



16 MARCH 1995

## Stories of death and decadence

### THEATRE

#### True Stories: Penny Arcade.

Comedy Club, Carlton, until 22 March

### GUY RUNDLE

**P**ENNY ARCADE, a brassy-mouthed 40-something New Yorker who spent her adolescence hanging out with Andy Warhol's gang, says that some people find her stories of down and out New York shocking and amoral. God knows why this would be. These tales of junkies, hookers and drag queens have been part of the bohemian repertoire for decades now, and part of the mainstream since the release of Lou Reed's *Walk On The Wild Side*.

The capacity audience is here for a reprise of the classic stories of decadence and death, and an appreciative sigh goes up every time there's a mention of Edie Sedgwick or the Max's Kansas City. This is almost a nostalgia show. Nevertheless, it's a reasonably good one, and well-worth a look.

The half-dozen monologues that Arcade gives us fall roughly into two categories. There are those characters who, while clearly based on real individuals, seem to represent a general cultural type. An acid head '60s Warhol casualty who can't move into the present, a speed freak whose whole manner, and existence, has been completely taken over by the amphetamine jitters, and a moving portrait of a homeless Latino Aids victim are examples of that aspect of the show.

The others are more idiosyncratic: a dirt-poor Southern gal, glorying in black lace and a Supremes wig, who tells us of her not-unwilling slide from marriage to prostitution, a drag queen with an aristocratic British persona, and a testy old woman waiting for death in a rent-controlled Little Italy apartment. Their type is recognisable, but they retain an irreducible individuality.

Arcade moves between these various New York stories with a professional, if unspectacular, command of voice and gesture differentiation, although the accents tend to slide together into a generic Noo Yawkese when her attention falters. What gives her characters more than an edge of reality, and allows her to overcome the uneven scripting, is the obvious enthusiasm with which she depicts their tireless struggle for more life.

Arcade has expressed her annoyance with those who say her show encourages hard drug use, and rightly so. And yet, although there is no judgment made of the characters' choices, there is an obvious authorial approval of their vitality and courage.

That may amount to the perpetuation of a myth; most junkies are sick and sad, not live and sassy, and most drag queens are accountants or similar. But watching through a haze of white light and blue cigarette smoke, as Arcade winningly evoked these denizens of the Chelsea Hotel it was difficult to banish the unpleasant, but familiar, thought that the lifestyle has its attractions, and that a failure to live fast and die young might ultimately have more to do with cowardice than common sense.