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## STAGEREVIEW

MEDICI MIXES  
ART WITH  
HIS 'PASTA'

By ROBERT KOEHLER

'Pasta, Dread and Mazel' is not a dish John Medici's mama would proudly serve her family. But Medici thinks it more or less sums up his life, which is apparently why it's the title of his stand-up confessional performance at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

Everything here possesses an integrity—as opposed to a raft of clichés—that can come only from a comedian who has thought through his act. Call it neurosis deeply considered, which makes Medici's piece (subtitled "How a Renaissance Prince Journeys From East Harlem to the Borscht Belt and Beyond") more a work of theater than the clubs.

Medici wastes no time informing us that he's an existentialist and, by extension, that God probably is too.

This makes it easy to pan for nuggets of absurdity, since the world is full of them ("This guy I used to watch on TV selling 20 Mule Team Borax is now President").

That still doesn't help answer the question, "What do you need in order to say you're a comic?" It's a query that nags Medici, who is remembering his beginnings, while at the same time suggesting that members of the audience attempt an analysis of the performance they're watching. All good stand-up, at a certain level, is about itself. "Pasta, Dread and Mazel" doesn't even try to hide that fact.

What the comic needs above all is a life that feeds the comedy. When World War II blends into his pals' street games (his people were on the wrong side, remember) and mothers screaming at their sons to get home for dinner resembles something out of Puccini, life and art mix in the dizzying way that artists relish. And make no mis-



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*John Medici performing at Back Alley Theatre, Van Nuys.*

take: Medici—at least the one on stage—is obsessed with art and what makes it what it is.

We only wish that Medici rejected the need to spell it all out for us. He has a habit of telling us the story, then telling us the moral of the story—which the story told far better than he does.

In the second half, when he takes us to the Borscht Belt, he brushes off this tendency and balances rhythms and images for an intoxicating memoir of what it is to die on stage. Dread, indeed.

All these remembrances of things past place Medici's performance, directed by Allan Miller, in a province far afield from the danger zone in which most of today's sharp young comics claim citizenship.

He may cite Camus, but he's ingratiating with the crowd. He doesn't use a mike, and he just wants to coax us along. It makes for fine entertainment, but without reverberations. At most, we're left with the comic's neurotic other wondering, "God, are they going to laugh at this line?"

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; Mondays through Fridays, 8 p.m. Ends Jan. 28; (818) 780-2240.