

Arts & Entertainment Film and Television Life

## “Heated Rivalry”: lamplighters, love and legitimacy



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**A**s a lover of the contemporary romance genre and loyal watcher of Bookstagram, it seems nigh impossible to get away from that gay hockey show. Since its announcement in late 2025 and rapid pick up across various international streamers, “Heated Rivalry” has overtaken the romance zeitgeist. “Heated Rivalry” is a Canadian Crave Original series that adapts two out of six of Rachel Reid’s “Game Changer” books. The central conceit of the show is very simple: two rival hockey players—Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie)—form a secret sexual relationship that eventually turns romantic. It is easy to dismiss this show as nothing more than an overly raunchy show full of romantic slop and nothing to say, but that is far from the case.

“Heated Rivalry” is not a show that fights its genres; it embraces them. It is unapologetically romantic, messy and retains an edge through consistent use of sex scenes. This is one of the main reasons that “Heated Rivalry” has garnered so much press; the show truly earns its TV-MA rating. In reality, the show is no more graphic than Netflix’s “Bridgerton,” and certainly not more than any supposedly edgy fantasy show like “Game of Thrones.” The change in circumstance here is really only that the show centers gay men. Our cultural tolerances have shifted more towards conservatism, and while heteronormative shows such as “Bridgerton” (for the most part), can slip through, a boldly queer show cannot. It is a spectacle that is poked fun at and relegated to a market of purely women and gay men. “Heated Rivalry” is not expected to have that mass market appeal, yet it rapidly exploded due to the genuine.

This unexpected popularity can be credited to the fact at all stages of production, great care was put into this silly little gay hockey show. Often, romance stories tend to be simplistic or even formulaic, with any depth coming from a real, human emotional weight. As such, the romances coming out of the restrictive Hollywood Machine have been noticeably inhuman and depressing. “Heated Rivalry” stands out as a show from a smaller streamer, Canada’s publicly funded company Crave. The show’s creator, Jacob Tierney, had originally pitched to a few larger streaming giants, but parted ways when they gave notes against the raunchiness of the show. Actor François Arnaud credits the show’s brilliance to the agency afforded to the creators by Crave, and that truly is because it is a smaller platform. This passion project, funded by Canadian’s public, for Canadians and by Canadians could not be made anywhere else. While the United States is defunding and dissolving the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Canada’s public media has made one of the most popular shows of the season.

However, with less oversight comes less money and backing. “Heated Rivalry,” with a final run time of roughly five hours, was shot in about 37 days with only two cameras. Any lesser filmmaker would have settled for simplistic shots, but not Tierney. They use open sets liberally and cut minimally, which creates a feeling of intimacy, keeping the audience with their beloved characters as much as possible. The finale, “The Cottage,” has a particularly complicated oner that mirrors how lovers Shane and Ilya cautiously navigate the unfamiliar space between them. The cinematographers also made the interesting choice to use anamorphic lenses in production. This gave them a 2.4:1 aspect ratio and signature, dreamy warped lighting. It is an unconventional choice, but one that shows great attention to how cinematography shapes the mood and can further intimacy. Short cuts like using lighting tricks to avoid fitting excessive extras into their shots only manages to add to the intimacy. Thoughtful choices like these make “Heated Rivalry” not feel like a rushed job, especially considering how short the filming was.

If nothing else, the show is beautifully, economically shot and supported by earnest performances. Most of the cast is fairly green, with the most famous of the bunch being François Arnaud, who is mainly a TV actor. The two stars Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams are fresh faces. Storrie’s biggest claim to fame is his role as the true Joker in the disaster that was “Joker: Folie à Deux” (2024). Williams only has a few lesser known TV credits. Storrie is lauded for his accent work and Williams’ for his skill in portraying an emotionally complex, repressed character, with both offering very grounded performances all while putting their bodies on the line. Since airing, they are internet darlings, taking full advantage of the show’s popularity and signing with one of Hollywood’s biggest agencies, Creative Artists Agency. Keeping with the anti-Hollywood Machine nature of this show, the show does not rely on stunt casting, but on talent.

“Heated Rivalry” is by no means the deepest show to exist, but there is more to it than steamy scenes and the occasional reference to hockey. “Heated Rivalry” tackles homophobia in hyper masculine spaces. It is admittedly a little optimistic about the outcomes, but Tierney and Reid give the issue the gravity it deserves. The National Hockey League (NHL) is one of the most homophobic professional sports associations in the United States. There was a pride tape and jersey ban in 2023, and while it has since been reversed, many teams operate under the same thinking. Hockey itself is also a hyper-masculine and deeply aggressive sport, which can be a breeding ground for homophobia. As such, bans have been replaced by opt outs. Ideological opt outs are generally due to religious beliefs or, in a not at all shocking similarity to the show, Russian players’ political concerns.

Since airing, the NHL did attempt to embrace the show, which is really funny, as they are the villain of author Rachel Reid’s six (soon to be seven) book series. There has never been an openly queer, active NHL player that we know of. This is the only American sport like this, even football, one of the more masculine sports, has had an out player.

For fans of “Heated Rivalry” hoping to watch some real hockey, without feeling a sense of betrayal towards the queer community, check out the Edmonton Oilers or—if you must root for an American team—the Seattle Kraken. The PWHL and women’s hockey have the opposite culture. Back in the 2000s, the women’s hockey captains for team USA and Canada fell in love and got married. While Cleveland does not have a PWHL team of their own, I must shout out my home team of the New York Sirens. Enjoy some guilt free hockey and support women’s sports.

There is a reason that “Heated Rivalry” got so popular so quickly, there is a lot to say about the show. The soundtrack was extremely catchy and it is at most 10% about hockey. “Heated Rivalry” does not pass the Bechdel test, but the show’s creators certainly treat their female side characters with more respect than some other writers in the queer sports romance genre. That is all to say, of all the hockey romance books that could have been adapted into film, I’m glad this one was first. It is funny to joke about how it’s just that one show with an impossible plot and a lot of sexual content. However reducing the show does it a great disservice. “Heated Rivalry” is a beautifully shot masterpiece of public media fueled by artistic freedom that tackles real social issues. There is something worth watching there.

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