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Review/Theater

Celebrating Sexual Diversity With the Dancers

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Toward the end of "The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show," an exuberant two-hour revue with a defiant political agenda, Ms. Arcade and seven scantily clad erotic dancers descend into the audience for some friendly physical contact. To the strains of Steve Winwood's inspirational anthem, "Higher Love," the performers climb through the seats, flirting, dancing and sitting on people's laps. For several minutes, the main auditorium of Performance Space 122, where the show runs through Aug. 23, becomes a low-tech disco and party hangout where the action, were it put on film, might be rated PG-13.

The carefully prepared meeting of the audience and dancers, who appear to have been chosen for their ethnic and sexual diversity, is the high point of a show that celebrates sex in all its adult consensual varieties. Ms. Arcade, who plays host and

ringmaster of the revels, is a veteran East Village bohemian who as a teenager acted in John Vacarro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous troupe and was later featured in Andy Warhol's film "Women in Revolt."

The 42-year-old star is also a character monologist of modest ability who prefers to impersonate real people rather than invent fictional types. Some of those she plays in the show include the madam of a midtown Manhattan brothel taking calls from would-be customers, a tough-talking advocate for prostitutes, and a bisexual woman who complains that lesbians refuse to accept the fact that she likes men as well as women.

Interwoven among these monologues are Ms. Arcade's own stories of growing up in Manhattan, along with her tirades against Senator Jesse Helms and anyone else who would deny Government grants to artists because of their work's sexual content.

Onstage, Ms. Arcade exudes the air

The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show

By Penny Arcade; video and sound by Mitch Markowitz; stage design by Steve Zehentner, Mark Russell, Mr. Markowitz and Ms. Arcade; technical direction and lighting by Jan Bell-Newman; onstage manager and sound operator, Bill Johnson; music by Leta Davis. Presented by Performance Space 122, Mark Russell, director. At P.S. 122, 150 First Avenue, at Ninth Street, East Village.

WITH: Penny Arcade, Leta Davis, Shelly Calcott, Bill Graber, Callie Ryan, Diana Moonmade, Ken Davis, Greta Watson, Taylor Mead, Bina Sharif and Ron Vawter.

of a friendly next-door neighbor fired up in a grass-roots political movement. If she lacks Karen Finley's focused rhetorical power and Eric Bogosian's gift for precise caricature, she is a passionate and likable

polemicist for sexual freedom of expression. The most poignant segment of her show is her own confessional monologue about growing up among gay men and observing the changes in New York gay life from the late 60's through the disco era to the age of AIDS. At the end of her reminiscence, she says that the disease has claimed more than 200 of her friends.

The show has no particular structure and flaunts an oldtime bohemian ambiance that is underscored by crude video scenes of Taylor Mead as a prurient priest and Ron Vawter reading a Lenny Bruce monologue. When the show wanders into deep historical waters, its homemade charms become obscured in a fog of pretension. At one point, Ms. Arcade suggests that the anti-sexual mood in Washington parallels the climate of Nazi Germany, as video monitors offer a few paltry images of Hitler and Goebbels. The argument is dropped long before it is developed into anything more meaningful than a glib analogy.