

TORONTO '08 CRITICS NOTEBOOK | "Pedro" Does Justice To Activist;

by Steve Ramos (September 9, 2008)
excerpts

Longtime fans of MTV's "**The Real World**" reality TV series and cast member **Pedro Zamora**, an openly gay cast member from 1994 who died of complications from AIDS while the show was being aired, may be convinced that no film can do Zamora's tragic story justice. First-time director **Nick Oceano** proves them wrong with "Pedro," a compelling youth drama equal to the heartache of Zamora's short life, one that transpired in the media spotlight.

Pedro (newcomer **Alex Loynaz**), is a young Latino in Miami. An activist teaching HIV/AIDS awareness, Pedro finds a powerful platform on the popular MTV reality series. When he becomes ill, he refuses to hide his diminishing health.

Instead, he uses the show to spread his message of safe sex and tolerance to a wider audience. His is a message of hope, and "Pedro" more coming-of-age drama than illness movie, more social message melodrama than TV movie of the week, does Pedro's story justice.

Oceano, who has yet to graduate from film school, shows the technical skills necessary to be a filmmaker in the professional ranks. Editor **Jonathan Alberts** and cameraman **Mark Putnam** keeps the storytelling fluid and cinematic. But it's "Pedro's" script that's most impressive; a strong biography tale from **Dustin Lance Black**, scriptwriter for the upcoming Harvey Milk drama starring **Sean Penn** as the famous gay San Francisco politician and activist.

Alex Loynaz, making his debut as a lead actor, is a worthy hero; charismatic, handsome, heartfelt and compelling. **Justina Machado**, also a new face to movie audiences, complements Loynaz perfectly as Pedro's caring but less tolerant sister.

Produced by "**Quinceanera**" co-directors **Richard Glatzer** and **Wash Westmoreland**, "Pedro" was originally planned by financiers **Bunim/Murray Films** as a straight-to-TV release. But "Pedro" would be a smart acquisition, especially in the U.S. market where Zamora's profile remains high. With a film that claims dramatic material as heartfelt and engaging as "Pedro," its chances at crossing over to numerous audiences, gay, Latino, MTV fans, as well as traditional art-house moviegoers, looks bright.

