

**Loud and Colorful, With Total Recall**

## **The Performance Artist Penny Arcade, Now an Actress**



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Penny Arcade in her apartment on the Lower East Side.

By TIM MURPHY

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In 1967, the same year that the playwright [Tennessee Williams](#) found himself in the depths of substance abuse, depression and critical failure, a short, busty, outspoken 17-year-old named Susana Ventura completed her tenure in reform school and ran away from working-class New Britain, Conn. She moved to downtown Manhattan, was sheltered by drag queens and fell under the tutelage of gay artists including Andy Warhol; the filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smith; and John Vaccaro, founder of the avant-garde Play-House of the Ridiculous theater group.

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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Penny Arcade, left, with Mink Stole, rehearsing the Tennessee Williams one-act, “The Mutilated.”

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Lee Black Childers

From left, Patti Smith, Jackie Curtis and Penny Arcade in 1969.

Williams endured several more years of personal and professional anguish before he [died at 71](#) in 1983. Ms. Ventura, taking a note from her drag mentors, quickly renamed herself Penny Arcade and by the 1990s had become a prominent performance artist downtown, presenting shows that, souped up by a troupe of burlesque dancers, mixed her vivid personal biography with passionate and sarcastic monologues about the AIDS epidemic, the women’s and gay rights movements, and, above all else, her own right to flaunt her body and her mind.

Williams and Penny Arcade, now 63, never met, but she says they are kindred spirits, which makes her excited to deliver the coarse poetry of his late work onstage. She is starring opposite Mink Stole, the actress from numerous John Waters films, in “The Mutilated,” one of two Williams one-acts (the other was “The Gnadiges Fraulein”) that, presented together, flopped spectacularly on Broadway in 1966. (Stanley Kauffman, reviewing in The New York Times, [called the play](#) an exercise in “boozy delusion.”)

“I adore Williams,” Penny Arcade said recently in the art- and memento-packed Lower East Side apartment she’s inhabited since 1981. “Tenn was a very florid personality, and by the ’60s, he was hanging out at Warhol’s Factory. He wasn’t writing the kinds of plays the critics wanted from him anymore, but the point they missed is that he’d always been experimental, and in the ’60s, he just kept on experimenting.”

A revival of interest in Williams's late work is under way, plays far beyond the realist constraints of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Set on the seediest side of the French Quarter in New Orleans on a 1930s Christmas Eve, "The Mutilated" follows two flophouse frenemies — Celeste, a rambunctious jailbird and aging hooker, and Trinket, a fragile, lonely heiress with a bodily "mutilation" she harbors like a shameful secret she's dying to shed — as they bicker, reminisce and, in a mystical crescendo, ultimately meet their maker (of sorts).

[The new production](#), directed by Cosmin Chivu and with original music by Jesse Selengut, had its debut last month as part of the eighth annual [Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival](#) in Massachusetts. Now in previews, it opens next Sunday at the New Ohio Theater in the West Village.

For anyone familiar with Penny Arcade's often abrasive, confrontational stage style, the role she plays should come as no surprise: it's the bawdy Celeste, who has no qualms about flashing her frontage to a sailor, or about picking a cockroach out of a cookie box before helping herself to a treat.

"Celeste is me if I hadn't moved to New York and become an intellectual," said Penny Arcade, who grew up in a contentious, profane and tight-knit Italian-American immigrant family, a milieu that has served as fodder for much of her work.

"Celeste is a force of nature and a sexual being, an unconquerable spirit," she continued. "At one point in the play, right after her brother bails her out of jail and walks away from her in shame, she declares, 'I'll go on!' And so do I.

"The New York Times doesn't feature me for 45 years, until now?" She shrugged elaborately, briefly primping her pink-dyed hair. "I'll go on."

Those who've known her for even a fraction of her four-plus decades as a New York performer and activist would call that an understatement. "It's impressive that she's been able to have such a long career in a scene that requires you to keep strange hours and where most people stop getting paid attention to after a few years," said Holly Hughes, a fellow performance artist. "That requires a level of commitment from her. As the world of downtown New York bohemia gets erased by gentrification, she carries a lot of historical memory and keeps it alive."

Penny Arcade has railed onstage against the glossification of Lower Manhattan since at least the 1990s — a trope that took form in a 2002 show called "New York Values." But she does not abandon a theme once it gets in her craw; she chews it into ever-new permutations.

"This is the first time in the city that an entire population, the working poor, has been displaced," she said. Reminded that artists pioneered downtown gentrification as early as the '80s, she replied tartly: "We didn't displace anyone. They'd already moved to the suburbs."

In 1999, with her longtime artistic collaborator Steve Zehentner, Penny Arcade started the [Lower East Side Biography Project](#), a video archive of interviews with longtime pillars of the neighborhood's artistic community, including the filmmaker Jonas Mekas, the artist and sex educator Betty Dodson, the Living Theater co-founder Judith Malina and the dancer Jack Waters.

"Gentrification happens to ideas as well as neighborhoods," she said. "We started this project so future generations would have access to the people who built downtown's reputation as an incubator for authenticity, rebellion and iconoclasm."

Now, it appears, her longevity is paying off. In the past five years, she has gained a new, adoring audience of young downtowners, in part thanks to her hosting a quarterly performance party with an unprintable name at the Delancey, a Lower East Side nightclub. There, she not only introduces new acts like Max Steele and Dandy Darkly, she also treats the polysexual, often-drunk crowd to a dose of whatever is enraging her at the moment.

"It's hard to communicate the visceral sense of watching Penny on a rampage," said Earl Dax, [who promotes the party](#). "It's terrifying, and the crowd loves it. They see in her somebody who tells the truth and who never conformed toward fitting the typical American dream of financial success."

With the Williams play, however, she now seeks a new kind of success — recognition as a traditional actor with a script. "Hopefully, this play will be a showcase for me, and I'll get an agent," she said. "It's a chance to be seen." Agent or no agent, it's highly unlikely she will become invisible anytime soon. "I realized at an early age that I needed a lot of attention," she added. "So I decided that in return, I'd give as much back as I possibly could."

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: November 10, 2013***

*An article last Sunday about the downtown theater performer and activist Penny Arcade misstated the length of time she has been working in New York. It is four-plus decades, not five-plus.*

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