

She is a crazed woman who dreams of injecting Joanna Lumley with cellulite

— and that I am who I am today because of those gay men.'

She also talks poignantly of the early days, when a devastating plague seemed to hit New York and no one knew what it was: 'In 1981 all my friends started dropping dead. I couldn't figure out why I wasn't getting sick. I've lost over 200 friends now to AIDS.'

A self-confessed bisexual fagg, Arcade is uniquely equipped to cross the barriers between gay and straight, politically incorrect and correct. Although at its heart her show lampoons the prejudiced and the American religious Right, who periodically try to ban performers like her, Arcade is just as willing to poke fun at the right-on Left. 'Lesbians think bisexual women just aren't trying hard enough,' she says to half-unsure squeals of laughter from the audience. 'They don't like girls who sleep with boys unless they're battered. Why do lesbians like battered women so much?'

This sort of statement gets old-fashioned feminists in a rage. She is also attacked by both feminists and the conservative element for punctuating her show with go-go dancers (men and women), who gyrate to a heavy beat, wearing dog collars, satin bras, leather caps and other more curious apparatus of a sexual nature. During the interval, the audience is invited to join in. 'We want to feel the full erotic wave of our love when we are dancing,' she says. Her angle on sex is celebratory in the extreme.

Talking to Arcade is almost as surreal as being at one of her shows: sometimes you suspect she is not all there; at other moments perhaps there is too much of her there, such is her intensity. For underneath the humour she is a preacher, a crusader in the name of tolerance, freedom and as much weirdness as possible. 'As we head towards the end of the millenium, life is speeding up. We're constantly bombarded and distracted and we don't have a place to go. We don't go to church any more, so we go to the theatre to laugh and to cry.' And, of course, for the free psychoanalysis. □



Jenny Eclair



Donna McPhail



Julie Balloo



Lea De Laria



Rhona Cameron



Rachel Berger

COMEDY'S SHRINK RAPPERS

As women elbow their way further onto the comedy circuit, comediennes with confessional tendencies are proving that 'sharing' is the new rock 'n' roll. While the funny boys bond with their laddish innuendo, girls are getting back to basics, airing their dirty linen on stage with graphic descriptions of their sex lives and anecdotes of breast-feeding their babies. From Jenny Eclair to Lea De Laria, the comic style is kiss and tell and, more often than not, X-rated. There is a rising number of contenders for Queen of the Confessional. Here we list the front runners and some of their most memorable life lines.

THE SEX CONFESSATIONAL Jenny Eclair

Comedy's pouting, platinum-blonde bad girl Jenny Eclair has perfected a no-holds-barred style that is part confessional, part therapy, part public abuse. Eclair's repertoire reads like a catalogue of pop psychology seminars: poor social etiquette; bad sportsmanship; attaining the dysfunctional family; spoiling special occasions. She thrives on titillating her audience with soul-baring, self-deprecating tales of misadventure. She is a loud-mouthed, crazed woman, who dreams of injecting Joanna Lumley with cellulite, forgets to put her knickers on and fantasises about group sex with Take That. She insists that there will be no equality until women behave as badly as men. *The Scotsman* advised: 'Don't see a therapist; see her.'

THE ACERBIC CONFESSATIONAL Donna McPhail

It's been said that Donna McPhail makes Madonna look like a shrinking violet; she is confident, loud and sharp, with an acid tongue. She jokes about gussets and passes off her constant swearing with a wry, 'Ladies don't swear, but luckily for me, I'm a bird', and casually deconstructs Gérard Depardieu: 'Because he's French he's a sex symbol. If he was English he'd be a dinner lady.'

THE DOMESTIC CONFESSATIONAL Julie Balloo

Having a baby has given the Australian comedienne, writer and actress Julie Balloo the perfect material to fuel her drily-delivered comedy. The jokes are no-messing one-liners ('In my opinion there is only one good reason to have children — so you can fart in public and blame them', or 'Thank God I'm still breast-feeding. At least I get my nipples sucked on the hour'),

and tales of everyday domestic bliss ('We don't have sex any more. My husband is so uninterested he's installed a Nintendo machine in the bedroom. The only way to get his attention is to dress up as a duck and fly past'). Balloo has co-written, with Jenny Eclair, a radio play for the BBC — *On Baby Street* — which is to be broadcast this autumn.

THE STRAIGHT LESBIAN CONFESSATIONAL Lea De Laria

Last year's show, *Muff Diva*, opened with De Laria yelling out to her audience: 'Hi, you know it's hip to be queer in the 90s and I'm a BIG, BUTCH BULL DYKE'. The Catholic Italian/American New Yorker and self-confessed 'professional lesbian' gave up her day job as a carpenter with an all-gay construction crew more than 10 years ago, became a stand-up and came out on America's prestigious Arsenio Hall chat show in 1992. De Laria is nothing if not over the top, using her (homo)sexuality as a building block. She has a dig at lipstick lesbians: 'A girlfriend is a better accessory than a Gucci purse nowadays.' She can also be crude: 'I don't eat meat...I'm a vagitarian.' Stories of her sexual exploits are too vulgar to repeat — she has to be heard to be believed.

THE OUTSIDER CONFESSATIONAL Rhona Cameron

This confrontational Scotswoman used to sell fake paintings door-to-door, had a 'difficult' childhood and 'prefers to shag girls'. In the spirit of the confessional, Cameron, who is also a reporter on the late-night celebrity show *The Big E*, uses her experiences as an 'outsider' for material. Like Jenny Eclair, her style is self-deprecating but not self-pitying. She is tamer than Lea De Laria, but just as sharp, cynical and sassy.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONFESSATIONAL Rachel Berger

Australian-based Berger focuses on jokes about being single and 40 in the 90s. She ponders taking confession with women priests, male vulnerability, breast examinations and food as a feminist issue. Berger was born in Israel of Polish/Jewish parents and moved with her family to Australia when she was five. She cites Woody Allen and the Dalai Lama as role models, claims to be well-adjusted to her neuroses and draws on her experiences as an immigrant in an uninterrupted, high-octane monologue, delivered at breathtaking speed. AMY RAPHAEL