

The Penny for your thoughts

By SUSAN SHAPIRO

PERFORMANCE artist Penny Arcade's "Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!" — urgently playing at Performance Space 122 — was initially conceived for a screening by National Endowment for the Arts grant-givers during the 1990 Jesse Helms-NEA crisis. She didn't get the grant, but she did get some hot and hysterically funny new material.

"R. J. Reynolds gave Jesse Helms \$2 million," she says. "So Mr. Censorship is taking money from the people who've plastered penis-face camels all over America."

Arcade, a.k.a. Susana Ventura, lambastes "all the pro-lifers for the death penalty" and lesbians who think bisexual women "aren't trying hard enough."

"They don't like girls who sleep with boys," she says. "Unless they're battered. Why do lesbians like battered women so much?"

P.S. 122 has been transformed into a go-go palace where half a dozen half-naked erotic dancers boogie to Gloria Gayner's "I Will Survive," while downtown actor Ron Vawter recites a Lenny Bruce monologue about freedom of speech on six video screens.

There's a clever skit about a receptionist at an Upper West Side escort service who tells Kyle, an NYU student who phones: "No, no, honey. Sorry. There's no student discount, not even with your ID. . . . Kyle, listen, I don't think you're ready for this experience. . . . Why don't you wait until next semester?"

Arcade speaks poignantly of friends who've died of AIDS. In a tribute to one of them, downtown cult figure Jack Smith — best

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known as director of the 1962 avant-garde film "Flaming Creatures" — she takes off her shirt and slices onions to cry, as he had once advised her.

She offers an emotional video of a real conversation about child abuse she had with her mother, "The Marlon Brando of Italian mothers," who has "forgotten how to speak Italian and never learned to speak English," which adds new audacity to the idea of confessional art.

This particular evening Arcade also criticized the audience for its "weird energy" and lack of interest in interacting.

"When are you going to stop being just an audience?" she asks.

"When we stop paying," offers someone in the third row.

A dialogue that resembled a group therapy session ensues. Someone else from the third row yells, "Stop lecturing us!"

"I'm not lecturing," Arcade yells back. "I'm ranting! I'm out of my mind with misery!"

Although the show was a little too long and some might find the half-naked dancers a little too friendly, "Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!" scores some brilliant points against the censorship movement in this country.

Says Arcade: "They're trying to pull the wool over our eyes, only it's 85 percent polyester."

Performance Space 122, 150 First Ave., at Ninth Street, (212) 477-5288, Thursdays through Sundays at 9 p.m. through Aug. 23. Tickets: \$10.

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