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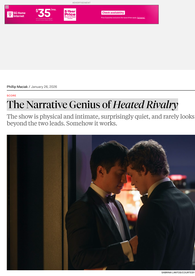
Philip Maciak | January 28, 2026
TV | Culture
The Narrative Genius of *Heated Rivalry*
The show is physical and intimate, surprisingly quiet, and rarely looks beyond the two leads. Somehow it works.


Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in HBO Max's *Heated Rivalry*
SIMON MILLER/COURTESY OF HBO MAX

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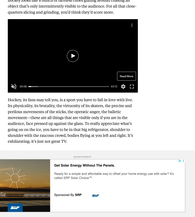
I don't like hockey. I grew up in Pittsburgh in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Pittsburgh Penguins were building their dynasty. It was arguably one of the greatest places and times to be alive as a hockey fan in the United States, and I wanted to be a hockey fan, but I just couldn't get into it. The hockey is fast-paced, the puck is hard to see, and the sport's pace and rhythms don't seem made to measure the small screen. While basketball's speed, muscle, and craft, football's strategic gamesmanship and sudden violence, and baseball's pastoral beauty are all apparent on television broadcasts, hockey looks like a bunch of berkes collide gleefully and violently for a short while and then inexplicably shuffle to the audience. For all that close-quarters slicing and grinding, you'd think they'd score more.



Hockey, fin-fans may tell you, is a sport you have to fall in love with live. Its physicality, its brutality, the virtuosity of its skaters, the precise and improvisational teamwork of its five-man units, the sudden, sweet movements—these are all things that are visible only if you are in the audience, face pressed up against the glass. To really appreciate what's going on on the ice, you have to be in that big enfeptiness, shoulder to shoulder with the raucous crowd, Sodes flying at you left and right. It's exhilarating. It's not great TV.

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This November, though, a little Canadian series called *Heated Rivalry* figured out how to make hockey work on television. It's not necessarily a strange ESPN-ish replicant.

Based on the popular Claire Chemar novels by Rachel Reid, *Heated Rivalry* is maybe the most sensually explicit romance adaptation on TV since Outlander. The six-episode series tells the story of the forbidden queer love affair of two professional hockey players, and it does so by concentrating almost exclusively on the bodies of its two protagonists, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. Of the work of its entire first season, it's set in the real world of professional sports, where there is currently not a single out athlete (is one of the major men's professional leagues of North America, (This is not the case in women's professional sports.) While the show's effort to explore realistic gender roles on the ice is cursory at best, its dialogue can occasionally lapse into crude (the TV equivalent of locker room talk), its plot is thin and tends to drag in the middle, and its choppy progression through time can feel like a 45-car narrative pileup, its depiction of the secret relationship between Shane and Ilya gives it unmistakable life.

The world of *Heated Rivalry* is radically narrow. In its brief, binging six episodes, the audience of a wider world beyond Shane and Ilya are blurry. There are insta-team dynamics, friends and former lovers, complex relationships, international political imbroglios, and actual lives outside of the encounters of hotel rooms in which these lovers meet. But the relationship between Shane and Ilya is so intense that it drains all else of other stuff. Trimming to plot of almost every bit of material that doesn't directly impact Shane and Ilya's affair, *Heated Rivalry* has a kind of ruthless narrative economy.

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One of the most jarring features of the show, which becomes apparent quickly into the first episode, is its skimming-for-the-good-parts storytelling style. In the first 15 minutes of the show's pilot, for instance, there are four separate time jumps—"One Week Later," "Six Months Later," "Three Months Later," "Two Months Later." While the pace slows a bit after that opening hepcatch, the time jump remains the show's signature structuring device. I found myself laughing about it as the series began, but, as episodes unfolded, there started to be something almost hypnotic about the constant cuts punching of everything that happens between Shane and Ilya. The effect is that of a kind of fast-forwarding of a love story between two people, but, from the jump, the show already formally in love with them. Time jumping and globe-trotting to show so every single time they hook up over the course of about a decade, the show's immediate direction is their affair starts to blend out into the viewer's perception and anticipation of it. *Heated Rivalry* almost literally can't wait to get Ilya and Shane into a room together, almost before the characters themselves feel that way.

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With a few notable exceptions, this is basically all the show does. It holds a narrative nucleus around the developing intimacy between Shane and Ilya. Championships are won and lost, peripheral friends and family members enter into frame and scurry out just as quickly, and neither this nor that seem necessary to the kind of voiceover narration or even open conversation with friends that might give an insight into their thoughts and motivations. The pace is fast, the cuts are sudden, the plot goes quickly paving on, with little dialogue save for hockey boasting. The degree to which they meet "keep it quiet" in their lives is reflected in the show's formal palence about saying anything out loud. The story is only, largely, through the performance of Shane and Ilya's physical chemistries, as well as the loaded moments when that chemistry disappears, freezes up, or transforms into something else.

There is a momentary break in this dynamic in the third episode, when we return to an earlier moment at the Sochi Olympics and follow Scott Hunter (Francis Annand), a fellow hockey player who'd mostly only appeared at All-Star games and award ceremonies to this point. In this episode, Hunter's life, which we have seen only in brief, fleeting sensuality, begin secretly dating a hunky Russian hockey player, and his relationship ends up against the wall of Kent's inability to come out. This episode is counterprogramming to the Ilya Shane romance. These men communicate with each other, they are demonstrative, and they have a lot of long sex scenes, but we also get to see the texture of them as a couple. It's everything the show doesn't give us of Shane and Ilya. For a moment, it seems like it might be a kind of relief from the tension, but the narrative eye returns to our titular heated rivalry, and things begin to loosen up with their own communication, it eventually becomes clear that the Scott Hunter episode is merely there to set up later plot developments between Ilya and Shane.

Though, for what it's worth, the moment when that happens, when these two pillbiters converge, is one of the most electrifying sequences I've seen on TV in the past couple of months.

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It's easy to write off this show as prestige bikininess or a guilty pleasure, but there's nothing to be proud of here, about when a show can hold onto its viewers' feelings with this kind of patience and confidence. Its unrelenting focus on the chemistry between its two protagonists turns out to be a generative constraint. Over time, and thanks to incredibly soft and sensitive performances, the relationship between Shane and Hunter—an NHL mensety charismatic legacy player and Gabe Ziglar's Tim Riggins—we learn to follow a story told mostly through the intimate physicality, bodily expressiveness, and wordless intimacy that develops between them. It's a spectacle. Yes it's a complex one. This is, I might guess, what good hockey is like.

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Even in their darkest moments, both *Heated Rivalry* and *The Pitt* shown a vision of humanity that is constrained by unjust systems but ultimately open, ready to love.

I was catching up on *Heated Rivalry* this January, just as I was also beginning to bite through new episodes of the second season of HBO Max's other titular TV drama, *The Pitt*. The two shows are different, of course, in the ways they are similar. For the main cast, another dozen recurring characters, and many dozens more who flow in and out of the E.R. for multi-episode arcs, *The Pitt* trains its focus on this one place and this one time (per season). But it cares about everyone who passes through. *Heated Rivalry* really only cares about two people.

But it's the care that stands out. Both of these shows are shows with intimate relationships at their core, and both are concerned with how they are together. In the terms of Film theorist Linda Williams, they are both series within the realm of "body genres"—dramas built around showing the body in moments of distress and/or elation. And they have a corresponding effect on the bodies of viewers. The *Pitt* with its spectacular scenes of surgery and body horror has an effect on the viewer; *Heated Rivalry* causes quite another. It's hard to watch either and not feel a little bodily response. Even in their darkest moments, both moments, show a vision of humanity that is constrained by unjust systems but ultimately open, ready to love. They're shows about what it means to care and be cared for. And they approach that topic with a radical, formal devotion to their characters. Blood and sex are both effects viewers register with their own bodies, but so too is time. You can feel the heartbeats.

Philip Maciak | X | BS

Philip Maciak is The New Republic's TV critic and the author of Reality Reads Screen Time.

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