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Heated Rivalry's 'crazy' success surprises star Sophie Nélisse

"I can't think of any other show that dives in so deeply to gay representation on screen and honours queer relationships," says the Montreal actress.

By Brendan Kelly • Montreal Gazette

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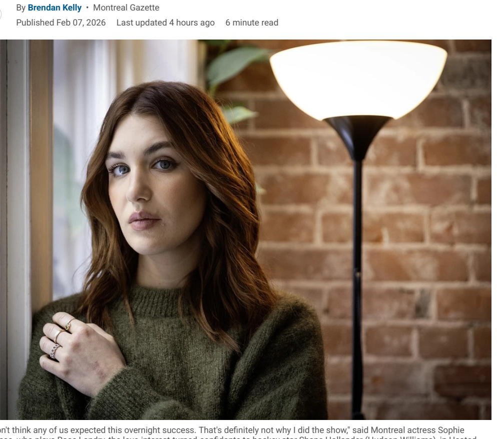

"I don't think any of us expected this overnight success. That's definitely not why I did the show," said Montreal actress Sophie Nélisse, who plays Rose Landry, the love-interest-turned-confidante to hockey star Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), in Heated Rivalry. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

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In a conversation Monday afternoon, Sophie Nélisse was still on a high from meeting Prime Minister Mark Carney a few days earlier and hearing the PM shower effusive praise on Heated Rivalry.

The steamy gay hockey romance series, the hottest TV show on the planet, has turned the show's two leads — Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie — into global stars. They play, respectively, hockey stars Shane Hollander, from the Montreal Metros, and Ilya Rozanov, captain of the arch-rival Boston Raiders. They are having a torrid affair that they are trying to keep secret.

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Nélisse hasn't quite been at the epicentre of the same sort of whirlwind as Williams and Storrie. She has a smaller but still central role in the Canadian series, playing Rose Landry, a famous Hollywood actress who briefly dates Shane and then becomes his close friend and confidante once he acknowledges that he is gay.

"I don't think any of us expected this overnight success. That's definitely not why I did the show," said Nélisse during an interview in the Old Montreal offices of the Montreal film company Entract Films.

Entract was set to launch on Friday the Canadian horror film Whistle, which stars Nélisse.

"The amount of love we've been receiving, I've welcomed it with open arms," said Nélisse. "But yeah meeting the prime minister was a bit surreal. I was texting all my friends about it so casually. They're like, 'Where are you in the world right now?' and I'm like, 'Oh I just needed to pop into Ottawa for a second to meet the prime minister.' And they were like, 'What???'

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"The phenomenon that it's been is just crazy," she said. "Mr. Carney, he was so relaxed. He was just very sweet and a lovely guy. And we're obviously just very honoured and proud to have his support."

Prime Minister Mark Carney, centre, on the red carpet at a conference for Canadian film and TV producers on January 20, 2026. From left: his wife, Diana Fox Carney, Heated Rivalry's co-creator Brendan Brady, Hudson Williams (Shane Hollander in the series), co-creator Jacob Tierney and Sophie Nélisse (Rose Landry). PHOTO BY PATRICK DOYLE /THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Williams and Nélisse laughed it up with Carney on the red carpet of an event at Prime Time, a conference for Canadian film and TV producers. In his remarks at the conference, Carney praised Heated Rivalry and said that the show's creator, former Montrealer Jacob Tierney, had decided to make it in Canada after Hollywood tried to tone it down.

Heated Rivalry was financed by Bell Media's streaming service Crave — and Crave is receiving much praise for taking a chance with the edgy series.

Carney's take was that Heated Rivalry is great because it's so Canadian, so representative of "a nation that celebrates what makes us different." New York Times journalist Matina Stevis-Gridneff had a good piece a few days back suggesting maybe the show's secret sauce is that it's oh-so-Canadian.

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And it is. It's about hockey, with some of the central scenes taking place at a high-end cottage in the country. Some of the action is set in Montreal, though it was filmed in Hamilton and Guelph. Much of the music on the soundtrack is Canadian, with lots of Quebec artists featured. And it is based on a series of gay hockey romance novels penned by Halifax author Rachel Reid. When I interviewed Tierney in late November, just before the launch of the show, he was proud to say that both he and Reid were big Montreal Canadiens fans.

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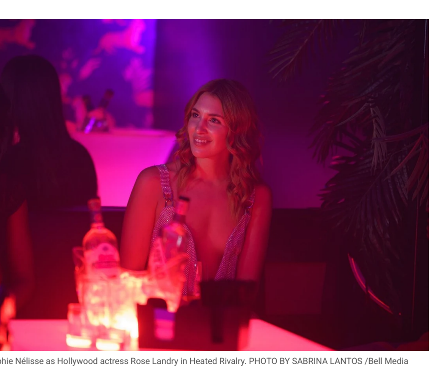
Tierney said at the time that both he and Reid love the idea that the heated rivalry is between the Montreal and Boston teams, just like the real-life rivalry between the Habs and the Bruins.

"It's perfect, it feels very real," said Tierney. "That's because Rachel Reid, the author of the book, she's from Halifax and she's a huge Habs fan. So everyone comes by it honestly."



Sophie Nélisse as Hollywood actress Rose Landry in Heated Rivalry. PHOTO BY SABRINA LANTOS /Bell Media

Nélisse thinks the show struck a chord because it's so different from almost everything else on TV.

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"I think it's really refreshing to see," said Nélisse. "There's so much darkness in the world right now and the stakes seem so high. So I think people wanted some hope and levity and something that made them feel good. I think that's what this show offers. There's something so pure and honest and real about it. And it gives a voice to a community that hasn't really been seen before.

"I can't think of any other show that dives in so deeply to gay representation on screen and honours queer relationships — where it's celebrated so much," she said. "We really needed to see that and people from that community finally got what they deserved."

Nélisse shot to fame ici with her first-ever role, at the age of 11, playing a school kid in the Oscar-nominated film Monsieur Lazhar. She won a Genie Award and Jutra as best supporting actress for that film. Two years later, she starred opposite Geoffrey Rush and Emily Watson in the Second World War drama The Book Thief. Prior to Heated Rivalry, Nélisse was best-known in the U.S. for her lead role in the Showtime series Yellowjackets.

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Sophie Nélisse and Hudson Williams in a scene from Heated Rivalry: "The amount of love we've been receiving, I've welcomed it with open arms," Nélisse said. PHOTO BY SABRINA LANTOS /Bell Media

She is part of a new wave of French-Canadian actors making waves outside Canada. That wave also includes her Heated Rivalry co-star François Arnaud, who plays a hockey star with the New York Admirals, and Théodore Pellerin, who has created major buzz in Europe for playing the title role in the French film Nino and also starred in the Showtime series On Becoming a God in Central Florida.

Nélisse said Hollywood is looking for fresh faces.

"I think it's so refreshing to see actors who are not cookie-cutter American stereotypes and I think there's something maybe honest about us, there's something less desperate and less about Hollywood and the industry," said Nélisse. "We just come as we are. But we have what it takes to compete with these actors who've been working in Hollywood forever."

There is speculation that Rose, the character Nélisse plays in Heated Rivalry, is based on Hollywood actress Jennifer Lawrence. In the series, Rose is in Montreal shooting an American film called X-Squad, clearly a nod to the X-Men movies, and Lawrence was indeed in Montreal twice shooting different X-Men films.

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Tierney is currently at work writing the second season of Heated Rivalry and it is expected that Rose will return, with Nélisse recently hinting that she believes her character will have a bigger role in the upcoming season.

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There aren't many details yet but there is much speculation that Rose will become one of Shane's best pals. Nélisse has even suggested, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that she'd like to see a lesbian spinoff with Rose having an affair with Svetlana Sergeevna Vetrova (played by Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova), Ilya's good friend and sometimes lover.

A scene from Heated Rivalry.

Sophie Nélisse as Rose Landry, Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander, centre, and Devanté Senior as Miles in Heated Rivalry. PHOTO BY SABRINA LANTOS /Bell Media

Nélisse has a real soft spot for Rose.

"I love the character," she said. "People root for Rose and she's a great ally of the (LGBTQ) community. So I was excited to play her but never with any expectation of the success the show has had. But it was one of the best sets I've ever been on in terms of the people, the crews, the fun we had. Everyone gave it their all."

And Tierney's writing is so powerful, I say to her.

"It's so spot on," said Nélisse. "He so perfectly balances the idea of the thrill and excitement of the beginning of a relationship and also its toxicity. But then how you slowly fall in love with someone, the dynamic shift, the push and pull. The complexities of romance are so well depicted. He doesn't shy away from silences and moments of stillness. Yet adds so much fun and energy."

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