

# Edinburgh Festival

## FRINGE FOCUS

# The proverbial bad Penny

Be afraid. Be very afraid. Penny Arcade's in town with a junkie hooker and drug baron, warns Keith Bruce

**T**HE Fringe's reputation for daring and experiment is at least threatened by the number of familiar shows that feature in this year's programme. For every new production in some venue brochures there is a show back for a bank raid, capitalising at the box office on earlier acclaim.

Not Susanna Ventura. Better known as Penny Arcade and discovered by Glasgow audiences before she appeared on the Fringe. She was last here with the seminal *Bitch, Dyke, Fag hag, Whore* – a show that challenged sexual stereotypes to such a revolutionary extent that it irritated right-on lesbians as much as prurient conservatives. Even the go-go dancers she persuaded to take part felt tacky by the end of it.

That was seven years ago. Ventura hung about in Glasgow to workshop her next piece, *Bad Reputation*, with a posse of streetwise teenagers from Castlemilk who knew the real meaning of the words, but Scotland never saw the finished article. She also produced a *fin de siècle* piece, *Love Sex & Sanity*, which jumped between Secession Vienna and her own New York city, comparing the life of Elizabeth of Austria in 1895 with the late-twentieth-century experience of Ventura/Arcade.

Then for two years Ventura looked after her elderly mother, because that's what good Italian-American girls do, even ones as bad as Penny Arcade, who left home at 17 in the mid-sixties to drop acid, change her name, and hang out with Andy Warhol and other Manhattan bohobos.

Then her mom died and there was no reason for her not to accept the invitation to appear at Ladyfest in Glasgow this weekend. From there it was easy to pick up the phone and ask for a Fringe date at the Assembly Rooms, the scene of her previous triumph, to make the trip worthwhile. Well, there was the small matter of not having a show, but that could be fixed.

Penny Arcade's show is fresh to the extent that the gloss is still tacky. It had had one run through in Manhattan before catching the flight. By the second night, she says, there was 15 minutes of new



PENNY FOR HER THOUGHTS: Arcade, née Susanna Ventura, fears that individuality is dying out, though her own show belies that opinion.

material in it. It wound up at the Assembly yesterday evening, but opens (for four nights only) at the Gilded Balloon tonight at the suitably more Arcade hour of 11.30pm. It will be new minted every night.

"People go to the theatre to experience that which we are unwilling or unable to connect with outside," she quotes, approximately. But, coming from Penny Arcade that's a challenge. For every minute that she flatters her audience, making them feel part of her gang of wise, clear-sighted individuals, there is another that makes them feel guilty for having a steady job, a well-defined sexuality, or a Gap sweatshirt – or for failing to recognise that individuals don't hunt in packs.

With Tim Fountain's memoir of Quentin Crisp, *Resident Alien*, playing in parallel, her reminiscences of the great

anti-fashion, anti-scene homosexual stylist are timely. He was only one of a million Arcade knew. "Eighty per cent of those larger-than-life characters have died. We are now in a world that hates individuality," she says.

Arguably, the world has always hated – or rather feared – individuals as fearless as Crisp. It is Penny Arcade who has changed. When I spoke to her in 1993 she was an irrepressible teenager in a grown-up body with her finger on the pulse of the hypocrisies of Fringe culture. Now she is 51, and conscious enough of it to remind us of the fact regularly. But she is wearing braces to correct her bite and looks as much an overgrown teenager as she always did, and is every bit as nihilistic as the modern model.

"Edinburgh looks incredibly beautiful to me this time – there's no way you could age as well as that.

But it is marred by that creeping globalisation that makes the airport in Bangkok the same as Heathrow. I stayed in Leith last time I was here and I loved it. I'm not going now because I want to remember it that way."

But it is more than corporate greed and civic gentrification that is depressing Penny Arcade. There is the gentrification of ideas that sees students regurgitating her performance vocabulary for PhDs and young people embracing political correctness until all the egalitarianism is squeezed out. "It's all about language, not real life," she says sadly. Quentin Crisp and I became close in 1986. We argued about the value of activism until 1993.

"Then came the triumph of gay marketing and there was no room for me as a bisexual fag hag. Everything Quentin said to me

turned out to be true. He used to say: 'Sublimating your personal identity to some narrow ghetto is the same as your father telling you to get your hair cut.' I'm not interested in gay people judging me about my sexuality."

Penny Arcade's new show is populated with riveting characters besides herself. There is the twentysomething ingenue to New York, who sees a *Friends* lifestyle in every Starbucks.

**A**ND there is *Girl*, a junkie hooker whose monologue, improvised song and all, is virtually unaltered from how Arcade recorded it on the streets of NYC. And there's Margot Howard Howard, the New York drag queen who serviced the city's black drug barons and wrote of her life in *A White Slave in Harlem*.

Arcade first introduced her to *Herald* readers back in 1993, when she revealed that, among all her other accomplishments, Margot H-H was a founder of the Mary Stuart Association, which celebrates the life and times of Mary Queen of Scots.

Penny Arcade admits to the appeal of a home in the Scottish Highlands, as she tires of New York, but does not reveal whether she shares the enthusiasm of Manhattan's transvestites for the Scots Queen. But, as she looks out over her world, you can't help feeling they'd have a lot in common.

"In 30 years the world will be a horrible cold place unless it's turned around now. I don't feel optimistic."

Penny Arcade is at Gilded Balloon from tonight to Sunday at 11.30pm and at Glasgow Ladyfest, 13th Note, on Tuesday, August, 14.