Exclusive

Heated Rivalry's Jacob Tierney talks season two, stigma and happy endings: 'Our stories don't have to be traumatic'

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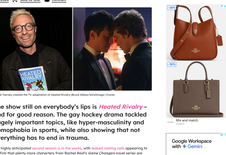

Jacob Tierney (left) and Shane Smith (Photo: Anna Thomas/Crave)

The show still on everybody's lips is *Heated Rivalry* – and for good reason. The gay hockey drama tackled hugely important topics, like hyper-masculinity and homophobia in sports, while also showing that not everything has to end in trauma.

The highly-acclaimed series season 1 is the sexiest, with heated casting calls appearing to confirm that plenty more characters from Rachel Reid's game changers novel series are coming.

Speaking to international press, including journalist Anna Lacey Walter, showrunner Jacob Tierney and star Shane Smith shared their hopes and fears for expectations and the importance of giving Shane and Ilya a happy ending.

Taking into account the fans' reception of the first season, is there something you want to this deeper into or explore more in the second season – things that fans seem especially excited about?

Jacob Tierney: If I'm being very honest, I'm trying to remove that expectation from anything I do. I'm just trying to make the best thing I can make. I'm just trying to make the best story that I can follow Rachel Reid's books and let them guide me down the path that I think is right for the next few moments of Shane and Ilya's lives together. I'm thrilled that people are so happy with what we've made, and I'm very happy that people are so excited about what's coming, but I'm scared that the more I think about it, the more I want to kind of drown that out.

You wrote and directed the series yourself. What was the single hardest creative choice in adapting Rachel Reid's story for TV, and what did you refuse to compromise on?

Tierney: I mean, I think the hardest thing that I did was to put Game Changer, the first book, into the middle of the show. I think that was a fairly structurally surprising thing to do for the audience, because it's a very different story than the rest of the book series. But it's one I'm glad I did. I think it ended up very well and I'm very happy with that portion of the show.

And the thing that I wouldn't compromise on, I would say there were two things. One was that the sex needed to be very explicit and very hot. And I'm very happy that we've been getting a happy ending. There were no way I was going to end the show on a cliffhanger. I'm just not that person. I don't think that's necessary. I don't think that's better than whether that audience watching them drive off into the sunset. That's everything that I wanted for those two characters.

Tierney: I wish I could say yes, but I didn't think we would reach those locker rooms. I didn't think that was even possible, if I'm being perfectly honest. It's a dream world, sure, that would be incredible. But I never expected that in any way.

What I did know was that we were putting something out into the world that carried love and hope. And I'm very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very happy that it's been taken in those terms. I probably would have told myself to get over it, that those audiences weren't going to watch something like this.

Francois Arnaud as Scott Hunter and Robbie Kay as Kip Grady (Sabrina Lantos/HBO)

I was surprised how many people didn't realise that Shane was autistic when first watching the show. I'm autistic myself, and it was immediately clear to me. What was important to you when writing an autistic character, and when working that out with Hudson?

Tierney: Honestly, I didn't think a lot about it in those terms. I just wrote Shane, and that's part of who Shane is. I didn't think too over-really believed it that way. I mean, look, he's autistic, there's no doubt about it, but I think it was more about, this is the way Shane reacts to things, this is the way he processes information, this is the way he deals with situations.

It was a lot of people on the autism spectrum, and I know enough to understand that there are so many different ways autism can manifest, emotionally, psychologically, behaviourally, and there is no one "right" way to portray it. So the guiding principle was really just to stay true to Shane, and let that part of his personality come through naturally.

It was also important that Ilya feels from his empathy rather than judgment. I think that's very important, and I think that's why people have responded so well to the character, because viewers who are not neurodivergent, for the no, it was never about defining him through a label, it was just, this is Shane.

Dan Jeannotte as Jack Parsons and Andrew Eyk, as Eg Grady (Sabrina Lantos/HBO)

How did making this series change the way you think about royalty?

Tierney: It made it worse. But more seriously, royal is just a great narrative device. It creates tension, humour, and emotional energy. It's that feeling you have toward someone where you don't quite understand what it is yet, so you impose it, you think you dislike them, but in reality you're just very focused on them.

It's a fun thing to explore dramatically because it naturally drives conflict and connection at the same time. I don't know if it fundamentally changed how I see royals in real life, but it definitely reinforced how useful and compelling it is as a storytelling tool.

Is there a scene that you are really proud to stand up for the screen for season two?

Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams in Heated Rivalry. (Sabrina Lantos/HBO)

What do you think makes the show resonate so widely, even beyond queer audiences?

Tierney: I don't think it's that complicated. I think it's about joy and about love. We took the relationship seriously, we gave it time to develop, and we didn't rush it into a single film. That allows you to feel the strong bonds between these characters in a deeper way.

I also think the hockey piece plays a huge role. Viewers often expect something bad to happen, and when it doesn't, it changes the way they experience the story. They can go back and watch it again without that sense of dread.

Ultimately, people respond to seeing love treated with sincerity. The show really wears its heart on its sleeve, it's earnest, and I think audiences feel that.

How did you approach filming the sex scenes in terms of intimacy, consent, and choreography, so that they feel character-driven rather than purely promotional?

Tierney: We approached them very deliberately. They were scripted in detail, and their purpose was always to tell a story and advance a character. Each scene has different intentions, different emotional beats, and different dynamics.

The idea is that once the actors know the choreography, they can stop thinking about the mechanics, where their hand goes, how they're positioned for the camera, and instead focus on the emotional connection. That's where the intimacy comes from.

We worked very closely with our intimacy coordinator, Charlie Hunter, and had a lot of conversations in advance. For me, a set is a workplace. It's not a place where people should feel uncomfortable or be asked to do something they're not prepared for.

In the end, we were incredibly lucky to have actors who trust Charlie and who are fully committed to the material. That made all the difference.

Share your thoughts! Let us know in the comments below, and remember to keep the conversation respectful.

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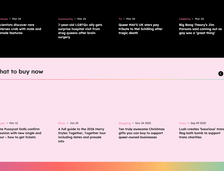

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Your show is obviously a love story, but also about fear, shame, and emotions that these characters don't have the language for. Did you deliberately set out to make people think twice about thinking about anything a message of support to better name, not just to hockey, but in sports more broadly? Did you want to make a difference?