



'Heated Rivalry' Changes the TV Romance Game

by Rose Ho — March 2, 2024 in Review



Photo Courtesy of Crave



Heated Rivalry is a Canadian television phenomenon like no other. A lovingly crafted show with the most unlikely roots of global success: a book-to-screen adaptation of a queer hockey romance novel series by Rachel Reid made for the Canadian streaming service Crave. This deeply Canadian television show has unexpectedly become a worldwide sensation and a prominent celebration of Canadian talent and culture. After all, what could be more Canadian than hockey, cottage country, and falling in love with someone who looks and sounds completely different to you?

Under the direction of showrunner Jacob Tierney, Heated Rivalry is poised to become a true game-changer of the television landscape, gaining a rabid fanbase of women who love men loving men. Along the way, it has also ended up drawing attention to many overlooked or sometimes-sneered-at aspects of TV-making — such as the romance genre in general — the importance of intimacy coordinators, and even how to treat audiences.

Starring Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov, the show follows the ever-evolving, and increasingly steamy, relationship between the closeted duo of hockey stars. Heated Rivalry unfolds over the span of several years as the hotshot rookies hook up with each other and slowly realize they desire more; meanwhile, their public rivalry and toxic hockey culture force them to hide their true selves.

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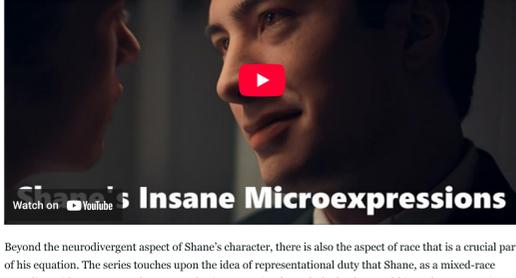
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The plucky first season — a mere six episodes long — premiered at the end of November last year on Crave (as well as HBO), and, in a little more than two months, it catapulted the previously unknown lead performers to stratospheric fame. In fact, the winsome newcomers have even participated in this year's Winter Olympics as torch bearers, bringing fictional sports rivals to the real world's biggest sports competition. A well deserved honour thanks to the phenomenal performances, off-the-charts chemistry, and jaw-dropping, uh, physicality of Williams and Storrie.

It's not all just hot men and sexy scenes on this show, though! The characters contain a remarkable specificity, which the actors portray brilliantly and indelibly. As Shane, a hockey superstar with undiagnosed autism, Williams does deliciously subtle work through his deliberately non-showy portrayal of him. He carefully crafts a depiction of autism that neurodivergent viewers can recognize and enjoy. Williams provides signals of Shane's place on the spectrum through his eye contact avoidance and flat voice affectation. The story, too, drops critical hints about Shane's neurodivergence without stating outright that he has autism (although Williams has publicly confirmed this intention about the performance), with his social awkwardness and obsession over things like real estate, fitness, and his diet. But peeking underneath lies an unexpectedly dynamic performance built out of masterful micro-expressions: a tiny eyebrow raise, mouth twitch, or jaw clench can reveal much about Shane's secrets and inner turmoil.



Beyond the neurodivergent aspect of Shane's character, there is also the aspect of race that is a crucial part of his equation. The series touches upon the idea of representational duty that Shane, as a mixed-race Canadian with Japanese and European heritage, carries through the hockey world in early conversations with his mother. He is (presumably) the only Asian person in the show's fictional hockey league, which gives him added pressure to perform well and pave the way for people who look like him. This detail helps add another facet to the character who would otherwise be seen as just another driven athlete and perfectionist.

A small note of criticism I have for the show (but more so the book) surrounds how they haven't wrestled enough with the dynamics of Shane's cultural identity with his sexual identity. Asian men have often been mistreated in the West, yet Heated Rivalry never leans too far into that very real toxicity or has Shane dwell too much upon that dynamic in his relationship to the very white culture around him. It stands to reason that those aspects would have permeated the hockey world and plagued someone like Shane, despite his all-star status. A brief interaction with someone representing the Montreal Metros, who is pleased to have Shane on the team in order to showcase how progressive the league is, lightly touches upon this issue, but for the most part, Shane does not quibble much with the model minority status the world thrusts upon him.

Maybe it's a relief that the series doesn't weigh Shane down down in this way. None of his teammates or opponents casually throw around any Asian slurs. (Only Ilya's brother ever utters an offensive term in the show, and it's about sexuality, not race.) I wonder if the writing will consider the specificity of Shane's heritage in the career he is in in the next season, especially with a clear antagonist representing the hockey league in the next Shane/Ilya book, The Long Game, which Season 2 will cover. Although, based on the way things have been written in the book series so far, it might not happen.

It should be noted that both Tierney and Reid are white Canadians, whom I would not expect to be able to grasp Shane's mixed heritage authentically, although they have handled many other elements and themes in the story beautifully. Therefore, one can hope that Tierney and Reid consult some real Asian-Canadian hockey players as they continue to write for Shane in the show's second season and the book series' seventh novel, respectively.

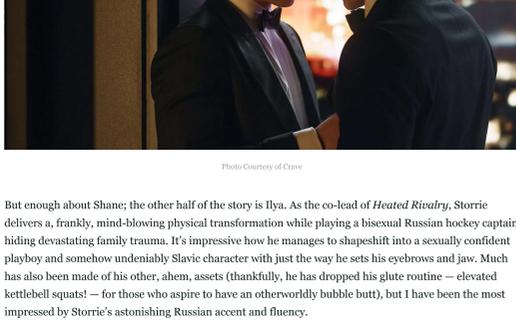


Photo Courtesy of Crave

But enough about Shane; the other half of the story is Ilya. As the co-lead of Heated Rivalry, Storrie delivers a, frankly, mind-blowing physical transformation while playing a bisexual Russian hockey captain hiding devastating family trauma. It's impressive how he manages to shapeshift into a sexually confident playboy and somehow undeniably Slavic character with just the way he sets his eyebrows and jaw. Much has also been made of his other, ahem, assets (thankfully, he has dropped his glute routine — elevated kettlebell squats! — for those who aspire to have an otherworldly bubble butt), but I have been the most impressed by Storrie's astonishing Russian accent and fluency.

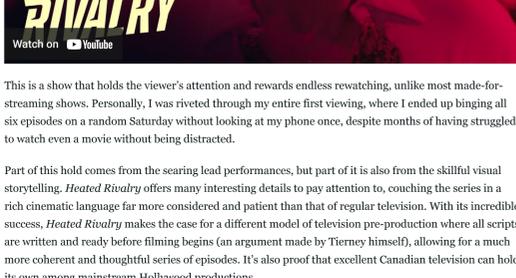
Several scenes in Heated Rivalry showcase his preternatural talent with the notoriously difficult language, including a stand-out, four-minute, phone monologue in which Ilya pours out his soul to Shane while cloaked in a language barrier. In fact, his linguistic prowess has been praised by many native Russian speakers (including tales of those who worked on the show or are just regular viewers, fans, and commentators).

Like Williams's multifaceted depiction of Shane, Storrie delivers a rich and deeply considered portrayal of Ilya. He telegraphs what his character feels in the most compelling of ways, and Heated Rivalry allows him to explore a wide range of moods and emotions: from stoic and seductive to sarcastic and sensitive. This is because Ilya occupies an especially difficult position as a bisexual man due to his country and family — in Russia, it remains extremely dangerous to be queer, and, adding to matters, his father is a high-ranking police officer with old-fashioned views. Throughout the show, he also secretly battles with trauma and mental illness related to the death of his mother, which brings even more weight to this character.

Of all the ways Storrie builds Ilya, his subtle eye-bounce lands as the most fascinating aspect (and my personal favourite), which comes across as a technique for showing how his character is processing something difficult. The trait becomes especially pronounced when he tries to come up with a response to a long-winded question as he continues to learn English, or when he wrestles with tricky emotions in regards to his family or Shane. When pairing Storrie's impressive efforts in mastering Russian dialogue with Williams's deft portrayal of neurodiversity, Heated Rivalry truly becomes a showcase for the magnificent talents of these two young performers.

It's not just the actors who deserve their flowers, however. Tierney writes and directs brilliantly, crafting a unique adaptation that feels incredibly thoughtful and tender. His additions and flourishes in the script elevate the story even further. Jackson Parrell's cinematography, too, is breathtakingly beautiful and deceptively downplayed, up to the final episode, which features an underrated omer. Also, we can't not mention Heated Rivalry's excellent soundtrack and original score, which hosts a bevy of Canadian talents, including Feist, Wolf Parade, and Peter Peter (the latter of which also holds the role of the show's composer).

The fifth episode's club scene best displays the series' peak use of cinematography and music, when Shane and Ilya are at a particularly non-communicative moment in their relationship. Parrell bathes the room in gorgeous pinks, blues, and purples (i.e. bisexual lighting), imbuing the scene with complexity and altering emotion. As Shane clocks Ilya's presence (after Ilya has already clocked him), a brain-chemistry-altering needle drop — a transition from Russian "lesbian" pop duo T.A.T.u.'s "All the Things She Said" to the Harrison remix — mixes with the perfect use of camera movement and near-wordless performance to bring us one of the most striking and loaded moments of the entire season.



This is a show that holds the viewer's attention and rewards endless rewatching, unlike most made-for-streaming shows. Personally, I was riveted through my entire first viewing, where I ended up binging all six episodes on a random Saturday without looking at my phone once, despite months of having struggled to watch even a movie without being distracted.

Part of this hold comes from the searing lead performances, but part of it is also from the skillful visual storytelling. Heated Rivalry offers many interesting details to pay attention to, coaching the scenes in a rich cinematic language far more considered and patient than that of regular television. With its incredible success, Heated Rivalry makes the case for a different model of television pre-production where all scripts are written and ready before filming begins (an argument made by Tierney himself), allowing for a much more coherent and thoughtful series of episodes. It's also proof that excellent Canadian television can hold its own among mainstream Hollywood productions.

It's no wonder it has found a rabid, international fan base that has quickly spawned its own language and subculture. In the week after viewing the show, I've seen lovingly homemade recreations of Heated Rivalry scenes done in air-dried clay, Calico Critters, and gumpolms. Social media has filled up with countless scene breakdowns, character deep dives, and compilations. It has introduced hockey to a broader audience more than ever before. (How many more women will be making a trip to view the "boy aquarium" a.k.a. the ice hockey arena?) It won't come to anyone's shock that Muskoka tourism is set to explode this summer, especially in and around Barlochan Cottage, as it has become one of the show's most iconic locations.

The show's off-the charts sexy, but never gratuitous, love scenes also make the case (again) for the important work of intimacy coordinators. They form part of the rehearsal process, helping to build these tricky and delicate performances while protecting the comfort of performers, as well as everyone else on set, during the filming of intimate scenes. Heated Rivalry's showrunner and lead actors have repeatedly shouted out Chala Hunter, who held this important role, in interviews for being deeply important to crafting the show's steamiest scenes.

The extra attention to the storytelling around Heated Rivalry's sexy moments has been a part of the reason for its outsized success with women and queer audiences. Unusual for our current media landscape, women's bodies are not being used to sell the show in any way, allowing women to feel safe watching this type of romance. The show presents Shane and Ilya as equals in the ice arena, and their dom/sub power dynamic is always couched in consent. In fact, Ilya checks for enthusiastic consent when preparing Shane for his first time trying anal sex, and repeatedly asks if his partner is okay while they progress in the act. The seeming bad boy is really a consent king, which is what women want.

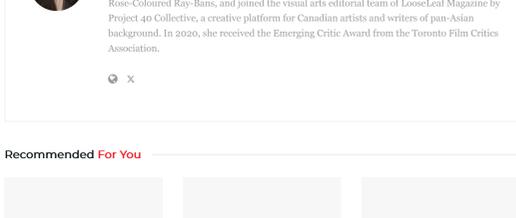
With so much care given to story, performance, and representation, it's clear that Heated Rivalry sets a new precedent for modern romances on our TV screens and streaming services. For that, we applaud the little Canadian gay hockey show for changing the game.

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Rose Ho is a film critic. After her art criticism degree, she started her personal film blog, Rose-Coloured Ray-Bans, and joined the visual arts editorial team of LooseLeaf Magazine by Project 40 Collective, a creative platform for Canadian artists and writers of pan-Asian background. In 2020, she received the Emerging Critic Award from the Toronto Film Critics Association.

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