

TAKING ON FILMDOM'S HEAVY ODDS

Totler film distributor gives AIDS-related VICTIMS a shot.



By Anne Rose

Hollywood's recent rash of box office disappointments aren't discouraging L.A.'s Studio Three Film Corporation from throwing the dice on a low budget film about heterosexual AIDS. Why not? Because, despite the odds, "The VICTIMS", a simple love story made quite palatable by the superb performance of its Star, Roger Pretto, may turn out a winner.

Filmed in South Florida, VICTIMS is a story about a self-made millionaire who gets AIDS under most unlikely circumstances. It's also the first feature film to board the subject of heterosexual AIDS. Bob Cheren, head of Studio Three—the official distributors of the film—plans to open the film later this year in Los Angeles and New York. Now, why a young distribution company wants to take on a film about AIDS is anyone's guess. One would think the small players in the film business would be wise to soak in the lukewarm protectiveness of the tried and true. It's a policy that, at best, guards against some of the nasty nicks the big leaguers often give themselves. But, albeit the difficulties one can expect in trying to market a film about AIDS, Studio Three still sees VICTIMS as a film that will sell...and sell well.

Cheren is convinced VICTIMS will appeal to moviegoers who seek grown up

themes that entertain while presenting important social issues to think about. Sure, in this case, it happens to be the World's scariest which people aren't all that prone to pay to be reminded of. But VICTIMS is not really all its subject suggests. It's not about the disease of AIDS as such. And it sure doesn't

lecture us about it either. There's already a lot of that going on. VICTIMS is nothing more than a gentle, easy to digest love story about an

immigrant who carves out a piece of the American dream for himself, from scratch, only to lose it all, well, almost all, to AIDS.

VICTIMS's flat try at being dramatically meaningful shows it is not of exceptional filmmaking stock. It has noticeable flaws which start with a romantic storyline that is outdatedly naive and end with the film sidestepping the raw and more dramatic realities of AIDS. Some find the film takes an over simplistic, veneered view of the dreaded disease. But then, on closer analysis, VICTIMS is not out to be an intricate, dramatic testament of the social, physical and

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psychological ruin AIDS is capable of inflicting upon its victims. Because of the obvious modesty of its production effort and its inherent naiveness, VICTIMS simply can't stretch that far. However, imperfect as it may be in that respect, VICTIMS manages quite effectively, nonetheless, to keep audiences interested while it issues its very serious warning about the dangers of casual Sex which lurk at *all* levels of our society. It does more in this respect than a hundred TV spots.

Of course VICTIMS could have been better made, its message perhaps more aptly presented. But that doesn't keep this daring little film from fulfilling a necessary social role. After all, it helps to remind people about the unforgiving nature of AIDS's risks, even under the most remote of chances. It's a film particularly suited for sexually active couples, for it makes them aware that they are well within AIDS's indiscriminating reach.

And in this the movie has social value.

VICTIMS's brilliance lies in the way it chooses its AIDS victims among the less expecting, privileged heterosexuals, like the wealthy and very happy Paul Genesco, played superbly by Roger Pretto, a Florida based actor we're sure to be seeing more of in the future.

Genesco is an illegal immigrant who tenaciously seeks and manages to earn his wealth through hard and honest work. Successful real estate developer, and devoted family man, Genesco faces the worst of his horrors at the peak of his biggest triumph. "One mistake, one damned mistake" he bewails in surrendered dismay at the terrorizing results of his only extramarital indiscretion. Justifiably so, for it wrecks

immediate havoc on his life as well as that of his wife and family. "If it happened to a guy like him, it can happen to me" the movie impresses so well in our minds.

The tragic overtones of its subject notwithstanding, VICTIMS is not the heavy psychological melodrama one would expect. In fact we're set up for the heavier dramatic notes with mild humor and soap opera romantics that pleasantly distract us from thinking too much about the tragedy we are expecting to arrive. We chuckle and sigh throughout more than half of the film before we pull out handkerchiefs to mop up the handful of tears.

VICTIMS is easy to watch and drives its point straight home. Its message is packaged simply without profound literary pretenses in a story that follows a comfortably familiar

premise. Genesco attains success and happiness in a way that reaffirms the notion that those driven by honest ambitions can make it in the land of

opportunity which America still is. And when the tempest we've been expecting makes its somber appearance, VICTIMS allows our emotions to grapple with tragedy without strapping us into a psychological straitjacket.

If not an excellent film, VICTIMS is surely a reasonably good one. It's not *badly* made at all as one hysterically irate Miami critic accused it of being. In spite of its unpolished production values—quite understandable for a lean budgeted film starring unknown actors—VICTIMS comes through, nonetheless, as a timely attempt to address the plight of heterosexuals in their own encounters with AIDS's wholesale probabilities. With AIDS seeping more and more into the seemingly insulated world of the heterosexual, Studio Three feels the right audience for VICTIMS is out there.

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Studio Three has another good reason for banking on VICTIMS's potentials. The film already had a surprisingly successful trial run in South Florida. Mochon, the Jewish producer who personally bankrolled it against all odds, released the film successfully in over 30 theaters in and around the Miami area a little over two years ago. For about 10 weeks this million dollar movie held its own quite well at the box office, actually running an unbelievable close third to *Black Rain* and *Sea of Love*—the two Hollywood multi-million biggies showing at the time. In some theaters VICTIMS even played to sellout houses. With this record behind the film, Cheren has little doubt he can do equally as well in other ethnic diverse population centers like Miami.

Ironically, if things hadn't gone wrong for Mochon, Cheren would not have had the chance to try his luck at VICTIMS. For a while there it looked as if it would end up with a major distributor. The film's South Florida statistics generated some quick offers from some of the heavyweights back then. But Mochon blew it. He was too hungry and cocky, and turned them down. He was convinced he had *agreat* film to offer (he was wrong) and should be paid handsomely up front for it (wrong again). No dice, said Hollywood. That ain't the way the game is played around here. "Oh

During its first trial run in Florida this thinly budgeted film about AIDS ran a close third to Black Rain and Sea of Love.

Offers from major distributors came quickly, but the producer blew it. VICTIMS soon found itself on the shelf destined for dusty oblivion...that is, until Cheren took notice.

yeah!" boasted Mochon. Yeah, replied Hollywood, and slammed the doors shut. Any other takers? You kidding! A film about AIDS? Pass.

Mochon considered taking on the distribution of the film himself; but lacking the bucks to put up the right fight, he was forced to throw in the towel. VICTIMS soon found itself on the shelf, destined for dusty oblivion...that is, until Cheren took notice. This time a quick deal was struck with a much more humble and realistic Mochon quite ready to sign.

Studio Three is quite happy with what it got. VICTIMS has been selling well in foreign markets. Cheren is considering a new US opening before the year's out. If the Miami audiences are any cue of what he can expect, Studio Three could end up with a nice sleeper payoff.

But, this time, his team is going to have to play it smart in how it goes about selling the film. VICTIMS is not by far a master rendering of inexpensive filmmaking like *Sex, Live Videotapes*. VICTIMS's flaws are notable, and critics are sure to pick at them. It would be wise for Cheren not to submit the film for critical review—a grave mistake Mochon made in Florida. Some critics there lashed out at the film, not so much

because they thought it bad, but rather because of the way Mochon tried to sell it—arrogantly boasting of its obviously unmerited "greatness" and promoting it via the offensive print slogan "If You Don't Want To Catch AIDS, Go See The Victims". That did the film its worst damage. Reviews might have still been negative, but they wouldn't have

been so vicious.

Learning from past mistakes, Cheren should leave the judgment of the film to the audience. And he should steer clear of controversy by adopting more responsible and honest selling tactics. VICTIMS proved it can sell itself once people are motivated to see it. What rescued the film from the jaws of the Miami critics, was that the TV spot—which did not hype the film's

"greatness" nor carry the polemical slogan—sold a fair amount of tickets initially. For the majority of those who took their chances and paid to see obscure actors in an obscure movie about AIDS, VICTIMS proved to be quite enjoyable. They recommended it enthusiastically to others, and, as we all know, nothing sells a film better.

VICTIMS's ultimate success, however, must surely be attributed to Roger Pretto's skillful performance and his total command of the screen. This Panamanian-born hunk projects a powerful and believably sensitive screen presence that oozes charisma and is very pleasant to watch. He is truly excellent in the film.

Once VICTIMS is out in the theaters Pretto should have few problems landing new roles. Flawlessly bilingual and more James Caanish than Edward Olmos in looks, Pretto lies at the outer edges of the Latino stereotype which most Hispanic actors with accents have to struggle against.

Looks and accent-free speech alone, however, will not guarantee Pretto's success. That will come because he is a versatile and capable performer. With a variety of professional stage, TV and film roles to his credit, Pretto has shown a

keen ability to play a wide range of characters, ethnic or not. And he usually dominates his scenes with the power of his image and his well centered naturality. This guy has Star quality indeed.

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Lamentably, the real brilliance of Pretto's performance in VICTIMS must have ended on the editing floor, for the story scampers too hastily through scenes that show signs of excessive surgery. The obvious purpose of it is to get Genesco's climb

to the top out of the way quickly, in order to get to the drama (weakly resolved) that unfolds after AIDS enters the picture.

Better scriptwriting and more scene embroidery would have graced this film with better filmmaking virtues, and it would have done wonders for evidencing the true worth of Pretto's qualifications as a top rate actor.

VICTIMS, the movie, fails to measure up to the levels of filmmaking excellence; but Pretto, the actor, weighs in as a promising screen contender by the manner in which he rescues the movie's unquestionable values and turns them into a respectable box office prize.

Don't miss "The VICTIMS", it will at least give you more of your money's worth than some of Hollywood's limp "giants". ■

[Anne Rose is a freelance writer and Television and Film critic. Roger Pretto currently lives in New York City.]

298 5th avenue
New York, NY 10001-4592
(212) 532-5860