

Edinburgh Festival

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY

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When *B!D!F!W!* first opened in 1990, America's arts community was in the grip of a right-wing backlash. A new paragraph had been appended to NEA grant applications, barring "obscenity" from publicly funded works. Never one to avoid controversy, Arcade dove into the maelstrom, by submitting *B!D!F!W!* for her NEA fellowship.

"I wrote the show virtually overnight," she says. "But as much as it is a response to Helms and the NEA, it is also a criticism of the avant-garde's preoccupation with commercial sex. Almost every show that went on downtown had girls in bustiers and garters. There was this post-Madonna thing going on in the arts scene, but it had no content. Just girls pretending to be go-go dancers.

"So I set about trying to find the real

thing. At first I only used girls, and I wanted them to wear costumes because I didn't want to exploit them; believe me, the downtown arts scene is just as prurient as any other. I wanted to show the dancing; I

wanted to show their ability to be erotic as a feminine art form."

What Arcade describes in her show as "the only thing designed by women to control men," is just one of many issues confronted in an exuberant 90-minute revue. There are compassionate and bitter memories of a Catholic upbringing with "the Marlon Brando of Italian mothers"; her adoption by New York's pre-Stonewall, pre-Aids gay community, and her grief and loss at the deaths of over 200 friends. Yet Arcade tempers her passionate polemic with warmth and humour; and for all her arthouse pedigree, she eschews the style of avant-garde performance that mystifies or alienates the audience.

"I'm a populist artist, not an elitist; I just don't fit in that world," she says. "They don't like me because I acknowledge the general public, who are a lot smarter and more adventurous than the critics give them credit for; and I don't see why art can't be accessible."

American reactions to the show are bound to be informed by domestic issues, but how will it travel? "Well, if we can be a rave success in Calgary, I can't imagine we're not going to do well in Edinburgh," says Arcade, who will tour the show to Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester after it's Festival run.



● Not a straight line: Penny Arcade and her go-go dancers. "I wanted to show their ability to be erotic as a feminine art form"