

Time Out

London's weekly guide

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When I tell people I was raised by fags, no one ever knows what I'm talking about. They actually think it means that my father came out, 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-'70s phenomenon. When I say that 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.'

And today, **Penny Arcade** (aka Susan Ventura), ex-Warhol Factory initiate and Playhouse of the Ridiculous member, is one of the most talked-about performance artists in New York, where her show, 'Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!' — The Penny Arcade Sex and Censorship Show', has just clocked up a year of full houses at PS 122 and The Village Gate, making it the city's longest running off-off Broadway performance piece. Earlier this month 'BID!F!W!' received its British première on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe where temperatures in the elegant Assembly Supper Room (and a few politically correct hackles) were raised by its fearless celebration of sexual freedom and expression.

gay

Penny for your thoughts

Featuring erotic dancers (of both sexes), music, video and the redoubtable Ms Arcade, this revue is a concoction of hilarious stand-up, audience dialogue and character sketches which blur the distinction between personal experience and fiction. 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 Jesse Helms and the hypocrisy of the moral majority while, at the same time firing a few well-placed shots across the bows of the liberal arts lobby who

favour the powerful sexual imagery of artists like the late Robert Mapplethorpe, but support removal of *Play-*

boy and *Penthouse* from supermarket shelves.

Arcade's own material delivers 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 sense of grief and loss at the deaths of over 200 friends. Yet Arcade tempers 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 élitist,' she says. 'Some people seem to be surprised that I have something to say, *and* it's entertaining: that's so ridiculous — most people wouldn't have a conversation with someone if it wasn't interesting.' And what Penny Arcade has to say about sex, censorship and art in the USA is very interesting indeed. As she says, 'they're trying to pull the wool over our eyes — and it's 85 per cent polyester.'

Christopher Bowen
'Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!' is at the ICA from Tue 28. See *Gay*.