

A close read of Michael Knowles's queer role in 'House of Shades'

The anti-LGBTQ+ pundit's character is a manipulative bisexual libertine bent on seducing an innocent student athlete.

By John Russell (https://www.lgbtqnation.com/author/john-russell/) Sunday, March 19, 2023





Michael Knowles (right) in *The House of Shades*
Photo: Screenshot


Long before he became a far-right crank perhaps most famous for calling for the eradication of “transgenderism,” (https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/rightwinger-calls-for-eliminating-transgenderism-but-says-he-didnt-mean-killing-people-no-one-is-buying-it/) *Daily Wire* host and demon expert (https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/02/conservative-pundit-claims-demons-are-always-trans/) Michael Knowles was that most beleaguered of all creatures: a wannabe actor. In the mid-2010s, he appeared in various web series and short films—including an uncredited role on the Steven Soderbergh’s *The Knick*.


Before *that*, however, he was a student at Yale, where he landed what may now go down in history as his most notable role starring in a student film called *House of Shades* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHwfg9LPARY). A clip from the 2012 short featuring Knowles’s queer character in bed with another man went semi-viral on Twitter (https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/rightwing-pundit-who-called-for-eradicating-transgenderism-played-a-gay-twink-in-a-movie/) this week, to the delight of LGBTQ+ users and allies who reveled in the hypocrisy of yet another

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(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/another-gop-lawmaker-trying-to-ban-drag-has-been-caught-in-drag/>) virulently anti-LGBTQ+ figure (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/matt-schlapp-blames-fake-journalists-for-groping-allegations-as-gop-fox-flee-cpac/>) with inconveniently queer skeletons (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/02/gop-gov-bill-lee-to-sign-anti-drag-bill-despite-wearing-drag-as-a-teen/>) lurking in his closet (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/gop-it-guv-who-liked-gay-mans-racy-instagram-pics-says-hes-not-anti-gay/>).

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(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/rightwing-pundit-who-called-for-eradicating-transgenderism-played-a-gay-twink-in-a-movie/>) **“transgenderism” played a gay twink in a movie** (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/03/rightwing-pundit-who-called-for-eradicating-transgenderism-played-a-gay-twink-in-a-movie/>) Michael Knowles is getting dragged for hypocrisy after a clip from the film surfaced on social media.

But what of the film itself? What’s it all about? What does it tell us about its moment in time, about the sexual mores of 2012? And who exactly is Knowles’s character, Gavin?

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The short, which is described on YouTube as an excerpt from a larger story about an interconnected group of college students, centers on Gavin, an apparently bisexual college student, and his pursuit of Dusty (Alex Benz), a student-athlete. It opens with Nada Surf’s 1996 hit “Popular”—which even in 2012 was *quite* the throwback! Right off the bat, this song is telegraphing something about Gavin, who seems to be kind of a Vicomte de Valmont-Brian Kinney-Chuck Bass type: a coldly confident libertine with very little regard for the hearts he might break. A jerk, basically; a player.

We meet Gavin as he returns to what we can only assume is his dorm room—which looks like it has an actual fireplace; do dorm rooms at Yale have *fireplaces*??—and briskly informs his roommate that he has broken up with his girlfriend. The girlfriend apparently “wants a husband,” and Gavin doesn’t want to be “tied down.” *Women*, right? Always trying to force their doofus college boyfriends into marrying them! But Gavin’s a beast, a lone wolf! He can’t be caged! To wit: he already has a new “target,” and *he’s* an athlete.

Record scratch! He? Gavin, who just broke up with a *girl* is now pursuing a gentleman? What is this daring new world of male sexual omnivorousness?

But wait, is this new object of Gavin’s lustful intentions even gay? “When has that even mattered?” Gavin scoffs. Gavin’s charms, it seems, are irresistible to literally anyone.

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Screenshot
Michael Knowles in *The House of Shades*

Also, during most of this scene, Gavin is wearing only a towel wrapped tastefully around his actual waist, i.e. above his navel—which feels oddly modest for such a frankly sexual character. It’s a small detail, but one that makes you wonder whether young Knowles was slightly less than confident in his own sexual magnetism.

So then someone named Heather stops by wanting Gavin to sign some petition advocating for a “positive sexual culture on campus.” Heather is super flustered by the fact that Gavin is wearing a towel—you know, due his being a drop-dead gorgeous hunk of man. Anyway, he signs her petition without reading it and she goes away.

Somewhere else on campus, Dusty, the athlete of Gavin’s dreams, a.k.a. his next victim, finds a rose on his pillow with an invitation to The House of Shades, a super-not-so-secret members-only student-run sex club. Presumably, this is from Gavin, his first overture toward seducing poor Dusty, who is actually pretty cute and could do a lot better than a smarmy creep like Gavin.

Suddenly, Heather bursts in all excited about all her petition signatures. But, *twist!* You know how she said she was advocating for a “positive sexual culture on campus?” It turns out what she meant was destroying all nakedness and punishing anyone who does any kind of sex! And Gavin, the nakedest and sexiest student of them all *signed that petition!* The tragic irony!

Then, Heather spots the invitation and she’s like, “Dusty, you have to go infiltrate this sex org club and spy on all the wicked hedonists!”

Dusty, who is obviously a pure-of-heart good boy, is reluctant. But he goes anyway.

**QUEER-
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So later at The House of Shades, Gavin pours an inexplicably tiny dram of alcohol into a cup with a straw for Dusty and explains that he, a college student, does not own this sex club; all the members pay for it. Which... fine, whatever. Maybe they're all rich and this is a Gossip Girl type situation where literal children manage to run an Eyes Wide Shut-type sexual cabal or whatever. Who knows?

Gavin leaves Dusty alone with this carnivorous alcoholic named Belle who gets Dusty drunk. Then Gavin comes back and blah blah blahs some more about how The House is a haven for sexual vampires or whatever to love whoever they want or something.

But, like the viewer, Belle is now bored with this nonsense and drags Dusty away to go dancing, leaving Gavin to make this face as they walk away:

Screenshot

Michael Knowles in The House of Shades

Next, some other sexually world-weary 20-year-old shows up and she and Gavin do over-heated banter briefly before she's like "Go ravage your little dusty lamb, fellow butcher at the slaughterhouse of pleasure!"

Meanwhile, Belle is seducing Dusty too! So Gavin locks his sex-jedi mind rays on her and she melts away into the darkness. But Dusty is too drunk so Gavin walks him home.

When they get to his dorm, Dusty, now fully cured of all inhibitions by Gavin and his sex cult, pounces on Gavin. But here is the hilarious and possibly *very* telling thing: WE DON'T SEE THEM KISS! As Dusty lunges at Gavin the camera drops slightly so that we only see the torsos tussling.

Screenshot

Screenshot

Did young Michael Knowles refuse to do actual homosexual kissing? What were those negotiations like? How pissed do you think the poor student director was when he found out that the brony he cast as his lead sex vampire in his movie about decadent sexual liberty *wouldn't kiss another dude on camera?*

(ED. NOTE: If you are the director of this film and would like to discuss this with us, we definitely want to hear *your* story!)

Cut to: Dusty and Gavin in bed, post-coitus. "That was... wow!" Gavin says. And Dusty is like, "Wait, have you not done gay sex before?" But Gavin is just like, "Shush shush shut up!"

What follows is a bit of awkwardness, none of which is as interesting as the fact that as Gavin gets out of bed, we catch a glimpse of the tiny cornflower blue underwear he's wearing. Was this garment a character choice, like the gold horn necklace Gavin wears throughout the film? Was this the type of underwear Knowles and the filmmakers decided Gavin would wear? Or were they meant to remain unseen? Was this teensy pair of underwear chosen so that Knowles would appear to be nude? Then again, how many student films have a budget specifically for underwear? Could these possibly have been Knowles's own?



Screenshot

Anyway, Gavin gives Dusty his number and leaves looking pretty annoyed by poor sweet Dusty's awkwardness and possible regret.

The next day, Gavin and that other not-Belle lady are in a music room somewhere and she's all freaked out because of how popular *The House of Shades* is getting. But Gavin is barely paying attention because he's all distracted that Dusty hasn't texted him yet. This is, like, rocking Gavin's world, right? He's used to everyone being basically in love with him once he has sex-matized them.

Sex Vamp Lady is like, "Did young Dustin have a big ding-dong?" And Michael Knowles, a subtle and nuanced performer, makes this face:



Screenshot
Michael Knowles in *The House of Shades*

But then he's like, "Blah blah blah, the sex was bad, but it was kinda sweet." Translation: our amoral antihero is maybe catching *feelings*???

Lady Tramp is like, "Ew! Gross! Go do sex on someone hotter and keep being a mean sex predator like me!"

Then suddenly Gavin's phone rings. But *twist* again! It's not Dusty, but someone else, informing him that the cops have raided The House of Shades! Cut to black and...The End! It's a cliff hanger!

Someone get Netflix to reboot this with the original cast so that Michael Knowles will shut up and leave trans people the hell alone!

■ [Life](https://www.lgbtqnation.com/life/)
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◆ [House of Shades](https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/house-of-shades/) (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/house-of-shades/>), [Michael Knowles](https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/michael-knowles/) (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/tag/michael-knowles/>)

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For many years, LGBTQ+ servicemembers couldn't serve openly. These courageous individuals served their country anyway.

Monday, May 29, 2023



Watchdogs warn Proud Boys planning big Pride Months protest nationwide (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/watchdogs-warn-proud-boys-planning-big-pride-months-protest-nationwide/>)

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/watchdogs-warn-proud-boys-planning-big-pride-months-protest-nationwide/>)

"What happened last year, it was probably just a whiff of what we might see this year, after 12 months of organizing."

Sunday, May 28, 2023



6 relationship tips for the anxiously attached (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/6-relationship-tips-for-the-anxiously-attached/>)

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Energy can be converted rather than tamped down or suppressed.

Saturday, May 27, 2023



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See how well you were keeping up with the news this week.

Friday, May 26, 2023



6 celebrities who know what it means to be allies to their LGBTQ+ children (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/6-celebrities-who-know-what-it-means-to-be-allies-to-their-lgbtq-children/>)

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They have been there not only to meet their own children's needs, but to make a positive difference for the rest of us.

Friday, May 26, 2023



Wanda Sykes says she would call out Dave Chappelle's transphobia (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/wanda-sykes-says-she-would-call-out-dave-chappelles-transphobia/>)

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/wanda-sykes-says-she-would-call-out-dave-chappelles-transphobia/>)

"If our paths did cross, I totally would say something."

Thursday, May 25, 2023

Music icon Tina Turner dies at age 83 (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/rock-and-roll-icon-tina-turner-dies-at-age-83/>)

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She had experienced several life-threatening illnesses in recent years.

Wednesday, May 24, 2023

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/rock-and-roll-icon-tina-turner-dies-at-age-83/>)



"Paris Is Burning" star Venus Xtravaganza's home declared a historic landmark

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/paris-is-burning-star-venus-xtravaganzas-home-declared-a-historic-landmark/>)

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/paris-is-burning-star-venus-xtravaganzas-home-declared-a-historic-landmark/>) The aspiring model's appearance in the 1990 documentary cemented her status as a transgender icon.

Wednesday, May 24, 2023



I am pansexual & in a straight-presenting relationship. I refuse to be invisible (<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/i-am-pansexual-in-a-straight-presenting-relationship-i-refuse-to-be-invisible/>)

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/i-am-pansexual-in-a-straight-presenting-relationship-i-refuse-to-be-invisible/>) My sexuality is an essential part of who I am, yet I often feel like an outsider in queer spaces.

Wednesday, May 24, 2023

(<https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/05/i-am-pansexual-in-a-straight-presenting-relationship-i-refuse-to-be-invisible/>)



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