

Revealing scenes from the sexuality war

Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore! True Stories.
Written and performed by Penny Arcade. Belvoir Upstairs, Sydney

By John McCallum

YEARS ago, George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party and Malcolm X's Black Muslims came to Madison Square Garden to protest together because they shared a common vision for the future of America: the segregation of the nation into separate regions for whites and blacks.

More recently, various groups of born-again Christians and radical feminists have united in a joint struggle against pornography. As Penny Arcade suggests, if extremists so committed to different causes can form such unholy

alliances, why do ordinary gays, lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexuals, who mostly just want to get on with their lives, have to spend so much time finding ideological reasons not to talk to each other?

At the beginning of Sydney's Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival this is a marvellous thing to hear, one of many exhilarating and refreshingly honest things which Arcade says in a show which cuts through political correctness with unstoppable force.

I have seen *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* several times in different cities, here and overseas, and each time Arcade's wonderful generosity, charm and good sense have seduced me.

She is funny and thoughtful and she can talk the leg off an iron pot. And she has those controversial erotic dancers — politically incorrect, apparently, but what isn't now? If anything, they're chosen with

too much balanced care. On first night there was a stud, a babe, a dyke, a fem, a gay and a tranny. At least that's how my friend and I categorised them, when, caught up in the spirit of the show, we were trying to decide which one we would want to take home.

The new show on this tour, *True Stories*, is even better, showing Arcade's bitter-sweet comic genius as a writer and character actor and the superb work she can do with her audience. As in *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* she pushes her material so far, and so beguilingly, that the challenge is to stay with her and keep listening to what she is saying.

In *True Stories*, Arcade presents six characters from the real New York, which is lovingly evoked from the 60s to the present, but which is also that metaphorical New York of the modern imagination which, like Genet's Paris, we all now share a part of.

It is a world of galleries full of acid-freaks and the darling mystic fools of high modern art, hotel lobbies in which hard drugs and sex have become the new coinage of millennial American civilisation, and dirty streets which have grown cluttered with the human jetsam of its decline.

From these sites Arcade conjures up desperately strange people who have a wild energy and dignity which reclaims their humanity in the face of that shadowed future which seems to end, in our contemporary vision, in the psychological full-stop year 2000.

Arcade presents us with Andrea Whips, an Andy Warhol trash star; Charlene, an old entrepreneurial whore; Aunt Lucy, an Italian mama eternally arguing about the work she has done in her long life; and Dame Margot Howard Howard, the drag queen known here as the author of *I Was a White Slave in Harlem*.

The best is the character who simply calls herself "Girl" — a black/Hispanic street kid who accosts us with "Gimme some change?" and then a spiel. In this case the spiel is that she is a homeless drug addict with a kid and AIDS.

It is difficult to walk away from full-on New York beggars when you are used to Sydney beggars who sidle up apologetically and are so easy to ignore. The New York ones have more competition and so have developed a more elaborate performance when they ask for small change.

Arcade reminds us that that doesn't mean their stories aren't true or their need any less. These two shows are wonderful for Sydney's Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, partly because hetero and bisexual friends of gays, with so much to say, don't usually get invited to such events in these ideologically constrained times.