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TV

Connor Storrie On ‘Heated Rivalry’ Season 2’s Big Question and Being Rachel Reid’s Perfect Ilya

In between his live interviews on TODAY, the actor took a seat with TODAY.com to chat deeper about the show that’s now so big, the word “phenomenon” is an understatement.

Connor Storrie took a seat during his busy morning at TODAY. Marc J. Franklin / TODAY



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Mere months ago, Connor Storrie was a guy working at restaurants while chasing a Hollywood dream. Now, he's one half of the duo at the heart of "Heated Rivalry," the hottest TV show out there right now.

If he's being honest, as he said on TODAY this week, he hasn't really had a second to "take it in."

"Heated Rivalry," based on a 2019 book by the author Rachel Reid that tells a love story between two pro hockey players, was a project intended for a small Canadian streamer called Crave. When HBO Max picked up the show in the U.S. shortly before its November premiere, Storrie and his co-star, Hudson Williams, found themselves in the big leagues. As viewership rose, so did their stars. These two got big-time famous, in a way that now draws crowds of admirers wherever they go, including here at 30 Rock.

For the show, Storrie, a 25-year-old Texas native, transforms into Ilya Rozanov, a Russian hockey prodigy with a thick accent, a complicated family and an irresistible attraction to a rival player. Both Storrie and Williams, who plays Shane Hollander, say they had chemistry from the jump, a key piece of the show that speaks to just how much audiences adore this story. "Heated Rivalry" was picked up for Season 2 midway through the first season. Storrie told Craig Melvin on TODAY they may start shooting this summer.

Storrie had shared that and much more on TODAY when he visited Studio 1A for a pair of live interviews. (And a tuna melt demo.) (And plaza fun with Al Roker.) And TODAY.com was able to catch up with Storrie in his green room in between it all.

Storrie, in a designer bomber jacket and jeans, all curls and charisma, sat comfortably in a director's chair in front of a brightly lit vanity. The windows behind him, though curtained, looked out at all the fans who braved sub-40° weather for a glimpse of him. He told us about meeting Reid, what he hopes to see next on-screen from Shane and Ilya's relationship and what he gives credit to regarding his electric chemistry with Williams.

I interviewed Rachel Reid when the show first premiered, and she said what made this show so unique is that creator Jacob Tierney took it very seriously. Her direct quote was, "More seriously than romance ever gets taken. I hope it's going to change the way romance gets filmed." Was

that your experience with Jacob? How did it affect your performance?

I think that Jacob just — he read the books a million times, and obviously wrote hundreds and hundreds of pages worth of scripts. He just knew this story backward and forward. I think he also was just such a fan that he saw whatever the fans of the book saw — that thing that makes everyone love this story.

What that is, I think, can be a few different things. I think the love, the spice, the world, the connection. I think he was just a really, really big fan, and I think that love poured over into his interpretation of it.

You've talked about how important it was to honor the source material. Thinking of that phone call to Shane in Russian — in the book, we don't know exactly what Ilya told Shane. How did you approach delivering the monologue without any context from the book?

Everything that Jacob wrote in that monologue totally tracks, and I think that it really honors the book. Everything that (Ilya) has going on in his personal life, I kind of just have to click into that and believe that. And those words are so powerful that I think you can't really help but be moved. Professing your love for someone, especially in such a stressful moment, having this cathartic outbreak, you can't help but be emotional if you believe in it.

When “Heated Rivalry” landed at HBO Max, it was a game changer. “I knew it was going to be something. I did not know it was going to be HBO,” Storrie said.
Marc J. Franklin for TODAY

You and Hudson Williams have said that during the audition process, you both singled each other out to Jacob. When it came time to film on set, was there a moment or scene where you felt validated in that instinct, that you made the right call?

The entire time. I feel like it wasn’t even on set that that was validated, because I think we had the acting down. I mean, I know this is about the acting, but I think it felt validated just with the natural flow of things. We had such a natural flow that, you know, everyone talks about the chemistry, the chemistry — and that really starts by just trusting each other.

I don’t think people could have the sort of on-screen chemistry that Hudson and I have without genuinely embracing each other in real life and really feeling seen and heard and safe. That’s when it felt

validated and real to me.

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Have you read the synopsis yet for Rachel Reid's third Shane and Ilya book, "Unrivaled"?

No, I've been talking to her. I mean, not to, you know, toot my own horn, but I knew way before it was announced that that was happening.

Rachel has become a very, very dear friend of mine. She is so supportive, which was such a blessing. I talk about this all the time, but I think the book-to-screen adaptation can be really tricky sometimes. Either the author not being fully on board, or the fans of the books not being fully on board. And I think that's why this was so successful — those two key elements were super gung ho and were super enthusiastic the entire time.

So, yeah, I got a little inside scoop, but I don't know what it's about.



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Do you have any big dreams for what could happen to Shane and Ilya?

I don't know, I think we leave them off in Season 1 at a place where — I've read "The Long Game," and I've read some of the other books in the series, so I know other elements of their story.

All I know is that going forward, the connection is going to deepen. And as vulnerability rises, so does some of your personal issues that follow along with it. And now that it's out in the open that they like each other, it's really just about, what do you do with that, and what does that look like in your day to day?

In our Rachel Reid interview, she said, "I don't remember what Ilya used to look like. I can't see him in my head anymore." What does that mean to you as an actor?

That's crazy. When I first met Rachel on set, I remember she was like, not really looking at me. And at first, I was so nervous, because I was like, "Oh, God, I'm a disappointment," you know?

I mean, think about that. You've created these characters for years, and they have this huge following, this imagination. She gets sent fan art all the time. So to see a physical embodiment of that has to be so bizarre. But at first I was like, "Oh, no, I'm a disappointment." And

then without looking at me, she was like, "No, you're perfect." And I was like, OK, cool. If she's saying that, that's fine.

But we've talked about it. I think she did envision him a little bit different, but I think I'm about as close as it probably gets. *(Laughs.)*

Bringing to life a beloved book is a responsibility Connor Storrie doesn't take lightly. "We have to acknowledge that before the show even came out, there's a whole legion of people that love the book," he said on TODAY. *Marc J. Franklin for TODAY*

The HBO Max distribution was announced less than two weeks before it was supposed to premiere on Crave in Canada. How did you find out that it was coming to the U.S.? How did that

affect how you prepared for that Nov. 28 premiere?

That kind of jump started the press really quickly. Brendan (Brady, executive producer) and Jacob (Tierney, creator) were in a group text with me and Hudson. And they were like, "Hey boys, we need to hop on the phone."

I knew it was going to be something. I did not know it was going to be HBO. I think HBO was kind of like a pie-in-the-sky moment for all of us. HBO is so prestigious, and I think it's a really good platform for this, but, you know, nothing's promised.

We were all so elated. Three days after that, I was on a plane, and I was in Canada for a week. And then I came back and started all the HBO press. It was crazy.

This interview was lightly edited for clarity.

Maddie Ellis

Maddie Ellis is a weekend editor at TODAY Digital.



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