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NIAGARA VOICES

Opinion | 'Heated Rivalry' the sunlight Canada needs in today's darkness

The Crave program's success sends a clear message to creatives to trust your instincts and take risks, writes Melinda Cheevers.

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Prime Minister Mark Carney poses for a photo on the red carpet with, from left, Brendan Brady, co-creator of the TV series "Heated Rivalry," Hudson Williams, series star, and co-creator Jacob Tierney at the Prime Time screen and media industry conference gala in Ottawa last month.

Patrick Doyle/CP file photo

By Melinda Cheevers, contributing columnist

At a time when Canada is fighting to assert itself on the world stage, there's something satisfying about the fact our hottest export at the moment is a TV show that has taken the world by storm.

And not just any show, a queer hockey romance that has Canadiana embedded in its DNA.

Based on the book series "Game Changers," written by Nova Scotian Rachel Reid, the six-part Crave original series "Heated Rivalry" debuted Nov. 28 and follows the intense rivalry and nearly decade-long secret romance between two professional hockey players at the top of their games, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.



Created by Montreal-born writer, director and producer Jacob Tierney, known to audiences for his work on "Letterkenny" and its spinoff "Shoresy," the show features Canadian talent in front of and behind the camera. And elements of Canadian culture are baked throughout.

Its runaway success has caught the entertainment industry, and audiences worldwide, by surprise. HBO, which streams the show in the U.S., reports it is averaging nine million viewers per episode. Deadline reported that "Heated Rivalry" is Crave's biggest original debut ever.

People aren't just watching it, they're rewatching it over and over. Online, fans refer to rewatches as "reheats."

The show's meteoric rise offers valuable lessons not just for television creators, but for anyone trying to do meaningful work in an increasingly risk-averse creative landscape.

Trust your instincts and, when possible, take risks.

In an era dominated by reboots, remakes and "safe" intellectual property, the show stands as proof that audiences are hungry for authentic, original storytelling done with genuine care.

It takes a "show them, don't tell them" approach that is rare these days. With global uncertainty and the weight of difficult news bearing down on us daily, we turn to art not as an escape, but as sustenance. We need stories that remind us why human connection matters, that offer hope without denying complexity, that let us feel deeply in a world that often demands we numb ourselves to keep going.



"Heated Rivalry" has become that source of light for countless viewers. In a moment when the world feels particularly heavy, this show has been the sunshine many people desperately needed and deserve.

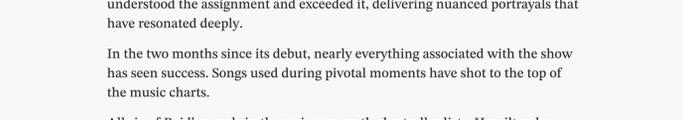
Speaking to CBC's Tom Power, Tierney said when he was growing up, stories about queer people, and gay men in particular, rarely had a happy ending. That's what drew him to "Heated Rivalry" — there's a happy ending.

"It's about two people figuring out they're allowed to be in love. And that felt so amazing."

Viewers seem to agree. The dedication to craft is evident in every frame. Scene breakdowns and episode analysis have flooded TikTok and Instagram, with viewers offering insight into everything from the way the show was filmed and the script's faithfulness to Reid's source material to the wardrobe choices and set design, from the soundtrack that delivers pivotal needle-drop moments to elevate the storytelling to casting that brought together performers who understood the assignment and exceeded it, delivering nuanced portrayals that have resonated deeply.

In the two months since its debut, nearly everything associated with the show has seen success. Songs used during pivotal moments have shot to the top of the music charts.

All six of Reid's novels in the series are on the bestseller lists. Hamilton has seen an increase in visitors checking out filming locations. The NHL is even enjoying a show-related boost, with increased ticket searches.



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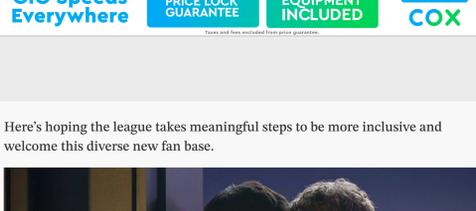
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Here's hoping the league takes meaningful steps to be more inclusive and welcome this diverse new fan base.



Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie in "Heated Rivalry."

Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max/TNS

The show's two lead stars, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, have been launched into the entertainment stratosphere. Both were working as waiters when they were cast, and now they've appeared on late-night talk shows, presented at the Golden Globes, went to fashion weeks in Milan and Paris and served as Olympic torchbearers.

Williams gifted Prime Minister Mark Carney the viral fleece jacket last week, and Storrie will be hosting "Saturday Night Live" later this month.

It's a good reminder to be ready for your big shot, if and when it comes. And it's an even better reminder of what we've always known but maybe sometimes forget: Canada is brimming with talent.

Our stories are worth telling. And they should be told by us, in a way that reflects us.

When you give talented people freedom to create — free from the influence of studio notes and creative decisions made by committee in a boardroom — great things can happen.

Melinda Cheevers is a member of the Niagara Voices community editorial board. A former reporter and managing editor with MetroLand, she is now a communications and public relations specialist at University of Niagara Falls Canada.

Opinion articles are based on the author's interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. [More details](#)

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