

With Crossover Audiences and "Drag Factor"

Penny Arcade's Sex and Censorship Show Enters 11th Month

It started as a modest audition piece for a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1990, during the Jesse Helms censorship flap, then turned up last summer as a work-in-progress for a limited run at P.S. 122.

With a transfer to the Village Gate, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* (a.k.a., notably in the *New York Times* listings, as *Penny Arcade's Sex and Censorship Show*) has, inescapably, turned into a commercial success, held over again and again and, last month, doubling the number of performances. Penny Arcade's show is now the second longest-running performance show in town, after Blue Man Group.

"Did someone drag you here tonight?" Arcade asks every audience, referring to what she calls the "Drag Factor," the need of those who have seen the show to share it with a loved one.

And the show seems to attract a remarkably eclectic audience, despite (or possibly because of) its complement of ten exotic dancers of both sexes, who perform between and around Penny Arcade's monologues. "There are real people here," said author Fran Lebowitz, after surveying the house. "Where do they come from?"

Arcade, a veteran performer and alumna of both Andy Warhol's Factory

and John Vaccaro's Theater of the Ridiculous, thinks that because her work is very subjective, it becomes universal. "My work doesn't alienate people," she told John Bell in a *TheaterWeek* interview, "so when I do the Hooker, the Junkie, the Drag Queen, and I go to, say, Tampa, Florida—not exactly a progressive performance art capital, or even a progressive theater capital—the audience comes, very regular kind of people, and they love it because what I always say is that sensationalism and content cannot coexist. If you let someone see someone's whole self, they're going to accept them. I mean, they're going to accept them at least in order to let that person have their say. Which is my point—to let people to whom no one will listen have a voice."

At the Village Gate, the audience listens, and comes back for more, hearing the central message about censorship and sexual freedom of expression, as Penny and her characters talk about intolerance, freedom, AIDS, puritanism, feminism, family, and love. Especially love. "You should love someone, and let someone love you," Penny tells the audience. "It's the most political act you can make—it's the only one that really changes the world." ■



The fabulous Penny Arcade