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How a Sweet, Horny Hockey Show Rewrote the Rules of Independent TV

Accent Aigu Entertainment turned a \$200,000 lowball offer and a rabid BookTok fandom into the game-changing global hit 'Heated Rivalry.'

BY **SCOTT ROXBOROUGH** SEPTEMBER 7, 2026



The story of Accent Aigu Entertainment, the Canadian production company behind 2026's [global TV breakout *Heated Rivalry*](#), began with a love story — between two dogs.

Brendan Brady had been brought on as a line producer. Both Tierney and Brady had dogs: Graham, a Lab/hound mutt, and Murphy, a black Labradoodle.

“Murphy’s a boy. Graham is a girl. I know that’s confusing, but that’s crucial,” says Tierney. “We brought them together, and our dogs fell in love. That’s our meet-cute. For the next season, when we came back to do more *Letterkenny*, they got us a place where we shared a backyard so the dogs could play together.”

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“That was basically our lake house,” jokes Brady, referencing a **much-memed scene** from the season one finale of *Heated Rivalry*. “We decided to take it to the next level.”

In 2023, after finishing *Letterkenny* and working on the first two seasons of its spinoff, *Shoresy*, Tierney and Brady left to launch Accent Aigu Entertainment. (The name, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Tierney’s Quebecois Francophone roots, was chosen “after several libations,” Brady admits.)

The plan was to make independent TV in a new way that was both faster and cheaper without sacrificing creative vision. Cutting-edge TV on a budget. “The cost-effective element was what we were really excited about,” Brady says. “With Jacob’s amazing ability as a director and my experience as a line producer, we understood we could change the way production is made.”

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Three years and one low-budget Canadian queer hockey romance later, Tierney and Brady are more than just the flavor of the moment. Accent Aigu Entertainment stands as a model for something the **international** TV business is scrambling to

Tierney and Brady applied their cost-saving strategies on the low-budget *Letterkenny* to *Heated Rivalry*.

LINDSAY SARAZIN/HULU

The Accent Aigu method was honed on *Letterkenny* and its legendarily tight shoots. “People talk about how low-budget *Heated Rivalry* was,” notes Tierney, “but we shot six episodes of *Letterkenny* season one in 18 days. As a director-showrunner, my task was to create an aesthetic where we could do that and have it still be creative and visually appealing.”

It starts with the scripts. On *Letterkenny*, Tierney and Keeso wrote “long scenes that were very still, not a lot of entrances and exits. Not a lot of movement,” says Tierney. “You can cover that in an aesthetically pleasing way so that the limitations turn into a choice. It’s a big master, you cover the close-ups, and then you’re done. Eight pages, eight minutes of the show, in like an hour and a half.”

Hudson Williams, who plays Shane Hollander on *Heated Rivalry*, recalls the same approach on that show.

“Jacob would use these long ‘oners,’ which are technically harder to achieve but if successful do save time over standard coverage,” he says. “They also look more cinematic than most TV shows.”

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The standard model of making television involves having multiple directors shoot each season, hired guns who come in to do one or two episodes each. Accent Aigu likes to lock in one or two directors for a whole season. (Tierney directed all six episodes of *Heated Rivalry* season one and will direct all of season two.)

shoot more like an independent film, location for location.”

(L to R): *Heated Rivalry* stars Connor Storrie, Hudson Williams, director Jacob Tierney, producer Brendan Brady on the set of season 1. SABRINA-LANTOS

Adds Brady, “If you have an actor who you only need in one location or two locations, you can get them in for a day or two, as opposed to having them come in once a week for five weeks. It’s a model —especially in the Canadian system where budgets are restricted — that’s a very smart way to get television made. An independent film model for independent TV.”

The original plan was to apply the Accent Aigu model to comedy. Then Tierney, who during the pandemic had become a voracious audiobook listener, discovered the hockey-romance subgenre and Rachel Reid’s *Game Changers* novels. The sweet and smutty tales involving same-sex romances between professional hockey players were below the radar of most television producers, but they were exploding on BookTok and had a fiercely devoted fan base. Tierney slid into Reid’s Instagram DMs and asked if anyone had optioned the rights. Nobody had, and Reid, a *Letterkenny* fan, was in.

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Jacob Tierney and Brendan Brady honed their “quality TV on a budget” style on cult Canadian sitcom *Letterkenny*. COURTESY OF LINDSAY SARAZIN/HULU

Tierney adapted Reid’s second novel, *Heated Rivalry*, which follows two Major League Hockey stars, Canadian Shane Hollander (Williams) and Russian Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) — fictional stand-ins for actual on-ice rivals Sidney Crosby and Alexander Ovechkin — who are drawn together into an intense, sweaty love affair. Tierney wrote the script on spec and pitched it to Bell Media, the owner of Crave, *Letterkenny*’s home network. Following the success of *Bridgerton* and *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, he knew Bell Media was looking for a romance series. But *Heated Rivalry*, with its queer storylines and graphic sex, felt risky — especially for Bell, which in addition to being the home of HBO in Canada, is the home of hockey broadcasting.

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“I read the first script and thought, ‘This is going to be special — [either] an insane flop or a real thing,’” Justin Stockman, vp content development and programming at Bell Media, told the *Toronto Star*. “Reading the second episode, I was sure I was going to get fired because it’s probably the most racy of all the episodes. But I thought, ‘This is worth getting fired over.’”

Produced for roughly CA \$3 million (about \$2.2 million) an episode — a fraction of comparable HBO-level drama budgets — *Heated Rivalry* shot for 36 days in and around Toronto and Hamilton in spring 2025, doubling Ontario soundstages for Moscow, New York and a Las Vegas hotel room.

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The show leaned in on Accent Aigu’s playbook of long, unbroken takes and efficient indie film-style production.

(L to R): Jacob Tierney and Brendan Brady share a laugh on the set *Heated Rivalry*. SABRINA-LANTOS

“Their approach was always, ‘Test it with less, and if it’s not enough, do more;’ ” Williams recalls. “In episode two, there’s the ice cream scene [set in Sochi, Russia]. At first it was just some chairs and tables on the volume stage, with the LED volume doing everything else. [But] it looked so fake that they scrapped the shoot. When we came back, they’d built a cafe and used longer lenses to make the background more out of focus. They tried less, and when it didn’t work, they added more.”

Adds Storrie: “They prioritized the people, the connection and the world-building over having millions of resources. They played to their strengths — they were fast, precise and prepared.”

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On set, Brady kept morale up by periodically wandering into tense scenes in character as an invented superfan of Shane and Ilya.

“He’d show up in the shower scene,” says Williams. “He’d do this dumb-jock-guy voice and say something like, ‘Hell yeah, fellas, I’m feeling it too!’ in relation to a certain excited appendage.”

romance story that doesn't end in tragedy, and the large female demographic, the "wine mums" who make up the core contingent of Reid's readership.

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"What we knew from the fans of the [*Heated Rivalry*] books is that they're evangelical," says Tierney. "They knock on doors, they tell their friends. They spread the good news online and on social media."

The show was designed to serve the superfans. Instead of a conventional will-they-or-won't-they relationship drama, Tierney follows the books and gets straight to the sex. The approach annoyed some critics, but the fans loved it. When the first steamy 90-second trailer of the show dropped late last year, it exploded online, spawning a thousand TikTok memes. They knew they had something special.

Connor Storie and Hudson Williams in *Heated Rivalry*. COURTESY OF HBO MAX/PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE SPORTING PRESS

Taking the series global, however, was a different challenge. Tierney and Brady held the IP for the show and had presold Canadian rights to Bell, so *Heated Rivalry* was less attractive for the global streamers — Netflix, Amazon or Apple — which like to buy all rights worldwide. And, outside Canada, few networks saw the commercial appeal of a horny hockey show featuring a lot of gay sex.

"We were given a comically low offer, like \$200,000," says Tierney. "It was either 200 grand an episode or 200 grand for all six. For the world! And we'd have to pay for the dubbing and subtitles. Basically, it would have cost us to do the deal."

The show was saved by a buyer with a different appetite: HBO, which acquires territory by territory rather than insisting on the whole world. Jason Butler, HBO and HBO Max senior vp global content planning and programming, was an early booster and brought *Heated Rivalry* to HBO CEO Casey Bloys, who snatched it up for the

Neon in New Zealand.

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When the U.S. and Australia deals were finalized, HBO decided to go day-and-date with the Canadian premiere — with three weeks’ notice. “We could not believe the level of speed we were dealing with,” Brady says. “Between Nov. 1, when the show premiered, to Dec. 26, we were literally still finishing episodes.”

“I was in the editing room, saying, ‘That music cue is wrong,’ while things are exploding online around the show,” Tierney recalls. “Ten days after the finale aired, we were at the Golden Globes party.”

The explosion, when it came, was fast and total. *Heated Rivalry* was Crave’s biggest original series debut on record, with viewership up nearly 400 percent in its first week; a second-season renewal followed within days. On HBO Max, the show reached an average of 10.6 million viewers per episode in the U.S., making it the platform’s most watched acquired scripted series in history. Streaming minutes grew from roughly 30 million in its first week to more than 300 million by the season finale.

Weeks after *Heated Rivalry* premiered, Storrie and Williams were presenting at the Golden Globes. RICH POLK/2026GG

“When we acquired it, I had some sense that it would make some noise,” Bloys tells *THR*. “But over the course of two to three weeks, it was just steady growth. It was growing on the platform, growing online, growing in media ... like a hockey stick, you know, up and to the right.” (Or just like, Brendan and Tierney might add, an accent *aigu*.)

“I think what people responded to is the combination of the sex and the sweetness; I can’t think of another show that has that combination,” says Bloys. “There’s a sweetness to the story of Hudson and Connor, seeing them go from being waiters to

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If there's a single lesson Accent Aigu wants the industry to take from all this, it's about paying attention, early and seriously, to underserved audiences who are already organizing themselves online. "For years, TV executives have assumed certain genres only appeal to niche audiences," says Brady. "What's happening here proves otherwise."

Accent Aigu has since formalized its growth spurt into an actual company: Tierney and Brady, formerly co-presidents, have become chief creative officer and CEO, respectively, adding an entire C-suite, including Jayme Alter Wilson as president and Craig Merritt as CFO, with Lori Fischburg as the new head of production and Liane Cunje as development executive and producer. It's built to scale up a slate rather than shepherd a single show.

Heated Rivalry's Christina Chang, Brady, Robbie G.K., Tierney and Nadine Bhabha at the 2026 GLAAD Media Awards. VIVIEN KILLILEA/GETTY IMAGES

The global success of *Heated Rivalry*, Tierney admits, "is not necessarily replicable." What is, he argues, is the Accent Aigu approach of trusting a genuinely weird, specific creative vision and producing for the most passionate fans.

"If you want to break through the noise, trust somebody to do something weird," he says. "Whether it's Taylor Sheridan or the guy that created *Squid Game* in South Korea, or Richard Gadd with *Baby Reindeer* or us with *Heated Rivalry*. If you let a weird person do a weird thing, people might pay attention to it. You might break through the noise and get that big return."

If *Heated Rivalry* has a lesson for executives or the industry writ large, that's it, Tierney says. "It's definitely not, 'Let's do more hockey shows.'"

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