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'starDUST' memories

Doug Motel checks in with a new solo show in Simi Valley

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Doug Motel isn't used to being himself.

The actor is known for playing a smorgasbord of characters in his solo shows.

In "Shiva Arms," for example, he becomes (without costumes or makeup), 11 residents of a Hollywood apartment complex, from a B-movie actress to an Australian handyman.

Motel's tossed mix of 20 roles in "Mind Salad" includes a 9-year-old boy, an angel and a cosmetology student.

"We're all made of a big bunch of characters," Motel said.

But in his new play, the autobiographical "starDUST (Adventures in Consciousness)," onstage tonight and Saturday in Simi Valley, Motel's main character is just one guy.

He still gets multiple acting credits though, because he plays himself from age 4 to 40.

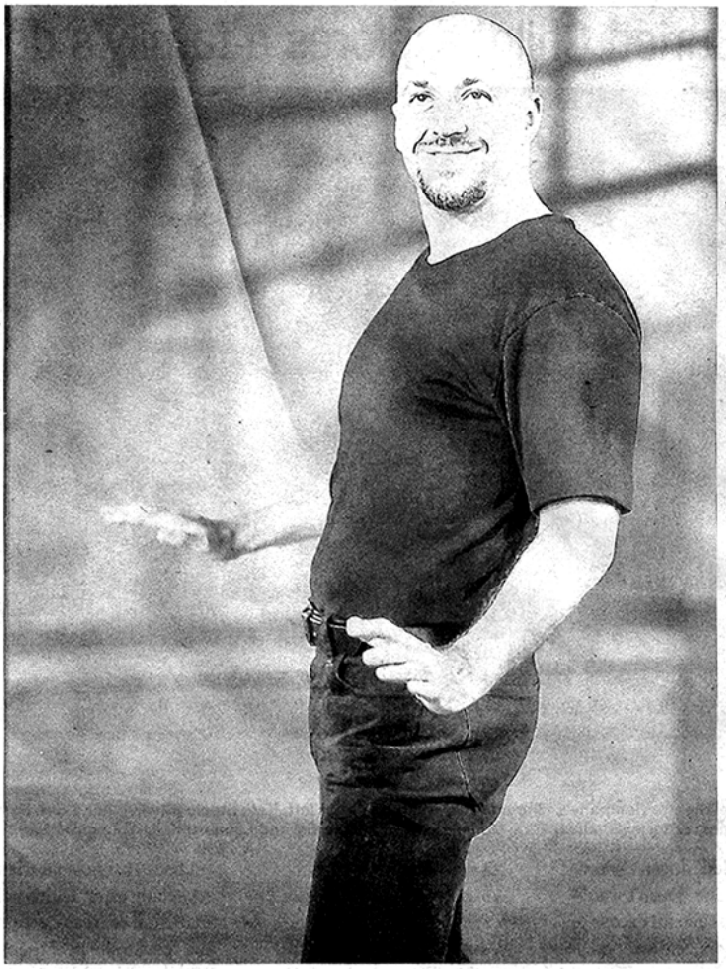
A memoir play can devolve into self-indulgence, but "starDUST" isn't a melodramatic ode to Motel's life.

In an interview from his home in New York, Motel said he never thought his personality or experiences were "quirky" enough to merit autobiographical treatment.

This from a guy who, at age 4, fell on his head and said he had "weird mystical experiences" for a year afterward. Even more eerie, he lived on the street where Reginald Denny was beaten during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and started a job in Lower Manhattan, in a building with a clear view of the World Trade Center, on Sept. 10, 2001.

These and other events from Motel's life — growing up in New Jersey, watching his dad leave the family, playing bit parts in Hollywood — are the particles that make up "starDUST."

And despite an apparent emphasis on "me, myself and I," the humorous and poignant show is not just about Motel. One of the play's themes, he said, is that "ultimately, all of us are part of one whole living thing; we're all intrinsically connected."



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Doug Motel says he works hard to create "conscious comedy." "I'm trying to create entertainment for people trying to focus on a more positive vision for Earth," he says.

Motel's Simi Valley performance tonight will be a quasi-premiere of "starDUST." He's done readings of the show (with a script in hand) at other venues around the country — including Ojai's Theater 150 last year — but this will be the first time he's done a scriptless, full-length production.

Audiences who remember Motel's past performances in Ventura County know he doesn't need props or fancy lighting to morph into whatever character he's playing.

In 1997, Motel's "Shiva Arms" was the inaugural show at Theater 150. Motel, who knew the theater's co-founders, said they wanted something "simple" for the first show there. They booked "Shiva Arms" for one weekend, but Motel ended up staying six weeks when word of mouth led to demand for more performances.

"I had never performed in a small town before; it showed me the power of a community that communicates," Motel said.

"Shiva Arms" earned Motel an Ovation Award for writing. He still performs the acclaimed show, along with "Mind Salad," around the country.

In 2001, Motel to returned to the county, this time to Thousand Oaks, for a reading of "Praestigum," in which he depicted such famed traitors as Benedict Arnold and Judas.

Motel not only introduced "starDUST" in Ojai last year but he also developed it there. The show came about, he said, because in New York he'd been asked by a theater company to incorporate stories about his life into "Shiva Arms," but the effect was disorienting.

His wife, Carrie Wykoff, told him that instead of trying to weave his experiences into "Shiva Arms." "I think you have a new show."

A week later he got a call from Theater 150 asking if he had anything new to perform.

For a week, he worked in Ojai with Dan Bonnell, artistic director of L.A.'s Ensemble Studio Theatre, to whittle down a stack of legal pads filled with his life stories into a manageable script. "We focused on stories that in some way touched on humanity's need to come together," he said.

Motel, who will also present a creativity workshop on Sunday, said he works to create "conscious comedy," or "finding humor without having to make jokes at someone else's expense. I'm trying to create entertainment for people trying to focus on a more positive vision for Earth."

The title "starDUST" is a double-entendre "that makes much more sense when you see the whole play," Motel said. "It sort of deals with how my decision that I wanted to be a star, when I was 11, dictated a lot of my life. There's also something about the genesis of human life and matter being connected to the big bang. It's the physics that I use to explain our connection to each other."

'starDUST (Adventures in Consciousness)'

Doug Motel will perform his new one-man show at 8 tonight and Saturday in the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center, 3050 Los Angeles Ave. Tickets cost $20 for adults and $18 for students and seniors. Call 583-7900 or visit http://www.simi-arts.org. On Sunday, Motel will teach Creating from the Present, a workshop for artists, writers and performers featuring storytelling, meditation, writing and more, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The workshop costs $50. Space is limited; call 583-7900 to make a reservation. Motel's Web site is http://www.dougmotel.com.