



Room 314

reviewed by JOE LEYDON
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Five mini-dramas unfold within close quarters in "Room 314," Michael Knowles' no-frills filmization of his Off Off Broadway play. Pic feels like a cross between an anthology of ambiguous short stories and a string of acting-class exercises. Thesping is first-rate across the board, but that may not be enough to lure ticket-buyers. (Even with marquee names, slightly similar "Tape" and "Chelsea Walls" couldn't draw crowds.) Still, limited theatrical play and appreciative reviews could generate interest in homevid release.

All the stories take place in a nondescript room of a midrange hotel in an unnamed city (presumably, but not definitely, New York). The first episode finds an attractive young woman (Joelle Carter) waking up lying next to a hunky football player (Matthew Del Negro) she only vaguely remembers meeting the night before. The setup smacks of faux Neil Simon, but her flummoxed reaction is genuinely amusing, and his unaffected gentlemanliness is pleasantly surprising.

The second segment raises the dramatic stakes: A suspicious wife (Sarah Bennett) barges in to discover her recovering alcoholic husband (Michael Laurence) is contemplating suicide, not infidelity.

The following two episodes -- a salesman (Knowles) fails to sell his co-worker (Robin Myhr) on adultery; a luckless fellow (Todd Swenson) is equally unlucky with a possibly psychotic pickup (Monique Vukovic) -- seem slightly more substantial.

The last and longest segment, the only one that does not play out in real time, is also the only one that achieves a satisfying climax in any sense of the term. A skittish young man (Michael Mosley), in town for his brother's wedding, has a difficult time opening up to his moody girlfriend (Jennifer Marlowe). "We are here to have a good time," he says, "and I'm not going to ruin it by telling you all my stupid thoughts." Of course, he isn't able to repress his emotions -- and his neediness -- indefinitely.

Obviously a labor of love for all parties involved, "Room 314" indicates Knowles -- who does multiple duties as helmer, editor, producer and co-lenser as well as writer and co-star -- has a fine-tuned gift for creating vivid characters with a minimum of dialogue, and a sure feel for establishing and sustaining tension, sexual or otherwise, within limited timespans.