

# We'd like originality before checkout time



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TELEVISION

As every single person in Canada must know by now, Ken Finkleman's *At the Hotel* (CBC, 9 p.m.) looks gorgeous. Oodles have been written about it. The colours are lovely and the decor is to die for.

This is all true. The rich hues of gold and the patina of ancient polished oak are as significant in the six one-hour dramas as the people who perambulate through the set. In fact, you'll find more and better ideas for classy home decor than you'll find on a month of HGTV shows about sprucing up your digs.

You'll also find much more in *At the Hotel*, although at times the decor is a welcome distraction from the drama. *At the Hotel* is lovely, sometimes stunningly good drama, ambitious, clever and ingenious. At six hours, it is scaled big, but by the end of it all, it's lovely and trite.

Using a hotel setting as a microcosm of society is not a new idea,

nor is it a necessarily fruitful one. A hotel is full of secrets, as the world is. There is a discrepancy between surface glamour and behind-closed-doors despair, and a hotel setting propels the theme. Simultaneously, the distance between the rich guests and the working staff underlines that the world works on a class system. The guests and the staff inhabit the same space but are socially remote. These are conventional themes, and what is ultimately surprising about Ken Finkleman's latest work (co-written with Morwyn Brebner and Ellen Vanstone), is the conventionality of the thinking behind it.

*At the Hotel* is set at the Château Rousseau, a luxury hotel whose looks haven't faded but whose cachet certainly has. Each episode opens with black-and-white footage of a party there in the 1960s. There is a murder, and each of these opening sequences tells us a bit more about the events of that night.

In the present day, Lucy Knowlton (Martha Henry) owns the joint and lives in splendid isolation there, seemingly lost in a fog of memories, alcohol and drugs. Only her stern-faced servant Zlawko (Hrant Alianak) knows for sure what's going on. Lucy's brother wants to sell the joint and allow it to be redeveloped. Lucy's concerns

are for the hotel's glorious past and the odd assortment of artists and has-beens who live there cheaply.

Into the situation come a writer (Mathew Edison) who has been hired to write a history of the hotel, and Jenny (Natalie Lisinska), a new chambermaid who has to learn the ways and secrets of the hotel, both upstairs and downstairs. The writer character is never really developed, but Jenny emerges as a key character, her young and guileless eyes seeing and absorbing all that unfolds. She is also the witness to a murder, and the two murders, in the present day and in 1961, are the framing events of the sprawling series.

There is fine acting in *At the Hotel*. Martha Henry is emphatically good as the grande dame Lucy. Carlo Rota is superb as the calm, polite but cynical front-desk clerk Albert, and Lisinska is outstanding in the demanding role of Jenny. In fact, with about 100 roles, it's tricky to point out all of the excellent performances. However, it's among the hotel staff that the truly great work is done. Brandon McGibbon is superb as the sly, scamming bellhop Jeremy and Walter Alza is delicious as the testosterone-driven, boorish waiter Slavic.

There is fine direction and writing too. A scrambled and hilarious

bit of plotting about a baby in episode five is beautifully done.

Yet under the surface of the look, the deft direction and the fine acting, the substance is tiresomely predictable.

Flattered by his connections with powerful people, a young, ambitious journalist, Danny Book (Jonas Chernick), is easily persuaded to write an article condemning a political candidate for being a closeted gay man. When it turns out that Danny is a hypocrite and that he's made a deal with the devil, the dramatic oomph is missing because it's all so clichéd. There is hypocrisy is journalism and politics? Hold the front page! And, watching that segment, one wonders where Finkleman and his co-writers are setting *At the Hotel*. Is it Canada today? If so, the plotting is ludicrous. It feels like a cynical perspective on American politics being imposed by a writer from Canada, which, for heaven's sake, has numerous gay politicians.

Also, we have not one but two instances of past-it comedians staying at the hotel. First we get Maury Chaykin doing a fine turn as Jerry Mitchell, a drunk, despairing guy who is very reluctant to repeat his old routines with partner Anne (Kathleen Laskey). Sour and sozzled, Jerry is an undeveloped char-

acter. We're told that Jerry and Anne had a hit routine "30 years ago" but their material is more 1950s than 1970s. Later, we get comedian Marty Kay (Danny Wells), a toxic broth of belligerence and selfishness whose jokes are hideous. His long-suffering manager Norm (Aron Tager) leaves to take care of his ill wife and abandons him. Marty's eventual reaction to being left alone is, frankly, the most glaringly obvious and unnecessary dramatic thump in recent Canadian TV.

A segment involving a Roman Catholic priest (Alvaro D'Antonio) and a curious Jenny is cute for two minutes. When blood flows out of a faucet, the viewer can only groan at the obviousness of it. A turn by Don McKellar as a twerp of a music-video director is best forgotten.

*At the Hotel* is never monotonous, and many scenes lift it, temporarily, to entertaining drama. But thematically, it is disappointingly dull-witted. On this occasion, when Finkleman stretches for sharp observations about life as we live it, he offers us nothing that's cutting or even original. It's lovely to look at, often lively and entertaining, and entirely lacking in bite.

Check local listings.

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