preview

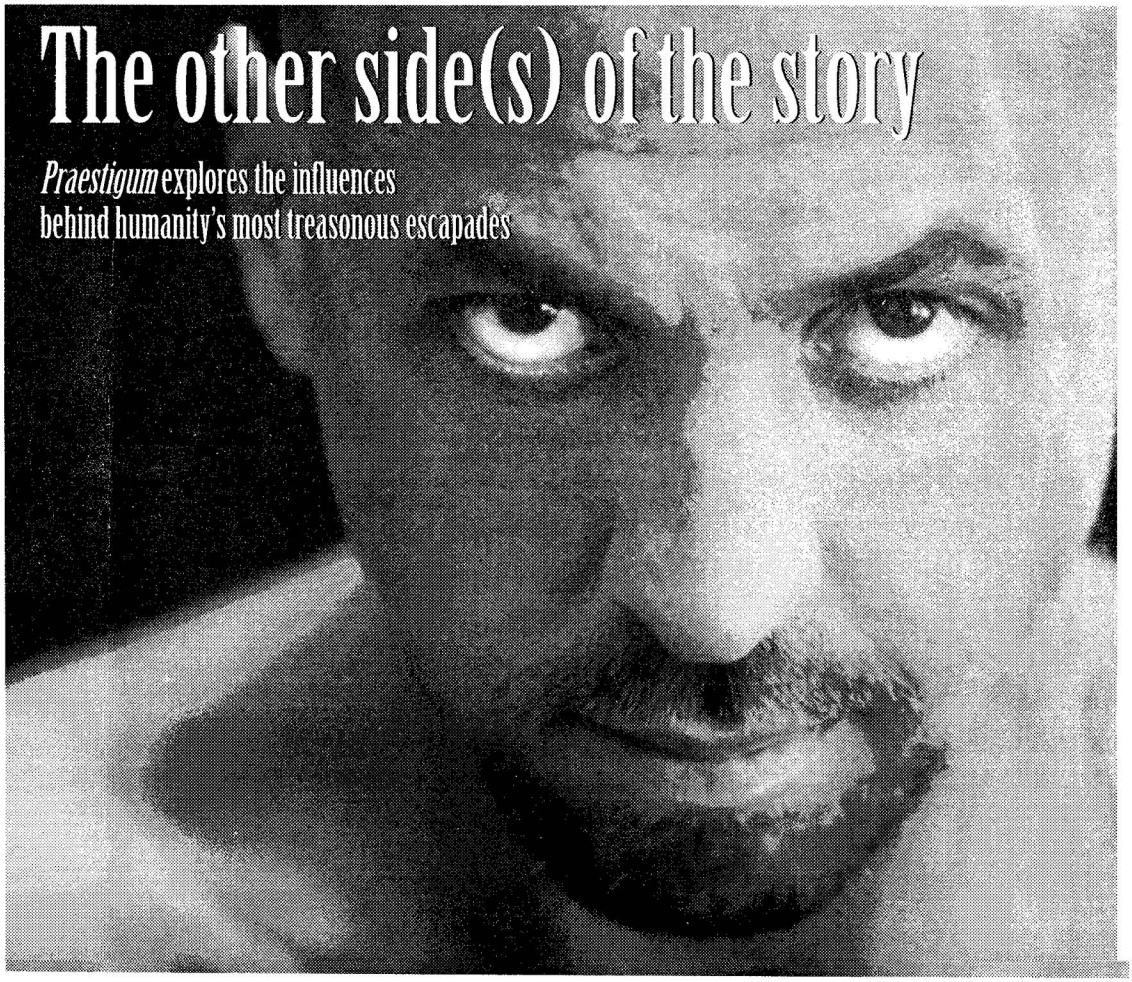
Praestigum

Through May 27

Backlot Theater in Thousand Oaks
497-8606

The other side(s) of the story

Praestigum explores the influences behind humanity's most treasonous escapades



by Martin Jones Westlin

If those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, then history may often merit less attention than it invites. The human chronicle is filthy rich with errant intent; except for class and fiscal peculiarities, such evil waxes downright monotonous on paper.

One horrendous act against society is generally as sufficient as another when a place for the ages is at stake.

As it happens, Los Angeles writer-actor Doug Motel is born to this concept. His new play is replete with the likes of Judas Iscariot, Benedict Arnold and others whose public accounts evoke no small measure of shame.

But if *Praestigum* is a creatively licensed digest of historical treachery, it's also an expression of historical temperament—and, Motel contends, the ambitions that consume the play's principals yield "much to teach us about ourselves as creators of cultures, as architects of societies."

Judas, Motel explains, betrayed the son of God for a paltry sum by the standards of his day; 30 pieces of silver and a smile would hardly have gotten him a condo at the Red Sea. Although Arnold was well compensated by the British for his treason, he had also spent much of his own money to bolster the causes behind the American Revolution. "Might there have been something more complex at stake," the playwright says, "than the simple stories of greed that... began to expend Colonial folklore after [Arnold's] escape to England?"

And then there's the less infamous James Wormley Jones, a black World War I hero turned FBI agent who collected damaging data on civil rights leaders alongside the destitution of his race. Motel regards Jones' relative obscurity as academic—misguided desire makes no distinction within race or favor, and Jones' small place in history thus invites similar reflection on us all.

Director Michael Michetti, who has worked with Motel on sundry theater projects since 1985, concurs.

"We are all unlikely to become traitors on the level of Judas and Benedict Arnold," Michetti said. "But the sort of things that drove them to that behavior are things that I think are very universal human characteristics, and so [*Praestigum*] does become a cautionary tale."

Motel says the play offers no excuses for the men's opprobrium, only explanations. Even so, he adds, "I don't think that we can ever extract all that their stories have to offer us if we are unwilling to penetrate past the obvious or surface level of their deeds."

John the Baptist, J. Edgar Hoover, George Washington and a cadre of the unsung—probably 20 characters in all—will gather at the Backlot Theater the next two weekends to ferment in fame and folly. And their personae will assume a familiar tack beyond their wayward objectives.

Motel, you see, is the sole performer.

"The minute you bring in other actors," Motel said, "the audience does expect [scenes] to be opened up a little bit more in terms of having them have props or having them have costumes or something like that. But when it's one person telling a story, audiences are just more willing to go with their imaginations and just let somebody tell them a story and act everything out.

"Initially," Motel said, "I didn't conceive of it as a one-person show. I thought of it as something three actors would do, playing the three men and then sort of coming back and playing the other supporting characters for each other's scenes. But somebody suggested that I do it as another solo piece, and I... felt scared by the idea. So the minute I got scared of it, I thought, OK, I've gotta do it."

The gamble ensues within conspicuous seasoning. Motel, who has been writing and performing for 20 years, has won Ovation and *L.A. Weekly* awards for his *Shiva Arms* and an *L.A. Weekly* nomination for his *Mind Salad*. His other critically acclaimed solo shows include *The Doug Motel Show* and *Mick in America*.

Motel explained that his bent toward solo endeavors is influenced by the one-person stage successes of Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin.

"When I was a kid," Motel said, "I used to watch Jonathan Winters on television with my grandfather. I was fascinated by him, because all his different characters seemed like real people to me. It was almost like a magic trick! That interests me as an audience [member] and as a performer. It's almost like a novelty act."

But just as Winters flourished over time with his gift for improv, *Praestigum* will take shape alongside the give-and-take of Motel's most valuable contributors.

"To call it a premier," Motel explained, "means to say I think it's done, and it's not. It doesn't have a lot of the theatrical elements that eventually it's going to have. It will probably not be the same play every night. I will be shaping the piece in collaboration with these first audiences that I do it for."

In the abstract, this approach was nothing new to Judas Iscariot and Benedict Arnold. Their escapades were founded in exhaustive input as well. The results, however, yield lessons in humanity so endemic to live performance.

"If we can all learn a little bit from the mistakes of these men as we've seen them through the course of history," Michetti said, "maybe we don't need to repeat them." ■