

Penny Arcade headlines in Provincetown's 3rd annual Afterglow Festival

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Provincetown Banner

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What's this?

PROVINCETOWN — The title of performance artist Penny Arcade's show at this year's Afterglow Festival in Provincetown is "The Girl Who Knew Too Much." Spend any amount of time reading her work, watching her perform or talking to her and it will become evident that the title is well earned.

Arcade knows a lot.

But as eager as she is to share it with you, you'll have to wait — Arcade performs her one-woman show at The Crown & Anchor, 247 Commercial St., on Sunday, Sept. 15, the final evening of the Afterglow Festival, which begins this Monday, Sept. 9. (For details, visit www.afterglowfestival.org.)

Born Susana Ventura, Arcade ended up on her own in Provincetown as a young teen and eventually found a family among the artists and performers on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. At 17, she performed in John Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous, and by 18 was hanging with Andy Warhol and appearing in his film, "Women in Revolt," thus becoming a Warhol superstar.

A gifted writer, since the 1980s she has been performing her own monologues. Her show that garnered the most attention was "Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!" Clearly, she is no shrinking violet.

"All of my work has a big element of improvisation," she says. "'The Girl Who Knew Too Much' is a compilation of work I've been doing my whole life — since about 17. I am fascinated by people, especially people I believe were marginalized, and giving them a voice. I am a precision mimic, but will only mimic people I admire — no Lady Gaga or Kim Kardashian. People in everyday life. Like a homeless junkie with AIDS, or my Aunt Lucy who is a marginalized character. On stage a lot more

is revealed. Art should be self-expressive and communicative. I'm a relater. I do it through me and my characters. I think it's going to be an interesting show."

"The Girl Who Knew Too Much" also has a soundtrack, mixed live by Arcade's collaborator of 22 years, Steve Zehentner, that she says acts as an emotional soundscape to the stories.

Arcade says she is thrilled that half of the proceeds from her performance are going to Helping Our Women, a group based in Provincetown that helps local women facing long-term health issues.

"I hope people will come knowing that money is going to help women who live there all the time," she says. "Anyway you cut it, being a woman is not easy. I can really get behind this. I'm a feminist, but for real reasons. My work has been more obscure because I'm a woman. Growing up in an immigrant Italian family, I learned early on that women can't have a point of view. Life for many women is really hard."

Now a long-time New Yorker, Arcade loves coming back to Provincetown. She was here this past summer teaching at the Fine Arts Work Center, and will be back at the end of the month performing with Mink Stole in "Mutilated" as part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival (Sept. 26-29).

"People who live in out-of-the-way places tend to be more individualistic," she says. "Long winters without a lot to do, people tend to read — self-educating ... that's my audience. They have to be alive. If I had wanted to make a lot of money it would have been easier to go to Hollywood, but I get to be an independent artist. I try to trigger compassion, empathy. My audience and I are similar. We're looking for a deeper investigation."

Arcade has seen a lot in her life. In the height of the AIDS crisis, she nursed many friends as they were dying. Now, she is trying to document the lives of those times in New York in her film series, "The Lower East Side Biography Project," something she started in 1999 and is still producing, which shares and celebrates the stories of individuals, each living his or her own unique life.

"I've been on my own since I was 13 [and can tell you that] nothing in the world supports individuality," she says. "We are living in an era where the predominant value is mediocrity. People want to see people a little cleverer or a little less clever. Not the best thinkers, the funniest who are talking about something. We're drowning in mediocrity. I feel like a one-woman campaign against mediocrity. Everything I accomplished was by my own effort. Most of us don't get the hand up. There's a lot of resentment towards women, a lot from other women."

After her Provincetown appearances in the Afterglow and Tennessee Williams festivals, Arcade heads to New York City along with Stole and "Mutilated," which will be performed at the New Ohio Theater on Christopher Street.

Penny Arcade is not slowing down.

"As I get older I see my desire to be with the public is based on a need to share something of value, and a need for attention, of course," she says, laughing. "We are all joyful creatures. The key is to be reinvested all the time in your own individuality. Our culture is designed to make you feel small and buy things. Enlightenment and self-awareness are free."

Just the facts

What: Afterglow Festival

Where: Crown & Anchor, 217 Commercial St., Provincetown

When: Monday-Sunday, Sept. 9-15

Tickets: \$30, www.afterglowfestival.org

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