Comic Belief

November 1, 2000 By Shana Naomi Krochmal

Long before CBS' Big Brother, *PWA Pedro Zamora lived out his own version of* Survivor, *the only compelling story to come out of nine seasons of MTV's* maison vérité, The Real World. *After his 1994 death, two housemates from the show -- med student Pam Ling, who became an AIDS doc, and her now-partner,* ***Judd Winick*** *-- toured the country, filling in for Zamora on the college lecture circuit. A Marvel Comics animator, Winick turned his HIV shtick into a graphic novel -- publishing-speak for a book-length comic -- called* Pedro and Me *(Henry Holt), also online at* http://www.pedroandme.com/. *Winick talks to* POZ *about Zamora's gallows humor, lying to the producers and what sets him apart from* Real World*er-turned-VJ Eric Nies.*

***POZ*: I heard the first four years of the show are going into syndication.**

Winick: We'll be like *The Brady Bunch*. It would be nice if the show was outdated, but little has been done about AIDS since 1994 except back-slapping. This time Pedro's message will get a much larger audience. He was the only altruistic person to ever be on the show. For everyone else -- including me -- it was about being on TV and free rent. For Pedro it was much bigger.

Like your new book?

I did 80 lectures in the 18 months after Pedro died, and whenever I stopped, I felt guilty. So I thought, "This is how I know to tell stories." I wanted it to be accessible for kids, so I tried to tell it simply. But Pedro had this constant, dark AIDS humor that I couldn't make work. He'd say: "Can you carry that for me? It's heavy, and I have AIDS. I could die any moment." They couldn't do it on TV, either.

Also left on the cutting-room floor -- but in the book -- was the severity of Pedro's illness. Did he ask you to lie on-camera?

It was all unspoken, but Pam knew from day one that it was serious -- his CD4 count was soon down to 32. We each got one get-out-of-jail-free card from the producers as to what they would edit out. Pedro said, "Don't show me throwing up or having a really bad day. Respect my privacy." He didn't want to be the sickly AIDS boy.

But he wasn't well.

He really was OK for a very long time. But it was stressful for him to be living there. Who knows what would have happened if we demanded he leave for his own good? We're still haunted by that. If he'd hung on another nine months, he could have gone on the cocktail. You wonder. . . .

Having an HIV specialist in the house must keep you up-to-date now that you're back on the road, lecturing.

We're always talking about AIDS at home -- which of our friends have changed their dosing, which protease they're on, what's working, what's not. It's a part of our lives.

What's the difference between this book and Eric Nies hosting *The Grind*?

I don't have to keep my abs as hard, thankfully. Look, I know people are going to say this is self-promotion. People ask what right I have. What's better? That I do nothing? This idea that I'm jumping on the bandwagon -- it's been six years. In '94, Pedro was all anyone could talk about. Now there's nothing. Let them criticize. I still think it's an important story to tell.

For a history of graphic AIDS, visit *www.nyc comicbook museum.org* and check out the fledgling group's first permanent exhibit, *Comic Books and AIDS: What's the Story?* A half-hour documentary produced with Cable Positive aired in New York in July and will be shown nationwide. (Call 212.712.9454 to help bring it to your local PBS channel.) An off-line exhibit can be viewed in the Big Apple this winter.

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