



This article by Kevin L. Carter was prepared for the September 19, 2007 issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper. All rights reserved.

New Jersey Film Festival: Michael Knowles

By the time you are reading this, Michael Knowles will be on his way to the West Coast, permanently. The filmmaker and actor, who comes from southern New Jersey and who has been living and working in New York for the past 15 years, has finally made the decision to take himself, and his dreams, to Los Angeles.

First, he will be going, via motorcycle, to Port Townsend, WA, and Tacoma, to promote his film "Room 314" at two film festivals, and then he will swing down to Los Angeles, or, more specifically, Culver City, where he will rent part of a friend's house and work on promoting his acting career.

Knowles is the writer, director and producer, and one of the stars of "Room 314," which will be screened at the New Jersey Film Festival at Rutgers University on Friday through Sunday, October 19 to 21, along with "Earano" and "The Disillusionment of Anglesea Briggs."

Knowles, 38, is a native of Gibbsboro. His dad, Lloyd, sold cars and homes and drove a forklift before settling down and running a gas station and auto repair shop. His mother, Linda, was a hairdresser.

Much of Knowles' motivation to become a performer comes from his background; he is a middle son, sandwiched between his older brother, Lloyd Jr., and younger brother, Brian. He is, as the Myspace/Facebook generation puts it, or at least he used to be, an attention whore.

"When you look at most artists, they need a certain amount of attention. That's why they are artists," Knowles says. "Some continue to need that attention throughout life, and some evolve. They begin to understand more fully who they are, they become more of whole, actual people, and they begin to give back rather than just receive."

He first got the acting bug at Eastern High in Voorhees, from which he graduated in 1987. During his senior year a buddy talked him into auditioning for "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder. "I got the part of the milkman, Howie Newsome, and I really enjoyed it. It must have been the middle child syndrome. I loved the fact that when I spoke, everyone listened to me."

As a youngster, Knowles was also involved in sports. During his late teens, he was a member of the United States national roller hockey team, even competing in the Pan American Games. He also began studying martial arts, achieving second-degree black belt status in Moo Duk Kwan Tang Soo Do, primarily a striking art from Korea.

Knowles has not practiced martial arts for years but the training has had an indelible impact on his personality - and his acting. "The actual punching and kicking is part of the practice and discipline but if you ask if I am practicing the art, yes, in some way, I am still studying. In life,

you are constantly assessing a situation, defusing and deflecting energy. You use it completely and totally in acting. Setting up and performing a scene is so much like sparring. It's unbelievable how much everything is simple and connected. You can look at the Buddhist influence in the arts and see just how much everything is connected. Everything is pretty much everything."

After high school Knowles made a decision to make acting his profession. While living in south Jersey and Philadelphia he began studying acting with a private teacher, Anthony Sippio, who employs the Lee Strasburg/Method acting style. "It involved a lot of getting in touch with who I was. That is the basis for Method acting, using your own stuff to help understand your character. When you think about it, that makes a lot of sense."

Eventually, in 1997, Knowles moved to New York, where he continued to study acting and writing. He also had a band, the Michael Knowles Band, for which he played guitar and served as frontman.

To make ends meet, Knowles worked first as a bartender, and then as a personal trainer. He also studied acting in the city with a private teacher named Tom Noonan. Noonan helped Knowles' acting but it was his writing classes that steered Knowles into a new direction.

"As an actor I felt that I really needed to learn how to write," he says. "I had dabbled a bit on my own but I needed to really sit down and write." In 2001 Knowles wrote a play, "Room 314." The play enjoyed an off-off-Broadway run and received good reviews. As a result, Knowles decided to make the play into a film. "Room 314" is a series of five vignettes set in a hotel room. Each vignette focuses on a couple dealing with a variety of issues, from sexual relationships to infidelity to alcoholism to suicide.

As a writer, says Knowles, he just allowed the characters to develop on their own. "It was not very much an idea; it was more of writing from a place of emotion within myself, to let the characters do what they want to do and let them get what they need without me getting in their way."

Knowles acknowledges that many of the characters in the film have lots in common with their creator. "They're all close to me," he says. The process of creating "Room 314" also taught him a lot about himself. "I learned that I have a lot of sadness, anger, and loneliness in me, and a lot of confusion but I also learned that I am pretty wise."

All of these factors have combined to make Knowles "a very driven person," he says. "I really think that if I work hard, if I get good at something, that is a way to get attention. And if I set my mind to something, I am going to get really good at it."

Knowles recently finished a documentary, "Nikki," about a 12-year-old girl with the debilitating neurological disorder Rett Syndrome. And he has acted in episodes of "Sex and the City" and "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit." He has also expanded the first vignette in "Room 314," "Nick and Stacey," into a feature film.

So Knowles will spend at least the next few months or years, anyway, in Los Angeles, chasing the next phase of his dream. He is happy and content with the direction in which his life has gone.

"You'll never hear me complain," says Knowles. "I love the life I live. I wish I had more money, so I could give more money to Rett Syndrome, so that I could have a lot easier time making my movies. You know what though? I'm definitely going to do OK."