

DAILY GRIND

Penny Arcade tears a strip off sexual hypocrisy in a show which combines go-go dancing with gay imagery. She talks to Christopher Bowen

THE singer and saxophonist in the bar on Bleeker Street are doing battle with a song that once was *Cry Me a River* as the audience filters upstairs to a dimly lit room. L-shaped and with a stage in the corner, it's a gloomy space, only faintly cheered by the flickering candles on rows of tables and chairs.

As the room starts to fill, figures slowly emerge from the shadows: 10 or so men and women dressed in an assortment of lycra, leather and latex costumes which are cut to reveal a lot of gym-toned flesh. Disco music blares from the sound system as the dancers take up positions throughout the room, draping themselves over bars and around poles. Picking up the beat, bodies undulate, hips grind and heads are flung back in mock ecstasy.

The dancers represent a wide range of fantasy stereotypes. There is the ebony-skinned dominatrix brandishing a riding crop; the all-American jock-next-door, popping the buttons on his 501s to reveal pristine Calvin Kleins; the statuesque redhead with double-jointed everything and an extension a competition gymnast would envy; and an impish leather boy who manages to look like Jimmy Sommerville on steroids.

Yet this isn't some sleazy Times Square sex bar, where soft-core is pedalled to an expense account clientele. While the audience has its fair share of business types, there are also groups of smartly-

dressed women, the East Village art crowd, gay men, chic mid-town ladies who lunch, and tourists. This is the Village Gate, a hip, downtown venue in the heart of politically-correct Greenwich Village. Here go-go dance becomes a celebration of undifferentiated sexuality in one of the most talked-about shows in New York.

Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore! – *The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show* has just completed a year of full houses at arthouse and the Village Gate, making it the city's second longest running off-off-Broadway performance piece. Now *B!D!F!W!* makes its British premiere at Stella Artois Assembly, where temperatures (and Edinburgh councillors' hackles) are likely to be raised by its bold celebration of sexual freedom and expression.

Apart from the exotic dancers who perform intermittently throughout the show, *B!D!F!W!* features music, video and the redoubtable Penny Arcade in a concoction of hilarious stand-up, audience dialogue and character sketches which blur the distinction between personal experience and fiction in an exploration of Arcade's testimony on sexuality in America.

So we meet Charlene, a prostitute from one of the Southern states, who voted for Reagan and Bush ("Cos I'm a business woman"), yet rails against Senator Jess Helms and the hypocrisy of the moral majority.

Then there is Penny Arcade's account of teen years spent in the company of gay men. "When I tell people I was raised by fags no one ever knows what I'm talking about. They think it means that my father came out, he left my mother, moved in with his lover, I stayed there at weekends and they took me to the opera. That's strictly a post-Seventies phenomenon. When I say I was raised by fags, I mean that I was taken in by a tawdry band of drag queens and their minions and that I am today who I am because of those gay men."

Today, Penny Arcade (aka Susana Ventura), ex-Warhol Factory initiate and Theatre of the Ridiculous member, is one of the most respected performance artists in America. She is also one angry woman, focusing her rage on the same subject matter which has fuelled controversies about art, censorship and the National Endowment for the Arts – America's answer to the Arts Council – over the past decade