People

Motel returns to 'genuine audience'

Award-winning writer set for Theater 150 performances

Sheila Murphy
OVN contributor

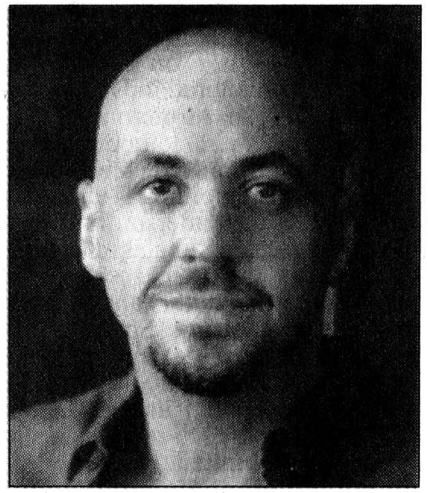
Is it that people with stories to tell just naturally seem to find Ojai or does Ojai attract people with stories to tell? Ten years ago, Doug Motel, an award-winning storyteller, writer, speaker and coach, was invited to Ojai, by Theater 150's co-founder Kim Maxwell (Brown), for the fledgling theater's inaugural show, "Shiva Arms." The play, which centered on a Hollywood apartment manager and the pivotal event that took place at his building and transformed the lives of its residents, won him, among other awards, the Theater LA Ovation Award for Best Writing of a World Premiere Play.

For Motel, who had been writing and performing most of his life, seeing his play performed in Ojai was an eye-opening and entirely gratifying experience. "In L.A. or New York, people come to see your play and they're almost sitting there, arms crossed, with the attitude of: 'OK, entertain me.' Here it was entirely different. When 'Shiva Arms' played in Ojai," shared Motel, "the audience was so genuine. People were so open and the attitude was so accepting. It was more like, 'Hey, I'm open — and I'm happy to be here!" After the agreed-upon weekend run, Motel returned to Los Angeles, and soon after received a call from Maxwell, saying, "Could you come back again next weekend?" Apparently, the 30 people who had come to the first performance had so loved the show that they told their friends about it, who told their friends about it and, well, in true Ojai fashion, the play ran an additional five weeks, fueled largely by word of mouth. Theater 150, and its appreciation for Doug Motel, was born.

Doug Motel is back in Ojai, 10 years after inaugurating Theater 150, with his newest play, "Stardust: Adventures in Consciousness." He is relaxed, happy, and proud to be back in a town that he likened to Shangri-La, before knowing it already enjoyed that bit of celebrity. "That was before I heard the movie had been filmed here. So I wasn't surprised," he laughs. To have his new play performed in the theater's new digs at 316 E. Matilija St., is very exciting to him, and feels comfortable.

With director Dan Bonnell at the helm, Motel knows that his material is in excellent hands. "This piece came out of notes that Doug had been making for quite awhile, with the notion that it would become an autobiographical, one-man show," said Bonnell, a UCLA and UC Riverside instructor and director. Bonnell has extensive experience with helping writers develop works in progress, and finds the process exhilarating. "My first commitment, as a director, is to help writers develop their personal stories. I was introduced to 'Stardust' by Doug reading me pieces of it over the phone. It captured everything that excites me about a story: it was funny, entertaining, and had a message." Bonnell laughs, thinking of the play's title: "There's a reason for the subtitle ('Adventures in Consciousness'); for the audience it's a huge leap of faith."

"Stardust" is Motel's most recent work and his only truly autobiographical work. "I feel like the more personal you get — and I get very personal in this play — the more universal the story and the more people really relate to it." Motel is happy to be back in Ojai, gracing the community with his talent.



Doug Motel

His web site, dougmotel.com., defines him as an artist whose work addresses the issues that confront people searching for deeper meaning in their everyday lives. "Stardust: Adventures in Consciousness" runs today, Saturday and Sunday, and March 1 and 2. For tickets, call 646-4300 or go to Theater150.org.