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A Penny For Our Thoughts
by **Jean Carey**

Don't be alarmed, but Susana Ventura is *Operating Under the Influence*. She gives her audiences entertainment and something to think about at the same time.



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What's so funny about a homeless woman with AIDS and a young child who also happens to be homeless and a junkie? Nothing comes to mind. But perhaps the outrageousness of the situation goes beyond any definition of pathetic or tragic to a realm of existence that borders on absurdity.

So thinks actor/monologist/comic (and, cautiously, performance artist) Penny Arcade. The New York-based performer brings the aforementioned woman, based on a real person, to life in her one-woman show *Operating Under the Influence*. Penny Arcade, *née* Susana Ventura, specializes in characters. This distinction separates her from other performance artists who often string together music, costumes and personal vignettes that are more stream-of-consciousness musings than cultural revelations.

About the character of the homeless AIDS victim, Arcade says, "She's very real. Very real life. She's an unmistakably individual personality, and yet she has nothing in common with most of the people I perform for. She's depressing and who needs to get depressed, right? But I explore her way of being. For such a person, her real life gets in the way of her mental life. It's your preconceptions that make her depressing, not her herself."

Arcade's other characters are no less defined or interesting. "One is based on Andrea Whips, a Warhol superstar and someone who was very, very crazy. She dies recently. Another, the character who people tell me is my star, is Dame Margo Howard-Howard, a 55-year-old drag queen. She's very raw, very risqué and very, very funny," Arcade explained.

After performing 36 weeks out of each year for the past several years in Manhattan's most prominent art houses and theaters, Arcade decided to take her act on the road, to "expand my range." Arcade seems pleased with her reception at the Loft Theater, where she opened *Operating Under the Influence* last weekend. The show continues this week, playing at 8 p.m. today and Saturday and at 5 p.m. Sunday.

"I love the theater is set up in the semi-circle formation," she said. Arcade explained that this arrangement facilitates her interactive style. "I don't actually go into the audience. I hate that feeling, personally, where people have to be frightened that you're going to call on them or go up to them and make them look foolish. I don't do that to people."

But, "whether i intend to have interaction with the audience or not, it always seems like I do. Every evening, i sort of see how it goes. In Tampa, I've been talking to the audience a lot. in most of my shows, I spend about 20 percent of my time talking to or with the audience. In Tampa, I've found that it's more like 40 percent."

Arcade is also pleased with the demographics of her Tampa audience. "There hasn't been one specific type of person in the audience," she said. "I would hate it if that were the case. On the night of my first performance here, i noticed that there were seven seniors in the front row. I thought, 'Oh, God, they're going to hate every minute of this.' My show is whimsical in many ways, but it's also very explicit in a sexual way. They loved it - the seniors in the front row were screaming with laughter."

Arcade has been including more AIDS-related material in her performances, which again abuts the funny/not funny question. "It's an inevitable subject, coming as I do from the theater community in New York," Arcade said. "I came to New York City when I was very, very young and I was basically raised by gay men. They took me under their collective wing. Madonna has made this supportive network of gay men very visible in her new movie about her life...I was very much in the same place as her."

"My work has a lot of content, a lot of pathos, certainly, but also a lot of humor," Arcade said. "People walk out of my shows and they've had a transformational experience. people do not have to have an art school or Wall Street background to understand my work. It translated to the audience. Very easily."