

# Evening Press

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Deirdre Falvey at the  
Galway Arts Festival

## The show that's really waking up the west!

**I**T IS a measure of how much things have changed in Ireland over the last number of years that Penny Arcade's New York show has provoked not a huge outcry about the "filth" on an Irish stage, but an enthusiastic response, standing ovations and an extension of the run.

Entitled *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, the show, which is playing as part of the Galway Arts Festival, is an uncompromising look at sexuality, censorship and the sex industry, features erotic dancers writhing and squirming throughout, and Penny Arcade herself delivers the last section of the show totally naked (aside from an American flag/chiffon scarf around her neck). Sounds different? Well it is.

Penny Arcade, aka Susana Ventura, is a low-sized, dark haired New Yorker of Italian extraction. An idiosyncratic, opinionated and charming woman, she ran away from home at the age of 14 and was brought up by a group of homosexual men, later becoming a faghag (a woman who socialises exclusively with homosexual men).

Her show — she has worked in theatre for 27 years — merges the personal and the political and is an impassioned and sincere plea for humanity, tolerance and liberalism. She attacks the inconsistencies of censorship and tears with equal fury into religious fundamentalism and the politically correct — "when people have to be told what is right and wrong they inevitably end up right, far right."

She also attacks some lesbians: "If you're bisexual, lesbians think it's because you're not trying hard enough."

But what shines through in her abrasively titled show is her sincerity and the warmth of her personality. In person she is the same

as on stage — the show springs from her character, life experience and observations. "All I'm trying to do is tap into people's innate humanness. Everybody wants to be loved." So much so that in New York her show is recommended by therapists to their clients!

The show's title was almost an accident. She had approached a New York arts organisation about trying out some new work, and was told they were booked out for two years. So, off the top of her head she said "Well, that's too bad. I have this show that's called *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*" They said "Don't give it to anyone else."

It became the second longest running off-Broadway show in New York's history, and has since toured all over the world, receiving great reviews and public reaction.

Penny says the general public are never shocked by her show. "To do something for its shock value would be too easy for me. What's subversive in 1994 is not to shock but to bring people together — I get very diverse audiences: young, old, middle-aged, middle-of-the-road, not the usual art school crowd."

The show has a screaming title, "and yet, these are names that women are called every day of the week, all over the world, and in Ireland too. Well, perhaps there aren't many faghags here! But if a woman won't dance with a man he calls her a dyke, if she has more than one relationship she's called a whore, if she's just minding her own business she's called a bitch."

It opens with male and female erotic dancers, clad in G-strings and miniscule bras (the women only!), gyrating to a pulsating beat. Through the show the dancers mingle with the audience, teasing, sidling up to, splaying their bodies over people. Later, half



Penny Arcade: joyful, funny and serious.

the audience join them onstage to dance to Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*.

Interspersed with the dancing are the guts of the show, set-pieces and monologues from Penny, talking about her life, relationships, friendships, having 200 friends die from Aids over 12 years. She opens her life up and, watching her, you see her honesty. It is very close to the bone, and very, very funny — this is a terrifically entertaining show, and very life-enhancing.

She says she didn't expect an outcry when she came to Ireland. "Irish people want and expect to hear the truth. They're great here: Irish audiences can laugh and think at the same time." After only four days here she has formed opinions on all sorts: "Keep out the chemical industries, they'll pollute your beautiful country. People will come here because they have never seen so much green.

Tourism is the way to go."

She describes herself as a transcended Catholic. "In Ireland there are lots of lapsed Catholics, but there's no point in being lapsed, the best thing to be is a transcended Catholic, taking the values and beauty of the religion and trying to live it."

"People expect me to be vulgar, but find the show is humanistic and about love."

Her material can provoke strong reactions: she received bomb threats in relation to a previous show, *La Misericordia*, about growing up as a Catholic, Italian girl. "Italians think life is miserable and difficult and then you die. So do the Irish, but you drink and sing your way through it!"

*Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* runs until Friday at the Setanta in Galway (the extra show was added due to popular demand).