

DVD Review: Strong Acting Bolsters Meandering '28 Hotel Rooms'

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- [28 Hotel Rooms](#) [2]
- [Chris Messina](#) [3]
- [DVD Review](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Marin Ireland](#) [6]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [7]
- [Matt Ross](#) [8]
- [Monogamy](#) [9]
- [Oscilloscope Laboratories](#) [10]
- [Up in the Air](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – It's taken quite a few movies for me to warm up to Chris Messina. Perhaps it wasn't his fault that he kept getting typecast as oafish, self-absorbed jerks. In my review of Dana Adam Shapiro's flawed Oscilloscope release, "Monogamy," I confessed that every time Messina's face showed up onscreen, I was "suddenly filled with the intense desire to punch it."

It's only been in the last year or so that I began to appreciate Messina's fearlessness as a performer. He isn't afraid to explore the dark terrain avoided by fellow actors more concerned with likability than truth. The same could be said of Zoe Kazan, whose debut feature script for the marvelous romance, "Ruby Sparks," gave Messina his best role to date as a typically suave ladykiller blindsided by the all-too-perfect woman who entered the life of his hopelessly neurotic brother.



DVD Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Yet Mark Ross' "28 Hotel Rooms" marks the first time in which Messina has shown any authentic trace of vulnerability onscreen, and that's not just because he goes full frontal. As a frustrated novelist who engages in a long-running affair on his travels with a seductive accountant (played by Marin Ireland), Messina exposes the raw need reverberating beneath his façade of blissful indifference. He repeatedly voices his belief that all relationships are doomed to be temporary and should be treated as such, but it's clear that with each successive meeting, he's become more and more attached to his lover, even as they each drift into committed relationships with other partners (his first big emotional outburst occurs after she fails to answer his text messages). Ross makes a bold choice in confining his film almost entirely within the hotel rooms where his unnamed couple meet, thus heightening the claustrophobia of their circumstantial connection. Are these people addicted to the honeymoon phase of a relationship, much like Michelle Williams' anti-heroine in "Take This Waltz"? Do they see each other as a mere "parentheses" in their respective life stories, evoking Vera Farmiga's memorable line to George Clooney in "Up in the Air"? Or is there a deeper meaning to their erotic encounters in room after room?



28 Hotel Rooms was released on DVD on February 12th, 2013.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Ross does a fine job of keeping viewers on their toes as each vignette hurls the audience into an altogether different atmosphere of tension, lust and conflicted angst. Like many an actor-turned-filmmaker, Ross is most interested in evoking richly layered, wholly believable work from his performers, and neither Messina nor Ireland disappoint (the score from Fall on Your Sword impeccably complements every sequence without drawing undue attention to itself). Unfortunately, it becomes clear in the film's final moments that Ross had no idea of how to end this picture, opting for an ambiguously hopeful wrap-up that rings entirely false. Just when the film appears to be heading for the poetic melancholia of Hans Canosa's "Conversations with Other Women," Ross disappointingly opts for sentiment that nearly derails the goodwill built from the preceding scenes. Its ending notwithstanding, Ross' directorial debut is still an impressive showcase for naturalistic thesping.

"28 Hotel Rooms" is presented in its 1.85:1 aspect ratio, and includes a standard 11-minute interview with Ross, who reveals his technique of shooting in long takes while allowing the performances to dictate the camerawork. Far more interesting are the half-hour of deleted scenes culled from around 49 hours of raw footage. They display the variety of directions in which the story could've gone, though its alternate ending is still too falsely upbeat for my taste. My advice: substitute the ending in the final cut with the alternate ending, but cut to black during the elevator ride. Now that would be a great cliffhanger.

'28 Hotel Rooms' is released by Oscilloscope Laboratories and stars Chris Messina and Marin Ireland. It was written and directed by Matt Ross. It was released on February 12th, 2013. It is not rated.

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