

Sunshine & Allyship: Nadine Bhabha Reflects on Elena, Friendship & Music in 'Heated Rivalry'

On March 7, 2026 By Popternative

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Popternative is thrilled to welcome Nadine Bhabha to our digital cover for March 2026. Nadine stars as Elena in the global phenomenon Heated Rivalry, a role that has quickly made her one of the story's most beloved characters. With a grounded presence and quietly powerful words—especially the widely quoted line, “the deserves sunshine and so do you”—Elena has struck a deep chord with fans of both the books and the series.

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In our exclusive cover story, we spoke with Nadine about why that moment has struck such a chord, what she loves most about playing Elena, and how her character's loyalty makes her the kind of friend everyone wishes they had. She also opens up about filming Elena's dance scene with François Arnaud's Scott, working with creator Jacob Tierney, and how the show's soundtrack has been on repeat long after filming.

Exclusive photos for Popternative Magazine by Mike NG

Hair & Makeup: Kelly Davidson

Studio: Cocreate Space

Why do you think Elena's line, "he deserves sunshine and so do you" resonates with so many people and has become one of the most quoted lines from the series?

Nadine: I just love that it's so simple in its message. Everyone deserves sunshine, and I think because it's such a beautiful, warm image, a lot of people are resonating with it. I've been getting a lot of DMs from people who don't have an Elena to show up for them in their lives, so hearing someone be accepting in a gentle, yet grounded way, feels healing to hear for a lot of queer folks.

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What stands out to you most about Elena as a character?

Nadine: I think what I love about Elena, which is the same thing I think my friends love about me, is that tough love, emphasis on the love. Holding your friends accountable so that they can get the sunshine they deserve. At least I hope they like that!

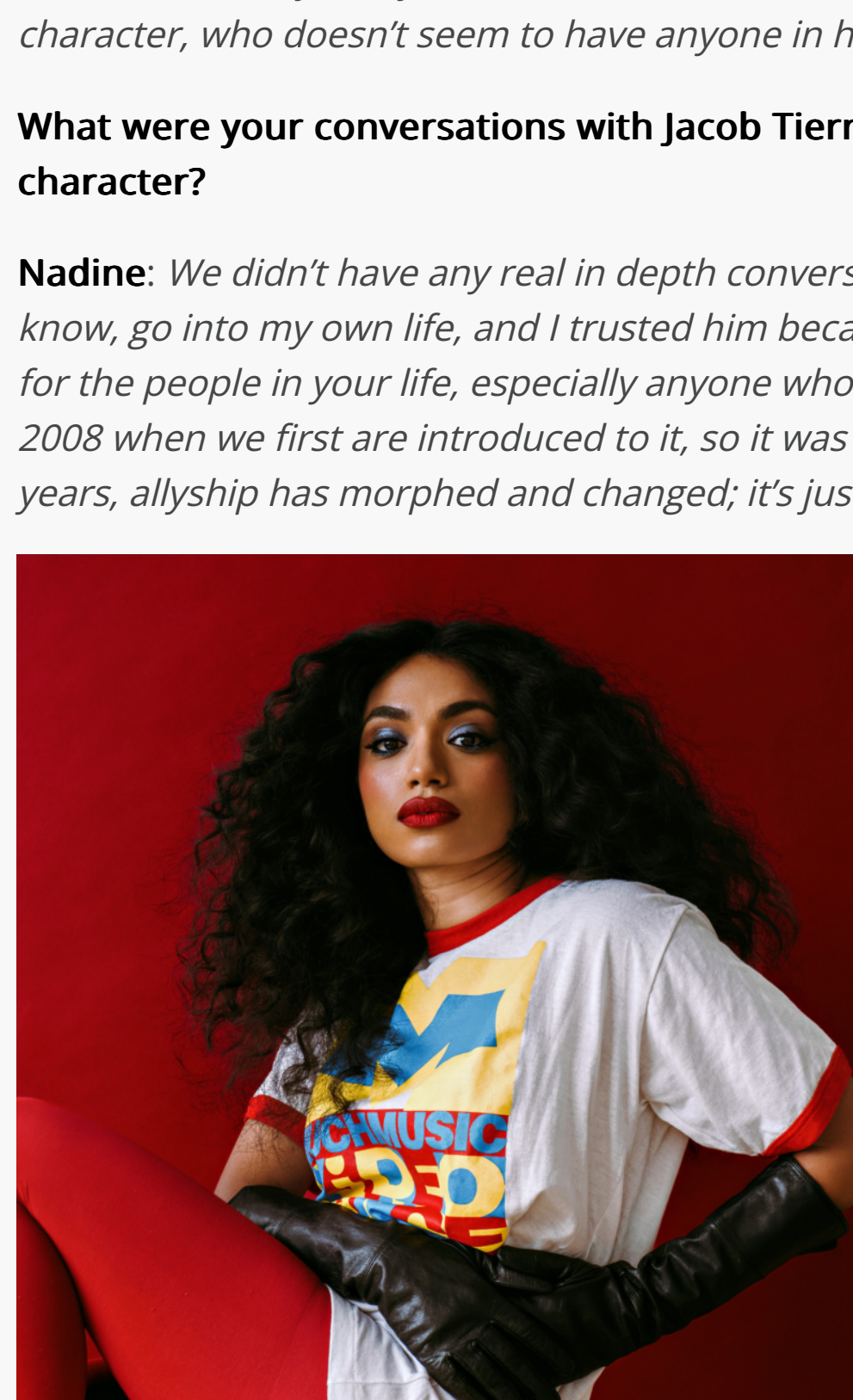


What can you share about filming the dancing scene between you and François Arnaud's character, Scott, in episode 3?

Nadine: It was nice that it was choreographed somewhat. Jacob asked me if I could dance and I gave him an unhinged answer worrying that it was going to be hard. But it was sweet for us and it was easy on the day. We were up in each other's grill; it was just a nice, intimate moment to film, and that intimacy really does come across, because I think Elena also is acting as a friend to Scott's character, who doesn't seem to have anyone in his corner.

What were your conversations with Jacob Tierney like about the allyship component of Elena's character?

Nadine: We didn't have any real in depth conversations about allyship. I think he trusted me to, you know, go into my own life, and I trusted him because we are real life friends. I think just showing up for the people in your life, especially anyone who's marginalized, is important. This show is set in 2008 when we first are introduced to it, so it was a bit of a different world. And so, I think over the years, allyship has morphed and changed; it's just about being there for your chosen family.



How do you feel about the way the books and the show are working in tandem, with fans discovering one through the other?

Nadine: Well, it's comforting to see that physical media is still alive and well. All the books are sold out in all the bookstores, which I love. It's nice because you have a bit of cross promotion. If you're a fan of the books, now you're watching the show. On top of that, if you're watching the show, people discovered Jacob also was part of Letterkenny, and then they start watching Letterkenny too. Which is fun for me because I love that people get to see Jacob in his element as Glen.

Do you carry any mindsets, preparation, or character work from past roles like Letterkenny into new projects like Heated Rivalry, or do you treat them as completely separate?

Nadine: I feel they are separate. Look, I'm no great character actor, but I do feel like lots of different women live inside me. Not in a United States of Tara kinda way, but in so far as I absorb the people I meet every day. Every now and then you're going to get similarities between characters, especially if I'm pulling elements for someone who is super dry or girly or maybe a little ditzy, for example. But every kind of woman that I've ever played lives inside me somewhere, or she's a reflection of a woman that I know.

Can you talk about the importance of the music in the series? How many times have you heard Harrison's "All the Things She Said" by now?

Nadine: Infinite. That one, and "I'll Believe In Anything" by Wolf parade are just on rotation, and that Wet Leg song. I love "magnetout." And Feist also had a resurgence. "My Moon My Man" went back onto the charts. It's so fun to see; it's Canadian music. It's just great. Brandon Brady, Jacob's producing partner, said to me on the phone one day, he's like, "Jacob's lifted so many boats," and that is how it feels. He just has an army of boats, and he's like this big, beautiful tidal wave.

Makeup Credits

Shop Nadine's Makeup Look Here

Brushes: Smith Cosmetics

Skin Prep: Charlotte Tilbury Magic Toner, Magic Serum, Magic Cream

Primer & Foundation: Shiseido Synchro Skin Primer, Shiseido Synchro Skin Foundation, Dior Forever Skin Correct Concealer

Contour: Fenty Beauty Match Stix

Bronzer: Charlotte Tilbury Beautiful Skin

Blush: MAC Cosmetics Glow Play Blush – Heat Index

Setting: Charlotte Tilbury Airbrush Flawless Finish Powder & Airbrush Flawless Setting Spray

Eyes: Charlotte Tilbury Super Nudes Palette, MAC Eye Primer, MAC Dazzle Shadow Bedazzled

Denim: Inglot Gel Eyeliner 77

Brows: Charolette Tilbury Brow Pencil

Mascara: MAC Gigi Lash Mascara

Lips: MAC Whirl Lip Liner & Taupe Lipstick with Fenty 'orta Selfish' Gloss Bomb Stick & Red Lips – Fenty Stunna Lip Paint in 'Uncensored'

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