The Glorious Warmth of 'Heated Rivalry'

Why the hockey love story was a balsam hit this winter.

Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie, right, star as professional hockey players in new hit 'Heated Rivalry.' Still via HBO.

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There are now types of people in the world: those who spent the final days of 2025 sign in the clinches of *Heated Rivalry*, Montreal director Jacob Tierney's meteoric television show adapted from a series by romance novelist Rachel Reid — and those who didn't.

I count myself among the lucky thousands who did. As a result, my social media algorithms are now tilted towards an aggressive deluge of Heated Rivalry memes and vertical content, and I couldn't be more pleased to be sharing 2026 this way.

Its unique cinematic drama stocking the unlikely relationship between two professional hockey players is a phenomenon, with good reason. In addition to sensuously graphic sex that actually use dopamine receptors in winsor months characterized by strife and seasonal affective disorder, the redemptive, cathartic joy at the heart of the series offers a hopeful proposal. Despite the everyday struggles that saturate our world, there remains the possibility that things can be different and better than what's in front of us.

This is the kind of hope that helps people carry on through difficulty. The outrageously positive response to the show holds a mirror to the grief that has shadowed recent years in current discourse.

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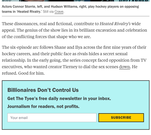
'The unmet and the story are not separate'

The six weeks since *Heated Rivalry*'s Nov. 13 world premiere at Montreal's Image+Nation LGBT2+ film festival has been a rocket ride for both those who worked on the production and viewers who watched the show.

Fans gave its penultimate episode, "I'll Believe in Anything," a rare IGN 10 score on the Internet Movie Database, or IMDB.

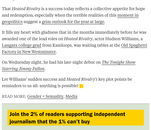
The only other television episode to receive this rating was *Breaking Bad*'s "Ozymandias," the 14th episode of the show's fifth season that aired in September 2013 and is widely considered to be one of the best television episodes of all time. Other top-scoring TV, according to IMDB users, are episodes from *Fire Under* and *Reject Heroes*.



Spoiler warning! Watch a clip from 'I'll Believe in Anything,' the penultimate episode of 'Heated Rivalry' that earned a rare 10/10 score on IMDB. Video via Crave.

Days after its debut at the Image+Nation film festival, the series premiered online on Bell Media's Crave streaming service in Canada and on HBO Max in the U.S. It was the most watched series on Crave over the holidays, and the platform claimed it's one of its biggest original successes to date.

The show's success vaulted its previously unknown co-stars, 26-year-old Connor Storrie (who plays Russian hockey player Ilya Rozanov) and 24-year-old Hudson Williams (who plays his Canadian rival and secret romantic interest Shane Hollander) into a superstardom that contrasts with the more humble facts of the actors' lives. When GQ magazine published a feature profile on them last last month, Storrie was sharing a West Hollywood apartment with his sister, and Williams was living in Vancouver with his mother.



Actors Connor Storrie, left, and Hudson Williams, right, plays hockey players on squeezing 'Heated Rivalry.' Still via Crave.

These dimensions, real and fictional, contribute to *Heated Rivalry*'s wide appeal. The genius of the show lies in its brilliant excavation and celebration of the conflicting forces that shape who we are.

The six episodes we follow Shane and Ilya across the first nine years of their hockey careers, and their public face as rivals hides a secret sexual relationship. In the early going, the series concept faced opposition from TV executives, who wanted creator Tierney to dial the sex scenes down. He refused. Good for him.

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"I'm a gay man and this is a gay show. The sexual and the story are not separate," he told Rolling Stone in December. "It's about two people learning about who they are and what their relationship is through fucking. The only times they're being honest with each other is when they're having sex."

It's a truism that transcends TV. Sex is the hook that surely helped many viewers tune in the show, and compelled my husband and me to stay ahead if we should close the curtains while it was on (we didn't). Co-stars Storrie and Williams gave matching cheeky "big selling" cameos to make the moment, but it's the tenderness at the heart of the story — and particularly the journey through self-hatred towards self acceptance — that has moved so many of us to tears.

'That is what some of us have been missing'

"Maybe what we ache for now is not culture built to serve a political end but a focus on the intimate — someone on top of us, breaking down in tears as he confesses his love. What is turning us on is not the thrill of naked bodies but the shock of being emotionally known. That is what some of us have been missing," historian Jim Perrin wrote in the New York Times Magazine last weekend.

"*Heated Rivalry* resonates because it embodies our lives," Dawna continued. "After the religious right pathologized us during the HIV/AIDS crisis, we reclaimed the sex story by revising bathhouses and sex parties, by unapologetically embracing hookup culture on apps like Grindr, by celebrating eroticism in family life and at work. There are queer politicians and lawyers, Olympians and celebrities. But representation is not the same thing as intimacy. We still need more stories about us, our relationships, our romances, our desires."

In response to its strong audience response and performance with its distributors, *Heated Rivalry* was renewed for a second season two weeks after it premiered.

The maelstrom of related viral moments that have rippled out from the show reflect its reach. The song by the Montreal band rock band Wolf Parade featured in the high-ranking "I'll Believe in Anything" episode (the song title shares the title of the episode) has received a new cold wave of listeners 20 years after its release in 2005. It surged more than 5,000 per cent on Spotify globally, according to the streaming service's platform.

It's interesting to see viewers gravitate to a television show whose hopeful tenderness is so central to its appeal that it feels radical. Most hit television series of this century — *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, GLS — demanded something else from their audiences. They invited viewers to confront and invest in moral grey areas, to identify with damaged, often challenging characters whose underlying motivations might remain elusive throughout a series.

That *Heated Rivalry* is a success today reflects a collective appetite for hope and redemption, especially when the terrible statistics of this monsoon in geopolitics suggest a grim outlook for the year at large.

It lifts my heart with gladness that in the months immediately before he was awarded one of the lead roles on *Heated Rivalry*, actor Hudson Williams, a Leagues college grad from Kamloops, was waiting tables at the Old Spaghetti Factory in New Westminster.

On Wednesday night, he had his late-night debut on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

Let Williams' sudden success and *Heated Rivalry*'s key plot points be reminders to us all: anything is possible!

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'Father Mother Sister Brother' Hits Canadian Theatres in January

Winner of the Golden Lion Best Film prize at the 2025 Venice Film Festival, *Father Mother Sister Brother* is the eagerly awaited new film from Jim Jarmusch. Funny, tender and delicately observed, this is an intimate exploration of the universal intricacies of family dynamics.

Starring Tom Waits, Adam Driver, Mayim Bialik, Charlotte Rampling, Cate Blanchett, Vicky Krieps, Indya Moore and Luka Sabbat, *Father Mother Sister Brother* showcases Jarmusch at his best: minimalist, with an unerring eye for the essence of human experience.

See *Father Mother Sister Brother* in theatres across Canada starting Jan. 9, 2026.

Tom Waits, Cate Blanchett and Vicky Krieps star in *Father Mother Sister Brother*. Image © Vague Better LLC24, Forest La Sauve.

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