

The Sydney Morning Herald

High priestess of gay wit, wisdom

CABARET

BY JAMES WAITES

Bitch! Dyke! Fag Hag! Whore!, Belvoir Street Theatre, February 4

FUNKY disco music fills your ears. At the top of the stairs, a tall Arabic guy in slinky top-to-toe vinyl is dancing on a box. A mirror ball throws light across the auditorium. A gorgeous black woman is writhing in cute pink knickers over the other side. A hot-blond feral with a ring through her nose hangs provocatively from a bar. A hunky white boy in boots, jockstrap and bandanna is down on stage, a handheld video cam projecting his image on to a large screen behind him. Five dancers in all warming up Penny Arcade's audience to, among other favourites, that most famous of gay disco anthems — *We Are Family!*

She herself suddenly comes running out on stage, arms out as if to embrace every one of us. Nothing outrageous about her look though — a stylish black-linen statement which reads: take this jokester seriously, please. And so we should — Penny Arcade is the international high priestess of gay wit and wisdom. Who more appropriate to kick off the 1995 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival?

Arcade started life as the daughter of an Italian-American migrant family. At 14, she ran away and was taken in by what she calls her "gay family". Not some dad who's moved in with his accountant, these were high-life drags. They taught her the meaning of love and set her on the path to greater knowledge. She was there for the Stonewall

riots, she was there when clone replaced camp and again when her pals started dying of this "horrible medieval disease". She was there when lesbians started coming out and dressing up sexy. She's been all around the world telling audiences not just about the way it was, but the way it is, in a series of hilarious skits and interludes, impassioned pleas, plain speaking and in no uncertain terms. The dancers (not the same team every night) add colour and movement wherever required.

This is Arcade's "sex and censorship" show. It's been here before, but with the increased familiarity, this time there's more local content. The audience likes that.

We begin, however, with a couple of classic set-pieces. A receptionist at a New York brothel handles the phones. A hilarious study on the nice respectable types who rely on such services. Then, in another deliciously observed skit, a prostitute simply sits on a chair sharing the wacky wisdom she has gained from her years on the game. Classic comic writing on display here and strong delivery.

Then there are Penny Arcade's observations of the follies of gay men and lesbians and the movement itself over the past 30 years, so sharp at times you can



Penny Arcade ... high priestess.

physically feel her targets squirming in the audience. No posture of falsehood escapes her. She warns that the front-line dykes and feminists are usually her most critical audience and, from talk in the foyer later, Arcade was even correct on that point. She's not asking you to agree with everything she says, though I have to admit I did.

It's not all talk either. Arcade does put her body on the line.

What lifts this show to the level of greatness is its insights into the collapsing soul of America.

Here's where the rest of the material falls into place. Arcade hates the double standards that

are dragging the country down, the escalation of hatred in the guise of morality (from the right) and political correctness (from the left).

The result — a disempowered public glued to cable ("Don't do it!" she begs us) while the nation burns.

In Penny Arcade's experience of around 50 years of life as a "bisexual fag-hag with a big mouth" who's seen 300 of her friends die of AIDS, love is the only thing that can change people, which means tolerance of difference as much as it means sex.

It's a political issue. To Arcade, the obsession with stamping out obscenity in the US — the key target in this show — is itself obscene. There's a larger, hidden agenda, and the fundamental right of people to be themselves is on the line.

"If you think any of your friends might like this show," says Arcade at the end of an incredible 2½ hours on stage, "tell them about it. If you think they'll hate it, buy them a ticket." If you want a genuine insight into the recent explosion in gay and lesbian activity and want to feel included as a member of the human race while it happens, this is your chance.

To Penny Arcade, it takes all kinds: and she loves us all.

Bitch! Dyke! continues at Belvoir St until February 19.