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'Salad' Springs Forth From the Fertile Mind of Doug Motel

Welcome to the theatrical schizophrenia of Doug Motel.

"I wanted to give people a mental massage, let them take a break from their own brains for an hour," says the writer-performer, whose one-man show "Mind Salad" is playing late nights at the Coast Playhouse. In the piece, Motel (an adopted nom de plume) spins into 30 characters, from such real-life figures as local cable host Skip E. Lowe, singer Steve Lawrence and the late comedian Paul Lynde, to a fictional 9-year-old boy and a 6-foot-4 black drag queen.

Motel, 30, who says he fashioned the material from imagination, friends' stories "and the noise inside my head," credits the inspirational teachings of Marianne Williamson as a major impetus. Developing the piece in what he calls "the living room circuit," he spent the past four years touring various versions to a collection of 12-step groups and rehabilitation centers around the state.

MARTIN COHEN

Doug Motel: "I wanted to give people a mental massage."

Although the play's characters are an international lot—from Britain, India, Cuba, and all over the United States—Motel is less forthcoming about his own origins. "I don't like to say where I'm from," he demurs. "I grew up with people, in my family and my community, who didn't understand me. The truth is, I was a very odd kid. I dressed like Tom Jones, I was an art prodigy, I was fat. The other kids would tease me, beat me up."

Motel found an escape route into theater when he was 12, and later quit high school to join a summer stock company. Resettling in New York, his activities included reading the Village Voice on the radio to the blind, and in 1985, the debut of "The Doug Motel Show," for which the New York Post likened him to Lily Tomlin and Whoopi Goldberg. In 1987, he moved to South-Central L.A., where he shares a house with two roommates and a Lab named Baker.

"She's a gift from the gods," he says simply. "She gives me unconditional love."

—JANICE ARKATOV