

PENNY ARCADE'S SIDESHOW

In 1968, director John Vaccaro told actress Penny Arcade to go out on the stage of New York City's Playhouse of the Ridiculous and "do something"; she's been doing "something" ever since. In her show, "While You Were Out/Invisible on the Street," which has been running in New York's East Village, she pours herself into a series of strapless gowns, sings a few songs (backed by a five-piece band led by her husband of three years, keyboardist Jonathan B. Hardy), and displays an uncanny talent for mimicry. The result is what has been described as "demented rock 'n roll theater." Arcade, a.k.a. Susana Ventura, writes or improvises the characters she performs in her show: a fifty-five-year-old white transvestite in the Harlem drug scene, a bag lady with a pet duck, an aging New Orleans hooker with a bad face lift, a horny Hasid with the blues, and Andrea Whips, the late Warhol "superstar" who entertained the back room of Max's Kansas City with outrageous "showtimes."

"All my life I've met weird characters," says Arcade, who has the frizzy hair and voluptuous body of the girls in R. Crumb's underground comics from the 1960s, "strange people who collected me. Now I collect them."

The daughter of an immigrant Italian family



("My mother still won't drink the water here"), Arcade says she wanted to be an actress from the time she was five. She ran away from her New Britain, Connecticut, home when she was sixteen, and fled to St. Mark's Place where she hung out with actors and transvestites like Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. Over the next six years, Arcade performed in New York and Europe with Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous, costarred in the Warhol film *Women In Revolt* with Curtis, Woodlawn, and Jane Fonda ("Andy said I was the only one who'd worked with him who'd actually read the contract"),

moved to Spain to perform with a political puppet theater, then Maine where she sang with a band and worked in a theater collective.

Arcade, now based in New York City, has firm ideas about what she is trying to do in her show. "My idea of 'rock 'n roll theater' is not *Hair*. It should be raw, more visceral. Usually when people try to combine the two, the music's good and the acting is terrible." Arcade's singing is forceful, and her acting is inspired improvisation. She has endeared herself to underground audiences for two decades—now she's ready to test the big time. —LISA ROBINSON

Top: PHILIP BURKE. Bottom: SCOTT HEISER. Hair and makeup: Prudence Walters.