Heated Rivalry and the Importance of Queer Joy and Activism

At a time of global backlash, the show's love story is essential — and inspiring.

By Katie Nafsinger

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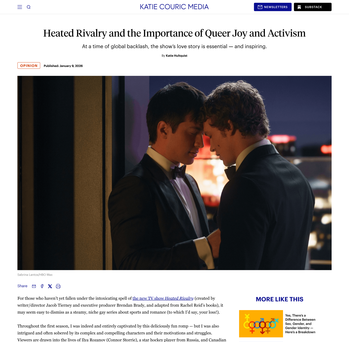

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For those who haven't yet fallen under the intoxicating spell of the new TV show *Heated Rivalry* (created by writer/director Jacob Tierney and executive producer Stephen Reynolds, and adapted from Rachel Reid's book), it may seem easy to dismiss as a steamy, niche gay series about sports and romance (to which I'd say, your loss).

Throughout the first season, I was indeed and entirely captivated by this deliciously fun romp — but I was also intrigued and often relieved by its complex and compelling characters and their motivations and struggles. Viewers are drawn into the lives of Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), a Russian hockey player, and Canadian professional hockey phenom Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), as they begin a clandestine physical relationship that spans several years. By the last episode, we're with Shane and Ilya at "The Cottage" — Shane's private lakeside retreat where they can spend time being in a safe space together and finally confess their love.

At the end of what has been an incredibly challenging year for many holidays, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people around the world, *Heated Rivalry* gave us something we desperately needed: sweet joy. I've been especially moved by the number of friends and colleagues across the globe who love the show, even in places where it's not yet officially available — or may be banned.

In my own life as a lesbian — and in my work supporting LGBTIQ activists with Outright International — I'm constantly reminded that this kind of joy sustains us even in the darkest of times. The resilience and pride of LGBTIQ people quite literally saves lives. We also have something special to share with the world about self-expression and identity, accepting and including others, the expansiveness and abundance of love, creating affirming chosen families, and persevering even in the face of stigma, discrimination, and persecution.

Many of us have long yearned for more, diverse queer representation and authentic, positive storytelling — and they have also recently experienced rising and dangerous attacks on our rights and communities, and a devastating defunding of our movement across the globe.

"CURLING CHOMPS": NICKSHIRE (R) Hudson Williams plays Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams stars as the already-presumed-gay NHL's golfing star in Nickshire (R) in Season 1, episode 3 of the series, "Heated Rivalry." Courtesy Crave/Bell Media (Image credit: Courtesy Crave/Bell Media)

So while I relish the unabashed romance, scintillating sex, and hot-as-hell chemistry in *Heated Rivalry*, I cannot entirely forget the harsh realities that so many queer, trans, and intersex people have around the world, including in Russia. The first season chronicles Shane and Ilya's relationship between 2008 and 2017, offering occasional glimpses into Ilya's life back home, where he struggles under the expectations and demands placed on him by his family, the government, and society overall — not to mention the potential dangers posed by his secret intimate encounters with men, if he were to be exposed.

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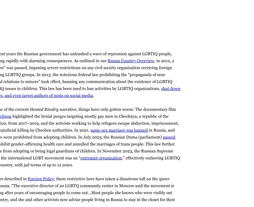
After the two hook up at the Major League Hockey Awards at the end of episode 2, Shane asks Ilya: "Are you heading back soon? To Russia, for the summer? Is it safe?" Ilya's response is resigned: "What do you mean, safe? What difference does it make?"

A few years (and episodes) later, when Shane suggests they try to be in a relationship, Ilya responds with frustration and sadness: "I wouldn't be able to go home again. Ever. Do you get that? I would not be able to go back to Russia." When Shane asks, "What would happen to you?" Ilya answers: "I don't want to find out."

For viewers who are curious about Ilya's fears, let me share some background:

Before 2008 (when Shane and Ilya meet for the first time), there was some social and legal progress and growing LGBTIQ activism in Russia. In the early 1990s, Outright International (then known as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) worked closely with activists in Russia, campaigning to decriminalize same-sex relations (achieved in 1993) and end the psychiatric hospitalization of LGBTIQ people, helping organize queer conferences and film festivals, and bringing anti-retroviral HIV medications and condoms into the country.



However, in recent years the Russian government has unleashed a wave of repression against LGBTIQ people, which is escalating rapidly with alarming consequences. As outlined in our annual review of LGBTIQ rights, 2025 was a "foreign agent law" was passed, imposing severe restrictions on any civil society organization receiving foreign funding, including LGBTIQ groups. In 2023, the notorious federal law prohibiting the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors" took effect, banning any communication about the existence of LGBTIQ people or LGBTIQ issues to children. This law has been used to ban activities by LGBTIQ organizations, shut down LGBTIQ websites, and even target authors of posts on social media.

After the timeline of the current *Heated Rivalry* narrative, things have only gotten worse. The documentary film Midnight in Chechnya highlighted the brutal purge targeting gay men in the Chechnya Republic, a republic of the Russian Federation, from 2017–2019, and the activists working to help refugees escape abduction, imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial killing by Chechen authorities, or to seek asylum in countries such as Canada. In recent years, same-sex couples were prohibited from adopting children. In July 2023, the Russian Duma (parliament) passed legislation to prohibit gender-affirming health care and extended the marriage ban from 2013 to bar further bans trans people from adopting or being legal guardians of children. In November 2024, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the international LGBT movement was an "extremist organization," effectively criminalizing LGBTIQ activists in the country, with jail terms of up to 12 years.

As J. Lester Feder described for Foreign Policy, these restrictive laws have taken a disastrous toll on the queer community in Russia. "The executive director of an LGBTQ community center in Moscow said the movement is now backpedaling after years of encouraging people to come out. Most people who knew who their vocals and have left the country, and she and other activists now advise people living in Russia to stay the closet for their own safety."

Putin's approach also impacts LGBTIQ people beyond its borders. The country's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has deeply harmed and impacted everyone in Ukraine, including and especially LGBTIQ people. For queer people, the presence of Russian occupation is particularly alarming, as it would likely bring with it the enforcement of Russia's deeply anti-LGBTIQ policies. In addition, other countries have proposed and in some cases passed similar anti-LGBTIQ laws prohibiting so-called "propaganda," organizing, or assembly, including Kazakhstan, Uganda, Bulgaria, Hungary, Ghana, and the U.S., where a wave of "Don't Say Gay" laws have been introduced in more than a dozen states.

I hope *Heated Rivalry* fans like me who adore Shane and Ilya's story will keep celebrating and amplifying queer joy — and help Outright International and our partners create a world that embraces and uplifts every queer, trans, and intersex person and family. LGBTIQ people exist everywhere, and there are clear and disturbing disparities in the safety, freedom, acceptance, civil rights, and opportunities we can access and experience around the world. No country has achieved full equality and there's a coordinated backlash burning our communities — even in places where significant progress has been made.

Fortunately, there are activists, artists, and allies in every society who are working tirelessly for social, cultural, and legal change (including Russian activists in exile) our most recent Pride Around the World report documented that Pride events were held in at least one countries in 2024. Many LGBTIQ people are also finding ways to access shows like *Heated Rivalry* and produce their own relevant and rich content locally.

While we research issues I and queerly avail season 2, let's also support the queer, trans, and intersex people in our own lives and communities — and join in solidarity with the real Shanes and Ilyas across the globe who want to be safe, celebrated, and loved. And people who are the much-needed, *all-deserve* sunshine.

Katie Nafsinger is the Director of Leadership Giving at Outright International, a 35-year-old organization dedicated to protecting the human rights and improving the lives of LGBTIQ people around the world. Take action here or follow @outrightint.

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