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'Heated Rivalry' and the Art of a Truly Joyful Press Tour

During an otherwise bleak news cycle, the stars of a queer Canadian hockey drama have managed to win hearts and viewers.

BY LACEY ROSE DECEMBER 24, 2025 9:39AM



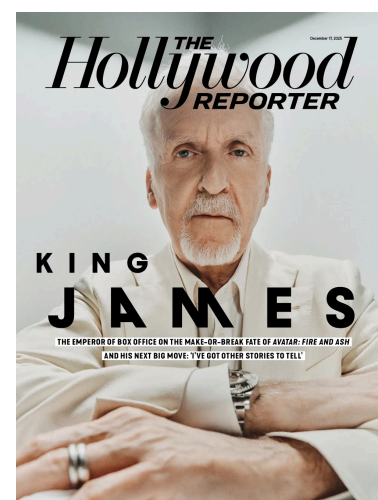
Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams attend the premiere of "Heated Rivalry" at TIFF Lightbox on November 24, 2025 in Toronto, Ontario. HAROLD FENG/GETTY IMAGES

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It's not often you see a press tour that is as joy-filled as the project that it's publicizing — even rarer is one that seems to peddle the same crackling chemistry off- as it does onscreen.

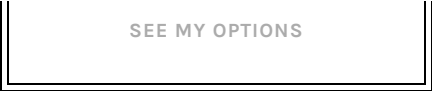
But that's what appears to be happening with Canada's queer romance series *Heated Rivalry*, which centers on closeted hockey rivals Shane Hollander (**Hudson Williams**) and Ilya Rozanov (**Connor Storrie**), and is based on a book series by the same name. The six-episode first season made its U.S. debut on **HBO Max** in late November — and in the weeks since, the series that *New York* magazine says makes "*Heartstopper* seem like *Teletubbies*" has flooded the Internet with swoon-worthy GIFs, memes and myriad



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think pieces, as its wide-eyed stars dole out one viral interview after another. (If you haven't yet watched Williams' five minute skincare routine, which is somehow 20 minutes long, it is a sheer delight.)



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"The reason I wanted to make the show is because it's a love story and it ends happily," creator-director Jacob Tierney explained recently, adding: "I don't want to traffic in queer trauma; I want to traffic in queer joy."

Audiences were clearly yearning for the same.

Amid an otherwise bleak news cycle, an unrelenting succession of trauma and tragedy, the 2019 book series shot onto the New York Times best-seller list and the critically praised show was swiftly renewed for a second season. (Though viewing metrics are still sparse, Heated Rivalry quickly became HBO Max's top-rated live-action acquisition ever.) More recently, that same joyous spirit infused the show's PR run, which hasn't felt like the contractual obligation it often does on other projects with other stars. Williams has joked about being "uncoachable" with regard to media training, but he and his equally charming, equally off-script co-star have provided us an antidote when we seemingly needed it most.

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As it turns out, witnessing two young, exceedingly green actors be so free in and genuinely enthusiastic about the moment that they're experiencing is as refreshing as it is endearing. Neither one of them is above it or blasé about what is happening, as you so often see once fame hits — nor are they dismissive of or embarrassed by the premium

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smut that they're promoting. In fact, when asked about the many explicit sex scenes in their hockey drama, Williams and Storrie — 24 and 25, respectively — have consistently offered honest, tender answers, and both have said they were considerably more comfortable filming those scenes than they were the emotional ones.

“For me, it doesn't feel spicy at all,” Storrie **has said**. “Like, that's me and my best friend.”

Undoubtedly, there's a relatable or at least aspirational aspect to their overnight success that fuels our collective interest as well. After all, Storrie was still working late nights as a waiter at Culver City's Laurel Grill right up until he landed the part of Ilya. And thank goodness, he's said, because the West Texas native (who learned Russian for the role) wasn't a particularly good server. In fact, he'd been given a final warning, because, as he's put it, he did “a fucking bad job.” Further North, Williams has said he was also living “paycheck to paycheck” as a waiter at The Old Spaghetti Factory — the Canadian equivalent of the Olive Garden — when he scored the role of Shane.

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But arguably it's Storrie and Williams' chemistry on- and offscreen that's done the heavy lifting of late. The two don't just like each other, which is evident **here** and **here** *and here* — they're supremely comfortable with one another, both physically and emotionally, and they seemingly have been from the jump. According to Tierney, Williams told him after his chemistry read with Storrie: “The other guy was good, but Connor felt like he was going to pin me down and fuck me.”

To date, the press tour-turned-cultural moment has provided fans extensive opportunity to watch and swoon over the pair laughing, teasing, dancing, petting, grabbing and declaring each other soulmates, or at least cosmically linked. “We're both pretty tactile people in terms of love

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languages and how you express yourself,” Storrie has **said**. The two acquired matching “sex sells” tattoos after filming wrapped, which they’ve flashed in interviews; earlier this month, Williams crashed with Storrie while in L.A. to promote the show at bars and malls and fancy parties.

“We were like, ‘Oh, my God, if people saw us just getting ready in the morning, giving each other big spooning hugs, just to say we’re proud of each other,’ people would be going crazy,” **said Williams**, who added: “If only one fan had access, God forbid. But yeah, we just love each other very dearly.”

Inevitably, there’s a healthy swath of the show’s rabid fan base that would like to believe the actors are a couple offscreen too. But in actuality, neither one of them has revealed a thing about their sexuality in real life, and, frankly, it’s none of our business — though staying mum has irked actors like *I Love L.A.*’s Jordan Firstman, who **blasted** the duo for, among other things, not being gay; or if they are, not coming out publicly. (He faced severe backlash and later walked it back, then snapped an “all is good” selfie with Williams at an HBO Max event in Los Angeles. If there was a lesson to be gleaned, it’s mess with the *Heated Rivalry* fans at your own peril.)

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François Arnaud, who came out as bisexual in 2020 and now plays the (spoiler!) newly out Hunter on the show, has been fiercely protective of his younger co-stars as they navigate the new terrain. “It’s a lot to ask of two young actors to give this much — and they’ve given so much to the show, but they don’t have to give everything...being an actor does not oblige you to share your private life with people,” he **said recently**, noting that he was speaking out, on the actors’ behalf, because they’ve “been famous for nine days. Can we just give them a break?”

Seems only fair, given the pleasure these two have delivered us over the past month. Toggling between the show and the press tour has been a joyful respite from so much ugliness in the world — one can only hope the next nine days, and well beyond, will remain so. We need it. Maybe we even deserve it.

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