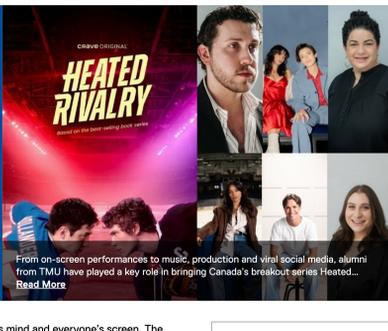


Meet the TMU grads behind Heated Rivalry

From on-screen roles to viral social content, TMU grads helped shape breakout series

By: Danae Rudder
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From on-screen performances to music, production and viral social media, alumni from TMU have played a key role in bringing Canada's breakout series *Heated...* [Read More](#)

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Heated Rivalry — the series that's been on everyone's mind and everyone's screen. The Canadian series has sparked real conversations about LGBTQ+ representation in sports, masculinity in hockey culture and equity gaps within the game.

Based on the Game Changers book series by Canadian author Rachel Reid, the six-part series follows the secret decade-long relationship between two top professional hockey rivals, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

"It's a global success," says Joe Recupero, a sport media professor at TMU. "It comes down to its high production values, relatable storylines and characters that stick with you."

"It resonates because people see themselves in the characters," says Recupero. "Not just the queer community, I think most people can see themselves in a lot of these characters and that touches people."

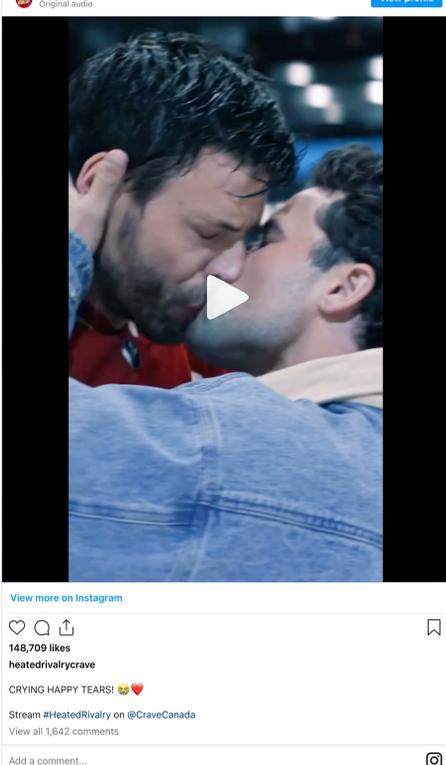
A cultural shift

For Recupero, one of the most pivotal moments is when Scott Hunter invites his boyfriend to come onto the ice after winning the Stanley Cup, making their secret relationship public for the first time.

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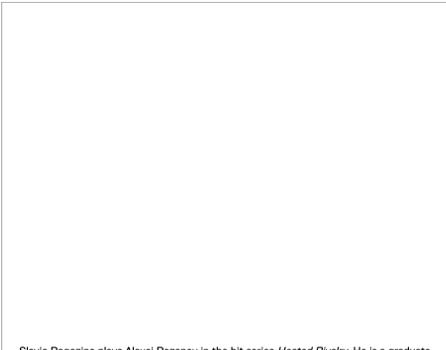
"Of all the big sports, hockey has long been one of the most masculine and rigid cultures. When I watched that, it made me think about all the times over the years that I've seen Stanley Cups or World Series celebrations," Recupero says.

"You see families come out onto the ice, and I never once gave a thought to any players who might still be standing there alone," he continued.

The scene became a lightbulb moment in the series for Ilya, prompting the iconic line, "I'm coming to the cottage," marking a turning point in their relationship.

Behind *Heated Rivalry's* global success are several TMU alumni — contributing in front of the camera and off, from acting and production to music and a viral social media strategy.

Getting into character



Slavic Rogozine plays Alexei Rozanov in the hit series *Heated Rivalry*. He is a graduate of TMU's performance production program. (Photo credit: Michael J. Ng)

Slavic Rogozine made his acting debut at a young age while on set with his mother, a theatre actress in Russia.

He applied to TMU for Acting and was placed in Performance Production. "The skills I learned there were so valuable. I know so much about set design, technical work, directing and producing — I'm able to incorporate them into a lot of the jobs I do now," says Rogozine.

He plays Alexei Rozanov, who has a complicated relationship with his brother Ilya in the series.

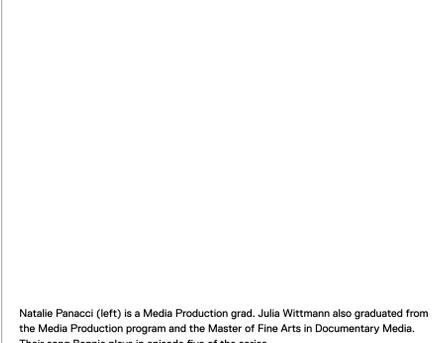
Rogozine describes his character as an antagonist and he loved getting to perform in Russian, his native language.

To get into character, he created a backstory, exploring why Alexei might be the way he is.

"I think the big thing to take away is to really embrace who you are and not be afraid. The message of the show is so powerful, because at the end of the day, love trumps all," says Rogozine.

"You shouldn't have to feel ashamed for loving who you love. I hope people are left feeling more accepting and to be more open minded," he said.

Driving emotions with music



Natalie Panacci (left) is a Media Production grad. Julia Wittmann also graduated from the Media Production program and the Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Media. Their song *Bonnie* plays in episode five of the series.

"Music drives the show," says Recupero.

One standout track is "Bonnie" by Absolute Treat, a band formed by TMU alumni Julia Wittmann and Natalie Panacci.

The two met during the very first week of school as Media Production students. The band began as a class assignment in TMU's Business of Music course.

"Bonnie" found its way into *Heated Rivalry* after their label's publishing partner pitched it to the show's music supervisor.

"To be one droplet of water in this tidal wave of *Heated Rivalry* is an honour," says Wittmann. "We've been a hardworking indie band for nearly ten years and this is the biggest thing that has happened to us."

Since the show's official Spotify playlist debuted, "Bonnie" has surged from 20,000 to more than 1 million streams.

In the series, it plays in episode five in Rose Landry's dressing room while she talks on the phone with Shane Hollander.

"When I think about the scene that has our song, I understand why the music supervisor might have chosen it."

"Bonnie" is a simple, good-hearted love song to women. That love can be platonic or romantic - the lyrics are open-ended. For Rose and Shane, I think it's about platonic support and companionship," says Wittmann.

Bringing magic to the set



Lori Fischburg is a Film Production graduate and the production manager for *Heated Rivalry*.

When executive producer Brendan Brady called Lori Fischburg about joining *Heated Rivalry*, she read the script over the weekend and was in the office by Monday.

"I think it was a success because it came at a time when everyone needed a win. The dialogue shows so much love and warmth," says Fischburg.

Fischburg felt the magic while on set and knew they were creating something special.

"The chemistry read was amazing, you could see it jump off the screen at you. These guys have so much magic together," she says. "That's hard to replicate. You don't see that in a lot of things."

Beyond the amazing acting, the series also stands out visually.

Recupero praises its aesthetic, "from someone who's worked in media and understands Hollywood, I noticed the high quality of the creativity. Something made it look so glossy and media."

Fischburg's passion for film began with a love of photography.

"I really don't know what I would have done if I didn't get into film school. I love creating the magic of movies and making stories come to life," she says.

Her advice for TMU students?

"Everyone has a path. It's not a straight line. Careers are built over time, through relationships, persistence and learning from mistakes. Surround yourself with people who love storytelling and care deeply about their work."

Creating a viral social media presence



Tristan McGuirk (left) graduated from TMU's professional communication program. Rebecca Moshé-Steinberg is a RTA grad and Madeline Fiore (right) is a journalism grad. All three played a role in *Heated Rivalry's* viral social media strategy.

TMU alumni Tristan McGuirk, Madeline Fiore and Rebecca Moshé-Steinberg were part of the team that built the social media strategy for *Heated Rivalry*. McGuirk and Fiore captured behind-the-scenes content on set.

Moshé-Steinberg managed community engagement once episodes aired and created content including graphics, fan art and TikToks with talent.

After reading the book, all three were excited to work on the series. "We knew it was a really special show, different from anything currently on television," says Moshé-Steinberg.

"It was special to be part of something like this and see it become a worldwide phenomenon," she said.

Understanding the fanbase was key to their strategy.

"It added a whole new level to the *Heated Rivalry* experience," says Moshé-Steinberg.

Within three months, the show's TikTok surpassed 1 million followers — the first Bell/Crave original to reach that milestone with more than 240 posts hitting at least a million views.

The impact was personal. McGuirk, who grew up playing hockey, says he never saw himself represented in the hockey world.

"It's so exciting and gratifying to be involved at any level. We get to work on a lot of amazing shows, but to be part of something that really touched culture is just amazing. It's an honour," he said.

Fiore, a TMU journalism grad, draws on her training in every post. "I really do put storytelling first," she says. "It runs hand in hand with journalism, through social media we bring an audience in to share these stories to see more than what's on the surface."

Future of Canadian media

Heated Rivalry showcases Canadian creative power.

"He's just fantastic to see a Canadian production that is really done so well and has such a huge international audience," says Recupero. "I'm hoping that this also opens the floodgates for more investment in Canadian stories."

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