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'Heated Rivalry' star Nadine Bhabha is 'so proud' of its success, but 'cautiously optimistic' it won't be a 'one-off fluke'

The Canadian actor and writer reflects on resilience, collaboration and Canadian TV's global moment

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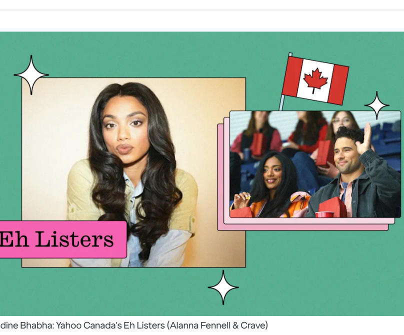
Nadine Bhabha: Yahoo Canada's Eh Listers (Alanna Fennell & Crave)

Canadian actor Nadine Bhabha has had a front-row seat to all the excitement around the hit Crave series *Heated Rivalry*, playing Elena in the show. Coming off her success in Jacob Tierney's previous project, *Letterkenny*, and having worked as a writer on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *Children Ruin Everything*, Bhabha is one of Canada's most exciting voices in entertainment, in front of and behind the camera.

Throughout her career, Bhabha is relentless. Describing herself to *Yahoo Canada* as "delusional" as a child, because she knew she was going to be an actor from a young age, she worked to make that her reality.

But it wasn't a completely straight path to success. Bhabha was kicked out of theatre school when she was 18, and instead of letting that halt her pursuit of becoming a professional actor, it made her more "intentional" with her goal.

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"I'm stubborn and hard-headed and relentless in my pursuit of what I want from the world," she said. "I think so much of living is other people telling you no, and in some ways, that is really helpful. After getting cut from theatre school when I was 18, it was a no. That was like, oh, this is going to be harder than I thought it was going to be, and that really prepared me for the industry."

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"This confidence and delusion at 18 of knowing that this was going to be my path, and just going, OK, that's a roadblock. How do I come at it from a different angle? And it's not like I went back to theatre school a second later. ... I worked a million jobs. I went to what is now called [Toronto Metropolitan University], and learned how to operate a camera and worked in radio, ... and then I went back to theatre school. So starting again at 22, I'm a bit more intentional about why I was there, and I just think sometimes it just takes a little bit longer to find that perfect fit."

Yahoo Canada's Eh Listers is an interview series with women and non-binary Canadians in film and television, looking back on their careers with unfiltered stories about their greatest projects.

Barbelle — 2019

A common theme throughout Bhabha's career is not just bringing her great skills to the table, but also being a great collaborator, making really significant friendships that lead to new projects for her to tackle. That was the case with the series *Barbelle*, created by Bhabha's friends, Karen Knox and Gwen Cumyn.

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"They had me in mind. And I've been lucky throughout my career, there have been many people who have had me in mind for things, though I have done billions of self-tapes and I've gone into the room hundreds of thousands of times," she said.

"You're working with your friends, and then you're honing your voice. Early on in my film and TV career, it was nice to have a character arc where I could really explore a person, rather than going in and doing a day or two here and there. ... It wasn't my first time on set or anything, but it was, I would say, early days of having this big, nice, chunky character, and character arc. And because it was my friends, I was able to not feel the pressure of needing to know everything as well. Maybe you're a day player on something, and no one's paying any attention to you, for reasons that are beyond you, there are a million things going on, on a set, at all times, but sometimes it's hard to learn that way. So it was fun to learn even other departments on a set like *Barbelle*, because it was my peers."

That relationship with Knox and Cumyn continues, as they're part of Bhabha's upcoming project, titled *Slo Pitch*, centred around an LGBTQ+ softball team, with an exciting list of stars attached, including Emily Hampshire, Jess Salgueiro, Chelsea Muirhead, Emma Hunter, Carolyn Taylor and Amanda Cordner, to name just a few. And one thing Bhabha has noted about how Knox and Cumyn work is that they run a set "as if everyone is their friend."

"If there's a problem, Knox and Gwen handle the set with grace. And it shows me that showrunning and being an actor ... in it, and directing, and all this kind of stuff, doesn't have to be stressful," Bhabha said. "And it really makes the actors, it makes the writers, it makes every crew member feel safe and calm. And I will say, leadership I learned from *Barbelle* to *Slo Pitch* with Knox and Gwen."

Letterkenny — 2018 to 2023

Before *Heated Rivalry*, Jacob Tierney worked with Jared Keeso on *Letterkenny*, with Bhabha taking on the role of Bianca, who had a great double act with fellow city girl Aly (Sash Striga).

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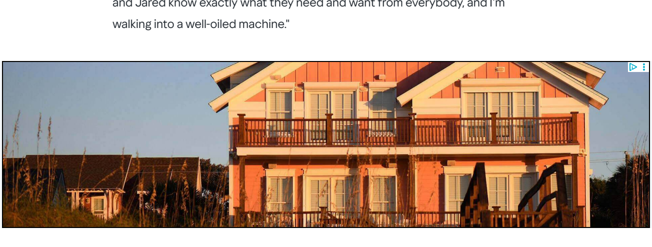
"It's always fun when you have someone to bounce jokes off of, and the writing is so tight," Bhabha said. "You're not doing a whole comedic exploration, because the writing is there. It's a foundation for you. It's guidelines."

"So it was fun, because we got to find these interesting physicalities and ways of saying our lines that made us laugh. And it wasn't just me kind of doing the work by myself and then showing up to set."

But the pace at which *LetterKenny* was shot was particularly rapid, shooting 22 pages a day.

"Once you were doing it, you got two takes. And if you were prepared, which almost every single person was, it was easy to do, in a way," Bhabha said. "Jacob and Jared know exactly what they need and want from everybody, and I'm walking into a well-oiled machine."



"Something I love about the Skids is that they had these big, meaty, wordy scenes. And I loved when we got to participate in that. I love the wordplay that's in that show. And so it was just fun to watch them start as outsiders, the city girls, and then kind of weasel their way into the world in a real way."

The actor described *Letterkenny* as "one of the most special experiences" of her life, saying it felt like being at camp.

"It showed me that it can also just be fun. And I'm sure people were stressed at some other level, but it just never rained down on us, for the most part, as an actor," Bhabha said.

This Hour Has 22 Minutes — 2020 to 2021

In terms of Canadian entertainment legacies, there are few shows more significant than *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and Bhabha really honed her writing skills on that series.

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"It's incredible to be part of such an iconic Canadian show. The show's been running for 30 plus years, and some of my favourite Canadian comedians have come out of that show, Rick Mercer, Shaun Majumder," she said. "And the writing staff are so amazing and taught me how to get to the punchline faster."

"That room was very, best idea wins. ... Specifically with sketch, you have such a small amount of time to make a joke and make a point. And it was kind of like writing boot camp in that way. It was in Halifax. Just iconically Canadian, the whole experience. And I love doing it. I love the live aspect of it. It was the perfect merger of theatre and TV for me."

Children Ruin Everything — 2022 to 2025

On the writing side of her career, Bhabha also worked on the award-winning TV show *Children Ruin Everything*, created by Kurt Smeaton.

"I loved working on that show. I would work on that show if it had 20 more seasons. It was the best," she said.

What really made the series particularly unique and beloved is that it honestly and authentically portrayed being a parent, in a way that hadn't been explored to the same degree in other shows.

"What I loved about [Kurt] was just his outlook on being a parent. You can tell being a parent is a huge part of who he is, ... and loves his kids, but he's realistic about how it has shifted his life," Bhabha said. "He's a comedian, he's a writer, and he's managed to make it work, but it took adjustments."

"I think we live in a culture of extremes. You'll get people who are like, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I have no more personality, and I'm just a parent, and this is what I do now. Or you get, ... I don't want kids ... and I don't want to talk about them either. But what was amazing about that show is Kurt was very level-headed about the spectrum of how people relate to being a parent."

Bhabha added that she felt particularly "empowered" writing for Ennis Esmer's character, Ennis, who doesn't want children, and how relationships can change when a friend has kids, but you don't.

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"It did feel layered in a way that I haven't seen in a while," Bhabha said.

How to Fail as a Popstar — 2023

When Bhabha got to *How to Fail as a Popstar*, an adaptation of Vivek Shraya's play and subsequent book, she also worked with another friend, director Vanessa Matsui.

"This one was a female-run set, top to bottom. Of course, we had some men and non-binary people in there too, but it was a lot of feminine energy, which really worked for this," Bhabha said. "It was a soft, sweet environment to work in, to tell a soft, sweet story. And once again, proof that when everyone's feeling chill, they're able to do their jobs properly."

Heated Rivalry — 2025

As we've all seen, *Heated Rivalry* has firmly planted itself in pop culture history, an obsession for people far beyond Canada's borders, and Bhabha says it's been "shocking" to see the response to the series — "in the best way."

"You shoot a show, it could be anything. ... This has a medium-sized budget, but not a lot of money was put into it, tons of time, tons of effort on the part of the creatives. But you shoot the show with your friends, and you're just like, I had a great time. This feels good. The scripts are incredible. I hope people watch it. And then a couple months go by, and you are about to go to the premiere, and it's getting buzz, and you're like, I guess some people are going to watch it. And then the first two episodes come out, and thanks to HBO and international distribution, lots of people had [watched it]," Bhabha said.

"And I speak for a lot of Canadians when I say it's shocking when the rest of the world is watching a show with you and doesn't discover it like two years, three years later on Netflix. It's delightful. I'm so proud of everybody who's worked on the show. And it's been a wild ride."

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Looking forward in *Heated Rivalry*, Bhabha said that she'd love to go home with Elena, to see what her home life is like, what her apartment looks like.

"I would love to see her and Kip and maybe Scott have a little wine night or something," she said.

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But in terms of the lasting impact of *Heated Rivalry* on Canadian entertainment and future TV shows and movies from Canada, we'll wait to see what happens. Particularly given the history of Canadian productions not being seen on the same level as our American counterparts, and often being made with fewer resources.

"I think we're too early in the days to really diagnose what's about to happen. I remain cautiously optimistic that attitudes will change. I don't know if anything will be reflected in budgets or be reflected in actually fostering Canadian talent, I hope so," Bhabha said. "We run the risk of everyone feeling like this is sort of a one-off fluke. And at the end of the day, a lot of the things that are set to come out this year and even early next year have already been in motion for the last year or two. So I think maybe things going to development might change, we might not see the fruits of that labour for a while."

"It's this weird complex that we still have where instead of being like, we make good shows, and we've always made good shows, because also, there are some shows that we make that are less than stellar, it's because [*Heated Rivalry*] has all of this international buzz that we are also claiming it stronger and fiercer than we would, had it not had international distribution. So I am interested to see, there are a few shows coming out within this year that probably won't get international distribution, and will we ride as hard as Canadians for those shows? I hope so."

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