

W C O V the village

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Oh, Susana!

BY JAN HOFFMAN



Susana Ventura (a/k/a Penny Arcade): a take-no-prisoners stand-up comic

PENNY ARCADE. *True Stories.* At P.S. 122, 150 First Avenue, 477-5288.

If a short, spark plug-lookalike performer named Penny Arcade is new to you—as she was to most of the packed audience at P.S. 122 on Friday night—it's likely that you haven't met the characters she's brought along. They include women, and would-be women, whose serrated histories have been scarred by cocaine, heroin, prostitution, AIDS, the Downtown Art Scene, Harlem drug dealers, and face-lifts. Some are nasty and witty, some just plain nasty, and others wondrously, absurdly ingenuous: they all spring full-grown out of the mare's nest that is Penny Arcade's mind, and while she's introducing them 'round for the next two weeks, you should consider making the uneasy pleasure of their acquaintance.

Ms. Arcade (a/k/a Susana Ventura) exudes the wry confidence and facility of a

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veteran downtown performer (one hesitates to go the distance and call her a "performance artist," a term she bats about lovingly but snappishly). As she says, she began acting at 17 with the Playhouse of the Ridiculous and quickly moved into the Warhol pantheon. Her solo performances started about five years ago—she's been at La Mama, the Ballroom, and, in exuberant display of bad taste this winter, portrayed Nancy Spungen (the downward-spiraling junkie made unforgettable in the film *Sid and Nancy*) in a room at the Chelsea Hotel, where she was killed. Oh, Susana!

At the P.S. 122 performance, Penny Arcade artlessly strips, tries on wigs, smears on makeup, and slips in and out of her roles right in front of us, challenging us to follow her abruptly down into each of her characters' seemingly bottomless pits. ("Don't worry, the rest of the show isn't this depressing," she tosses off

after finishing up the first—and one of the least-realized—roles, a young black junkie mother with AIDS. "Well, it is this depressing, it's just a little funnier.") She'll call for the house lights, then trot around the crowd, deliberately drawing attention to artifice, commenting on the characters she's already done, and riffing, standup comic style, about her day. Well, make that an unusually astute, feminist, take-no-prisoners stand-up comic.

Her strongest turns are "Charlene" and "Dame Margot Howard-Howard." Charlene has a soft N'Oleans accent and wears a lacy black slip; fresh from her dramatic face-lift operation in Caracas ("Everytime I raised my eyebrows up, my stockings moved"), she narrates a spunky, dignified tale of how she became a sob sister, an entrepreneur, a... Charlene doesn't like to use the word... a whore.

The Dame is astonishing. A very proper British junkie drag queen she is, describing "a gentleman who importuned me in front of the Plaza Hotel," then her unholy tryst with one of Harlem's biggest drug dealers (the actress dives headlong into his character as well). Jagged, remarkable, unexpected, and mesmerizing, the Dame is the sum of the rough, poignant humor Penny Arcade brings to all her women. If she'd closed the show with her, the evening would have felt complete.

But she's tacked on an uneven, pseudo-confessional coda, a deeply self-referential spiel about the death of performance art and her own reentry into theater. Without giving away the ending, suffice it to say that she does regain her "composure" at the finale, with a wicked stunt about onions and feelings—the best self-referential comment possible about her sentimental streak. And she does, intentionally or otherwise, drive home her point: she's been away from steady gigs for too long, and indeed it's great to have her back. ■