

"The portrayal of Shane shows that autism touches individuals in many areas and is part of who they are, but it isn't all of who they are."

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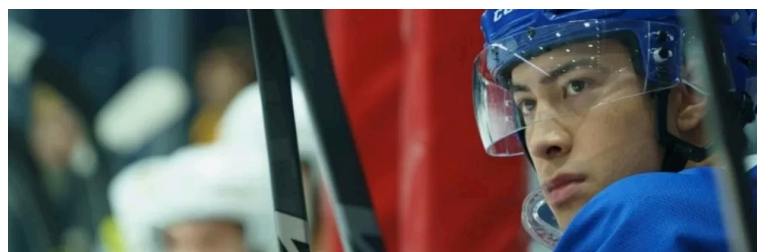


IMAGE: VIA INSTAGRAM -
@HEATEDRIVALRYWOOD

Marking Autism Awareness Month, GCN contributor David Ferguson analyses how gay hockey TV show

Heated Rivalry has provided queer autistic representation on screen.

Since its release in November 2025, *Heated Rivalry* has received kudos for representation in a number of ways. The show has also started conversations about things we don't often see in real life or on screen, from having a queer Asian character in a lead role to raising the real-life issue of athletes feeling like they need to be closeted while they are still active in sports. It has also been lauded for its use of subtlety.

As critic BJ Colanegelo put it, "This is a show that explores character growth in what isn't said as much as what is said. Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie are both delivering some of the best microexpression work currently on television."

Something that isn't said, at least on screen, is that one of *Heated Rivalry*'s main protagonists, Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), is autistic, something many viewers picked up on without having to be told.

Previous portrayals of autism on the screen have been more overt, with famous examples being Dustin Hoffman as Raymond in *Rain Man* and, more recently, Jim Parsons as Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*. Hudson Williams summed it up: “Sometimes autism’s portrayed in movies with quirky head movements, weird blinks, and weird inflections. And it’s like, Okay...? That is sometimes truthful but that’s always the reach. That’s always the way it’s expressed.”

Shane’s portrayal as a queer autistic character comes from a couple of personal experiences. The author of the book series, Rachel Reid, based her development of Shane’s story on her own familiarity with neurodivergence.

“When I wrote *Heated Rivalry*, I wasn’t specifically thinking about Shane being neurodivergent because I wasn’t particularly informed about that sort of thing. He was just uptight/anxious/focused etc.

“I then went through the long and complicated journey of getting my neurodivergent oldest child diagnosed, and I learned a lot then, and since. So by the time I wrote *The Long Game*, I had a better understanding of Shane, I think, and I realized that, yeah, he’s probably autistic.”

Actor Hudson Williams also has personal experience with a family member being on the spectrum. “After reading Jacob’s [Tierney, the show’s creator, writer, and director] scripts, even before the book, I immediately saw how he would operate. My dad is on the spectrum, he knows it. He has told me, I’m not even paraphrasing, ‘I relate more with Vulcan than human,’ referencing the *Star Trek*, the hyper-cerebral alien creatures.

“I love my dad to death, and I’ve always felt very connected to him. He has a sensitivity to him that is very boyish. I think when I read the script, I took a huge page out of living my life with him. Rachel has said [Shane] is autistic, so I think I knew how it should look. I empathized with him a lot, immediately.”

Autism exists on a spectrum, which means that it appears in a range of forms. Some individuals develop typical capabilities in terms of speech and language, and develop exceptional skills, but struggle with lifelong social and behavioural differences. Others may have challenges in communication, sensory sensitivities, and behavioural issues, such as excessive tantrums, repetitive behaviours, aggression, and self-harm.

Many autistic people can mask or “socially camouflage” their autistic traits. This means, like Shane, they often go undiagnosed or receive diagnoses as adults. The portrayal of Shane shows that autism touches individuals in many areas and is part of who they are, but it isn’t all of who they are. Shane is on the spectrum, but his autism is not the entire focus of his character.

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