yuna doesn't fall into that, but were you ever nervous about that?

No, because I think you're right. He strikes the balance well [of] a loving mom who is, of course, concerned about her son's wellbeing, but is also like, "How do we capitalize on your growing success?" In the beginning, it's like, "OK, we've got Reebok, so I really want you to wear them because there are a lot of kids that are looking up to you." It starts there. Then by the time he's where he is, it's like, "All right, now we got to get Rolex in there and go to Wimbledon." She's not pushing. I think like all parents, we are hoping our children have wonderful opportunities. She just wants to make sure as a fierce advocate of her son, that he's not missing out on any of these wonderful opportunities. That's how I saw it. I think she strikes the balance well.

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Also, I have to give a shout-out to hockey moms. That type of dedication for that sport in particular is intense. If he started skating at a very young age, which he did, and she's also such a hockey fan, her enthusiasm is already built in about the sport. She's dedicated to taking him to all of the practices and games. I know hockey moms up here in Canada, and I never see them. They're so busy taking their kids. It's early mornings and late nights. It's three-hour drives to a game and then the three hours back. It's hardcore, so shout out to those moms.

There's been a lot of talk about how the sexiness of the story is what draws people in, but it's really about the heart. At its core, it's just a truly romantic story. What do you hope people take from *Heated Rivalry*?

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I think ultimately this is a love story. It's [about] romantic love, friendship — the wonderful best friends, the women and then familial love. Authentic human connection is at the core of this show, and I want that to be the takeaway. If you can love this show then you can embrace the LGBTQ+ community. The ripple effect is, if you are a parent and know what it is to love and want to protect your child, then you can connect to this show. If you have trouble speaking to your child at any stage in their life, let this be also a template for that.

I'm still in the role of parent. That role will never end, thankfully, for me, but I'm always reminding myself to just stay in the room for the challenging or frustrating moment, the difficult one. All parents come from a place of love. Most do, right? It's about figuring out the best way to protect our child in the way they need versus the way we want. That's the parental takeaway for me, a reminder for me, but in general, overall, I'd say this is just love is love, is love.

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You worked probably the closest with Hudson given the amount of scenes you had together. What was it like working on set and what're you most excited about for season two?

It was wonderful working with Hudson, Huddy. He is so easy and relaxed, in general, and he's funny. They're both clowns, if I'm being honest. He's really easy to work with and I'm looking forward to more clowning, is the short answer.

I'm really looking forward to working more with Connor [in season two] because I didn't really get to do that [in season one]. I got to spend some time offset with him, obviously, on location when we were away, but I would love to do more on screen with him. They're both really fun actors, and when people have a sense of humor it just brings a different type of life to the vibe in the room. I can't wait to do more with them and some of the other cast members, hopefully. know nothing about season two. I'm not being coy. We know nothing, but my hope is that Yuna gets to spend some time with other people.

Do you have hopes for Yuna as a character in season two, even if you don't know what's going to happen yet?

Other than them being maybe flown to Wimbledon? I think probably getting some mama bear time in with Ilya. There's some rich material there potentially. Again, we don't know what Jacob's planning, but I think that could be really rewarding and nice for Ilya's character to experience, since obviously his mom died. Aside from all the fun things they might be able to do, all their little adventures, that would be probably the most heartfelt thing that I would like to see.

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What has it been like to see all the love that Connor and Hudson have been getting from the series?

They deserve all the flowers, so I'm really happy to see that they are having this experience. I continue to say to them when we speak or text, "Just make sure that you're hydrating and sleeping and taking care of yourself." I couldn't be more happy for them. This couldn't have happened to nicer guys. They're truly kind and thoughtful people.

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