

 Scarlett Smithen · 14 hours ago

A "Heated" Success - Reflections on the Phenomenon that is Heated Rivalry

My first exposure to Jacob Tierney's *Heated Rivalry* came back in early December with a simple TikTok edit set to the score of Luca Guadagnino's *Challengers* (2024). The edit showed clips from both that film and this new show I had never heard of before: *Heated Rivalry*. I saw clips of two men who played hockey who appeared to have a romantic relationship. I loved *Challengers* and the competitively-driven romantic element of it, so I was elated as to what this new show could entail.

Heated Rivalry immediately intrigued me. I have watched it too many times to count at this point. I have always been a strong proponent of queer media. From sobbing the first time I watched *Brokeback Mountain*, to blasting "The Story" by Conan Gray, to reading *Red White and Royal Blue* and kicking my feet, to writing a whole play based on the 15-minute scene about Cal's backstory in *Euphoria*, queer media consumes me. But this time is different—*everyone* is hooked, not just me. We have A-list celebrities giving the show praise, NHL streaming on the rise, and even sigma-male podcasters reflecting on the show's amazing story. Why is *this* show so special out of all the queer media that's been released?

Heated Rivalry explores the longstanding relationship between hockey rivals Shane Hollander and Ilya Rosanov. Hollander is played by rising star Hudson Williams, who has garnered praise for his representation of the Asian-American and neurodivergent communities. The character of Rosanov, who is played by Connor Storrie, represents the difficulty of coming from a place that does not accept one's identity. Hollander is Canadian, whereas Rosanov is Russian; in the fictional Major League Hockey (MLH), Hollander plays for the Montreal Metros and Rosanov plays for the Boston Raiders. (The team dynamics reflect the actual rivalry between the Montreal Canadiens and Boston Bruins.) Hollander and Rosanov first met the summer before their rookie season and went on to play against each other on their respective teams for nearly a decade.

But what makes this show so unique and more successful than other queer media? So much of popular queer media, or even queer representation in otherwise cis/het media, has a heartbreaking ending. The institutionalized homophobia that has persisted by Hollywood is reflected among these popular queer characters and stories too. We have seen how Heath Ledger had to advocate for *Brokeback Mountain* when it was shamed by the media back in 2005—an entire decade before gay marriage became legalized. Despite its needed representation during the time, the film's melancholic ending does not leave an outlet of hope for the queer community. Fans and critics have thus appreciated this uplifting queer narrative that provides a rare emotional escape from the genre's usual sorrow. Intimacy comes both physically and emotionally, and the show doesn't try to hide that. *Heated Rivalry* provides a sense of comfort that has connected fans across identities.

If I had to give my one critique on the show, it would probably be how it contributes to misogyny in popular media. Representation matters in this industry. If the show was about two women, would it still have the same popularity? There are few sapphic films and TV shows that have reached this same level of success. Could this be the case due to the history of fetishizing these relationships? Or is it because male stories remove the quiet threat of sexual violence against women that is so prevalent in heterosexual relationships? On the first point, lesbian media is often not taken seriously due to fetishization by male audiences. It reminds me of how we see gay men often be friends with straight women, but hardly see straight men be friends with gay women. It is an unfortunate, but veracious truth. For as much as I love and appreciate this show for increasing representation for the gay community, I know that proper representation for other groups of the LGBTQ+ community still has a long way to go.

Regarding the second point, this show and other homosexual male relationship pieces have a capacity to draw women in. Recently, I saw a TikTok by creator @musicbydearest saying that the reason why people, especially women, love the show is because it is rare to see a romance story with no gender power dynamic. When viewers watch a romance show, it is natural to approach it with the understanding of how power imbalances stand in that moment, so when there are not those imbalances, women can feel safer and more empowered. It also can help women to not feel the need to relate to the characters and thus compare themselves to fictional idealism. Popular media often depicts unrealistic beauty standards that can be harmful to women. Seeing two men on the screen therefore means no self-comparison. It's really a fascinating phenomenon, but it certainly helps explain why the show is so universally loved.

The stars of the show, Williams and Storrie, have risen to fame rapidly in just over a month, appearing everywhere from press interviews to *The Tonight Show* to the Golden Globes. Several celebrities have praised the show—from actors like Pedro Pascal, to even reporters like Andy Cohen and Anderson Cooper, to it being featured in an *SNL* skit. On January 14th, hockey player Jesse Kortuem came out as gay and credited the show's success to helping him open up a part of himself to the world. This is why representation matters. Professional sports have a history of contributing to the typical rhetoric of masculinity and rarely include openly queer players. A show like *Heated Rivalry* allows for those closeted individuals to feel a level of support that they likely would have never known before.

This show is worth all the hype it's been getting. Episode 5 has achieved an astounding 10/10 review score on IMDb. *Breaking Bad*'s "Ozymandias" is the only other episode in television history that has achieved this score. Suffice it to say, *Heated Rivalry* is worth the watch. The show combines a raunchy, intense, angst-driven relationship with an eventual soft, warm-hearted, and sincere emotional tale. This love story is truly beautiful. I hope that the show's success will further increase queer media representation because everyone deserves a place to feel seen on the big screen.

Rating: INDY

Scarlett Smithen is a freshman from the School of Foreign Service hoping to study Business & Global Affairs with a minor in Chinese. She does not care for hockey or really any sports unless she finds the players attractive.

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