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MTV's Pedro -- reality TV and a life that still matters

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Pedro, an MTV docudrama about the life and death of Pedro Zamora, is a powerful statement about a man who died way too young but who made his life matter. The film, which was written by Academy-Award-winner Dustin Lance Black (*Milk*), is also a reminder and testament to the power and social impact of the often-maligned genre of reality television.

Premiering at 8 p.m. Wednesday on the MTV and LOGO cable channels, the 90-minute production tells the life story of Zamora, who emigrated as a child to the U.S. in 1980 as part of the Mariel boatlift from Cuba. About 125,000 refugees were allowed to leave the island by Cuban leader Fidel Castro in hopes of crossing to the United States in a flotilla of ill-equipped boats and ships. To its credit, the film includes bits of Zamora's life in Cuba as a child and the agonizing separation from several of his teenage brothers when the Cuban authorities denied them the chance to leave because they were of military age.

The focus of the film, though, is the span from when Zamora was 17 years old and found out he was HIV-positive to 22 when he died of AIDS. Shortly after getting the diagnosis he became an activist -- speaking to high school students in the Miami area

about the disease. But he became a national and international figure in 1994 when he appeared on MTV's *The Real World: San Francisco* as the first openly gay, HIV-positive lead character on the series -- and in the history of prime-time TV. *Pedro* is made by Bunim-Murray, the production company that created *The Real World*.

The film plays on several levels, but in the end they all dovetail into a moving meditation on Zamora's final days. He died right after the final episode aired, and millions who had followed his journey on the show mourned as if they knew him as a friend.

Long-time fans of *The Real World* should love the backstage details that appear in the film from the San Francisco season. Remember Puck, the gross bicycle messenger, and his confrontations with Zamora and other house guests? The film provides a juicy backstage look at that dynamic -- including Puck's ouster.

Without saying a word about it, *Pedro* also makes a profound statement about levels of reality in our TV viewing these days. What we are seeing at times during *Pedro* is a docudrama about the off-camera, backstage behavior of *Real World* characters as seen through the lens of actors playing camera operators from Bunim-Murray. I hope you got that, because I am not sure I do. But as you watch, think about how many layers of reality within reality you are looking at.

Near the end of the film, when the people whom the characters played are shown onscreen, the effect is a little overwhelming.

Emotionally, the ending with Zamora's death is totally overwhelming. It's intense and deeply affecting. That's a credit both to the way Zamaora lived the last five years of his life -- and the way in which the film captures that journey.

(Above: Bunim/Murray Productions photo of Alex Loynaz as Pedro Zamora and Justina Machado as Mily)