

NEW YORK P R E S S

ROOM SERVICE

One hotel room, many lives

By Leonard Jacobs

Room 314

Directed by Michael Knowles

If voyeurism in the era of YouTube is the newest recreational drug, Room 314 offers a major high. Shot in a single room at a Fairfield Inn in New Jersey, Michael Knowles' film examines pairs of couples with different relationships—like Nick and Stacey, who drunkenly hooked up the night before and now face a little embarrassment and lots of irony; like David and Caly, emotionally damaged exes who must reconcile their baggage and their apparently unchanged affections.

By filming in a claustrophobic hotel room and through the use of astonishingly long takes, Knowles leaves very little to the imagination: Room 314 depicts situations so achingly, relentlessly real that it's as if you really are the proverbial fly on the wall. Yet unlike, say, Plaza Suite, there are few contrivances to be found within the characters' interpersonal dynamics, fleshed out by actors that are almost shockingly rooted in realism.

If each scene is slight on story, you're nevertheless lured in because the characters invariably seem fascinating as they stand on unsteady ground—here's one who's unsure of what to say and is reduced to cutely clumsy ums and ers; there's one who knows how she feels but won't articulate it. And into all these character wells are poured a flourishing and attractive cast of New York actors, each of whom apparently subscribe to Knowles' view that subtlety can speak volumes.

Consider the second scene, "Harry," for example. Michael Laurence plays a suicidal husband so far down into the pit of suicidal depression that the unexpected arrival of his wife, Gretchen, played by Sarah Bennett, enrages him. Up until now, you've had the sinking feeling that Knowles will let Laurence radically overplay it—watch how it takes Harry forever to pull out the bottle of pills and start tossing back shot after shot of hard liquor, all the while fighting the urge to cry. Not only is the timing of Gretchen's arrival inspired, but what transpires between them defies the expected convention. It's a thrilling scene.

After Matthew Del Negro and Joelle Carter, in "Nick and Stacey," rub their eyes and check each other out in the harsh and sober light of day—watching them gradually realize what they've done and who they really are is the perfect way to kick off the film. Their scene invites you into that spirit of voyeurism so well that that by the time you arrive at the film's extended fifth and final scene—culminating in David and Caly steamily consummating their relationship, however imperfect and idiosyncratic it might be—you're not only comfortable peeking into the lives of these people, but glad to have had the privilege.