HEATED RIVALRY: EVIDENCE THAT ARTISTIC INTEGRITY IS NEEDED IN THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WORLD

(and a look at toxic fan culture in the age of social media and parasocial entitlement)

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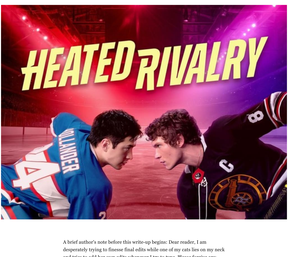

A brief author's note before this write-up begins: Dear reader, I am desperately trying to finesse final edits while one of my cats lies on my neck and tries to add her own edits whenever I try to type. Please forgive any small typos or at least blame the cat, I swear she's just a menace to society.

Heated Rivalry has taken the world by storm since its debut. With an already solid following from the book community and a showrunner in Jacob Tierney who clearly feels a strong sense of responsibility to the art he creates as well as the source material, it seems as though this project was a shoo-in from day dot.

As an ADHD creative with experience in the music industry, writing/publishing, and various arts, including childhood stage performances and independent creative projects, I was surprised by how viscerally this adaptation impacted me. I don't think I realised, alongside millions, probably billions of others, just how desperately needed this genuine piece of art with such a deep, meaningful and integral backbone.

In the days of rampant consumerism, of rapid output and AI to garner as much money back as possible while cutting corners, Heated Rivalry is a stark contrast and a breath of fresh air. It has been a long time since I've watched something new and thought, "wow, this is something only humans could make." And I mean that in the best possible way. Every moment of this show has meaning from the blocking, the lighting, the clothing, the little easter eggs to be found on-to-boats, to the little looks, glances and smirks throughout. This production is a clear labour of love from every single person who's involved in it.

Every single moment of this show shines with love and passion. It's a piece of media which adapts the very soul of an already beloved source material and transfers it to the screen with an apparent ease that can only come from someone pouring their heart and soul into a project. Visually, it's absolutely gorgeous. Audibly, it tickles your brain in just the right way, and the acting, directing, writing and intimacy make you feel as though you're taking a peek into something so private you're not sure if you should look away or grab the popcorn.

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie are such pure artists who clearly love what they do, who believe in the art they create, whether individually or together, who aren't afraid to show the affection they have for each other in their friendship, but also aren't afraid to stand on their own and fight for freedom in their careers, too. They both bring such life to their characters and their craft, and while they do have such wonderful chemistry when they're together, they also have that same charm and charisma when they're on their own and with anyone else they're sharing a screen with, which is such a rare gift these days.

I love both actors' performances throughout. As someone with intense anxiety, a history of mental health struggles and neurodivergent to boot, as well as the tendency to internalise, these characters (and their actors in subsequent interviews) reflected things I couldn't articulate about myself and showed me that it's okay not to have all the answers to life. Their performances reminded me that it's okay to be both bold and vulnerable at the same time, that it's natural to be afraid of the unknown and that it's okay to love deeply and to ask for love in return. It's okay to want to be someone's first and only choice, even if it's hard to make it happen, and it's okay to be unapologetically yourself even when your foibles make you feel lesser than.

Hudson's performance was a sight to behold. This man appeared on my screen and embodied his character so perfectly that I would have a hard time ever pictuering anyone else as Shane, but could still see Hudson playing a million other characters with a million different backgrounds in the future. He showed insight beyond neurotypical norms. Their personality and the way he internalises. He portrayed inner monologues from the book solely with the looks on his face and his body language, without a single word. We know where Shane's head was at in the quietest of moments, we see joy shine through anxiety, we saw love bloom through his eyes and mouth without him even saying a word. Hudson's performance as Shane lets the viewer know that their perceived imperfections are the things that make others love them most. I was also incredibly impressed while watching interviews that Hudson's thought into his characters goes far deeper than the script. The way he discusses Shane potentially having an oral fixation, having hoodie strings in his mouth etc not only made a lot of sense, but also showed how Hudson has shaped the visual version of Shane in a way not many others could. On top of that, Hudson's unapologetic ADHD chaos gallin energy in interviews shows us all that same thing. He is so unbelievably charming in every interview he's in; he brings both the interviewer and the viewer into his world without hesitation and is just so endearing. It makes other ADHDers see themselves differently, it makes us realise that maybe those moments when we feel too much or too loud or too brash could really be seen as endearing to some onlookers and make others feel so though maybe they can find their place in the world and belong somewhere too.

Connor's performance as Ilya was absolutely stunning. This man somehow fully embodies Ilya as a character to the point where, as the viewer, the dichotomy between Ilya and Connor leaves you unsure if it really is the same person. This man puts so much passion and feeling into this role, whilst appearing effortlessly blasé as Ilya does in the first couple of episodes. It's an absolute pleasure and a dream to watch his performance, to watch the way he emotes as Ilya, to watch the way he shows Ilya softening over the course of episodes. There are even differences in the way Ilya smiles vs the way Connor does. It's clear that he's passionate about not only this role but this craft in general. It's clear that he's going places and that he will be a huge name in this industry for years to come. Connor embodies artistry in every movement. His versatility is unmatched in this new generation of actors and I can genuinely see him creating an almost non-niche for himself where no part is ever off-limits. This man could play a tree convincingly, and any production would be begging to have him do it. His demeanour in interviews is charming and much-needed; he seems like he would be a lot of fun to be friends with irl, but also clearly thinks so deeply, much like his counterpart in this show. It's clear that he thinks about his character and why his character would do certain things in certain ways. He knows Ilya and he understands Ilya. I've also noticed a few things in interviews that Connor does that have clearly shone through to Ilya, and I have a hard time ever imagining someone else trying to emulate those intricacies and doing it successfully.

The shared performance was magical. The way these men brought these characters to life and showed a raw, delicately emotional arc, whilst also portraying the most viscerally, almost painfully powerful and satisfying physical performance I have seen on TV in a long, long time. Their chemistry gives you that swoop in the pit of your stomach and leaves you feeling bereft of that same kind of connection with another human being. They define yearning, they actualise the queer experience, all with movement and expressions. They are not only an unstoppable duo, but unstoppable individuals as well. Everything about the way they play these parts, these characters, displays like a well-choreographed dance. They understand each other, their acting styles, the script and the source material so well that they always appear as if they're connected by invisible strings, each minute movement echoed in an almost invisible way, but somehow giving the viewer the most powerful reaction. Their performance makes me yearn for more media like this and echoes some of the most pivotal pieces from years gone by that shaped the silver screen.

Their chemistry off-screen also shows a friendship that clearly transcends stereotypes in male friendships, and that in itself is cleansing for the world we currently live in. I have been blown away time and again by how gracefully these two individuals have handled the media and fan culture since the show blew up. It's such a rare experience to see two men showing up for each other in this way and to also be so casually tactile within their friendship. It's so refreshing to witness as a viewer. I also have so much love and respect for the way they have already drawn boundaries with fans and made it clear that while they may be a duo in this show and while they may be close irl, they also have the right to do things on their own, to have individual projects and keep their friendship private. They have made it clear to both fans and the media that their lives are still their own, the public will see what they want the public to see, and they will handle this fame on their own terms, which is so admirable.

These two actors made me feel like I would love to just sit down with them and talk about their favourite movies, TV, music, art and fashion over a good coffee and a cigarette. They made me want to experience the world through their eyes because of just how interesting they appear to be. They made me want to come out of creative hibernation and actually start participating in my creations again, which is genuinely a feat in itself because I have been stalling writing for years due to PTSD-related writer's block.

Before I move on, I also want to shout out the wonderful performances by François Arnaud and Robbie G.K. as Scott and Kip. Their performances, displaying a wholly different kind of relationship to Shane and Ilya's, where the power of what they felt for each other was the surest of things in their story, paid beautiful homage to their beat. I was also particularly moved by the way François portrayed Scott's decision to come out so publicly alongside the love of his life on the ice in the best moment of his life. It was reminiscent to me of that one line in One Tree Hill, which always stuck with me: "It's you. The one I want standing next to me when all my dreams come true. It's you." Which, of course, then also so neatly ties into Ilya's Russian monologue, too.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to mention the entirety of the rest of the cast, too. Every actor was the perfect match for their character. Sophie Nélisse as Rose was a genuine delight after being a fan for some time, especially being reminded of her versatility as an actor. Overall, though, the entirety of the cast told this story so perfectly that it's hard not to marvel at all of their performances, and it's clear why this show has such a hardcore following and fanbase all over the world right now.

Fan culture, whilst respectful in some corners of the internet, has shown once again how some consumers can feel entitled to knowledge about their favourite celebrities and create a negative atmosphere around great media. While I appreciate that people want to show their support and love for the art and the artists, trying to push any public figure to reveal personal details about their lives, friendships, relationships, sexualities or anything not directly related to their work is not only inappropriate but also downright invasive. As an audience, we are not entitled to these actors' private details. We are not entitled to information on who they hang out with, who they're dating or not dating, where they live, what they have for breakfast, how they smoke their cigarettes or anything that is not directly related to the work they are doing at any given time. They, however, are entitled to private lives, to peaceful moments, to tranquillity and safe spaces. As someone who has watched fandoms singlehandedly destroy musicians' and actors' relationships alike, and as someone who has witnessed and had to deal with fans overstepping and creating genuine fear for artists in the music industry, I am begging anyone and everyone who identifies as a fan of this show and these books to please, please think about the people behind the characters and remember that they are human beings with human rights. If you wouldn't want your clients, consumers or people who know you from your work (or school, for those younger fans) poking around in your private life, why would you do that to someone else, regardless of their level of celebrity?

I've written about fan culture before from the point of view of the music industry, but I return to this topic now after seeing countless attempts by fans to harass and harangue these actors who gave us this beautiful expression of art in such a dark time in the world. I believe it's important to now take a look at toxic fan culture from another perspective. While most of the fan interactions I've seen have been fairly polite and clearly from people who can separate the actor from the media in which they are acting, there is currently an overwhelming increase in comments and posts from fans who desperately do not wish to see these actors with anyone but each other ever. I don't think I should really need to explain why this is already a toxic way to behave, but clearly there are people in the world who just don't quite understand yet that what we see on screen is fiction, and these actors are fully entitled once again to their own lives and privacy, and no-one, I mean absolutely no-one in this cast or any other should be harassed or vilified for things they do in their private lives. Please, for the love of whichever deity or universal being you believe in, leave these actors' private lives alone. They're not out here reading your diary, so you could probably stand not to try to read theirs.

Overall, this show was a masterpiece from start to finish. I don't remember the last time I re-watched a show this many times consecutively or felt this strongly about wanting absolutely everyone in my circle to watch it just so I can force over it some more. I don't remember the last time I felt so strongly about an actor's performance and artistic integrity that I wanted to go back and watch their short films and previous work, as well as keep an eye out for what might come next for them. May the toxicity of mas never change the pure artistry of these souls, because if it does, the world will mourn that loss in all the art from these actors it will miss out on.

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About the Creator

Ale Day
Fruity little misfit with a passion for music, travelling, 90s/TV, writing and art. Fully qualified music producer, music photographer, travel photographer, ex-music manager and full-time struggling creative. Work hard and achieve.

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