

## WE PAY TRIBUTE TO THE LEGENDARY WISDOM AND LIGHTNING WIT OF THE SELF-PROCLAIMED 'OLD QUEEN' OF THE UNDERGROUND

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IT'S A HOT JULY AFTERNOON IN 2009 AND I'M IN PENNY ARCADE'S FOURTH-FLOOR APARTMENT ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN. The pink and blue walls are covered in portraits, from Raeburn's 'Skating Minister' to Martin Luther King to a STOP sign over which Penny's own image is painted (good luck stopping this one). A framed heart sits over the fridge, Day of the Dead skulls spill along a sideboard. Arcade sits at a wrought-iron table, before her a pile of fabric, a bowl of fruit, two laptops, a red purse, and a pack of American Spirits. She wears a striped top, cargo pants, and scuffed pink Crocs, hair pulled back from her face, no make-up.

'I had asked if I could audition to play myself,' she says, 'And the word came back that only a movie star or a television star could play Penny Arcade!'

She's talking about the television film, *An Englishman in New York*, the follow-up to *The Naked Civil Servant*, in which John Hurt reprises his role as Quentin Crisp. Arcade, a regular collaborator and close friend of Crisp's throughout his last decade, is played by Cynthia Nixon, star of *Sex*

*and the City* – one of the shows Arcade has blamed for the suburbanisation of her beloved New York City. Short and sensuous, mischievous and wise, part imp, part sibyl, a shrewd listener when she isn't talking – which is most of the time – Arcade is a one-off. It's hard to think of anyone else playing her, let alone that gamine friend of Carrie's.

Her main issue with the film, though, concerns its depiction of Crisp's experience; misrepresentation of history, especially history in which she has a stake, frustrates her. 'While I think it has some value politically, in many ways it fails to represent the real challenge Quentin had, which was fundamentally against an ageist American society,' she says. Ageing has been on her mind too. 'Quentin and I both wanted the same thing out of life. We both wanted to grow up to be completely ourselves.'

# PENNY ARCADE





This, more or less, is Arcade's idea of the meaning of life: to become most oneself by being honest and respectful to one's true self, from which respect for others and the world will follow. 'Life is so short, you know?' she tells me later. 'And then, on the other hand, life is so long! It's too long to be miserable. As humans, we're pack animals. We have an intrinsic need to fit in. That's a very real force and we have to go against that to stand for who we actually are and what we actually want out of life. People will sacrifice themselves – their very most innate needs – to have a friendly support system. But I believe that you can have that support system [if] you get comfortable with the fact that you're born alone, you die alone and the journey of life is about the discovery of who you are. It's the most exciting journey of all!'

Today, Arcade and Steve Zehentner, her collaborator for the past two decades, are running through her latest show. Arcade's devised pieces fuse autobiographical address, character monologue, dramatic scenes, dance and audience engagement, among other things. *Old Queen* (sometimes also known as *When Nobody was Famous*) is both a tribute to the queers Arcade credits with raising her and a rallying cry to resuscitate the culture of defiant individualism and intellectual inquiry that made such an upbringing possible. 'There's one big dance number in this called "I Was a Teenage Faghag"; she notes.

Zehentner experiments with music cues and makes practical enquiries ('You'll have a gown on at this point, right?' 'Who knows what I'll do?') as Arcade runs through the script. As 'Don't Leave Me This Way' plays, she describes herself as, 'The living link between past

again about *An Englishman in New York*. 'To not even have me read – it's crazy,' Arcade says. 'But my hope for that production was for it to be – all right, I'm going to say this...' Zehentner rolls his eyes. 'Oh, Jesus, Penny. Don't say it!' She continues, 'Penny Arcade: career-killer number 700,456! In *The Naked Civil Servant*, they took a very big risk and told a story that had tremendous human interest. In this, they set out to try to make a commercial film, most obviously in the casting. I'm a charismatic. Cynthia Nixon I think is a quite good actress but she's not a charismatic.' We arrive at Dixon Place. Arcade looks around for a light. She never seems to have a light. 'But my issue is not with Cynthia. My issue is with those costumes. 1980s East Village. Hello? You know I did not dress like that! That's how people dressed in malls in New Jersey in the 80s! Hi, how are you?' Arcade greets a young man, warm before she's quite sure who he is. 'Didn't you dance in my show?' 'Yes.' 'I thought so!'

'Penny Arcade is a reformer; she is on a mission,' writes Ken Bernard in the introduction to *Bad Reputation*, a 2009 collection of Arcade's performances, essays, and interviews. In her 'foundational outsidersness', Bernard says, there are links to Aileen Wournos, Phoolan Devi, Frida Kahlo; she is, 'A survivor who has lived through a personal hell and come back to tell the tale – raw, bloody, obsessed, utterly unyielding and utterly serious. You might want to kill the messenger, but history and literature tell us that won't work... We are all in a dire fix – who are we? Where do we go now? Arcade is trying to find a way out.'

Susana Carmen Ventura was born in July 1950, in New Britain,

### 'AND NOW, FINALLY, I AM AN OLD QUEEN, BUT IN A WORLD THAT HAS LOST THE MEANS OF MEASURING THE VALUE OF OLD QUEENS'

and present,' remembers, 'That glorious era when the walls between the classes fell for a short time,' bemoans the coming of, 'The shadow of the rainbow-flagged marketplace,' and the, 'Counterrevolutionary... fact that where gay people gather today they can't speak, nor can they be heard'. It's vintage Arcade. Even in rehearsal mode, she's an electrifying performer: provocative, iconoclastic, and unapologetic, but also vulnerable, eager to connect, always reaching out a hand to the audience. 'She thrives on creating a visceral, spiritual connection,' Zehentner has written, 'A current of circulating energy connecting hearts.... She loves when the show breaks – when the realism of the moment is more real than what we've contrived.'

Arcade talks of her years spent learning at the feet of the masters: Jamie Andrews, Jackie Curtis, Jack Smith, Crisp, and so many more. 'And now, finally, I am an old queen, but in a world that has lost the means of measuring the value of old queens. I sometimes ask myself the question, why am I one of the few survivors from that time trying to publicly navigate my way in this new fearsome world of consensus and status quo? How did I find my way to that gay world?'

They're late for rehearsal at Dixon Place and we leave in a flurry of phones, papers, and cigarettes. In the hallway leans a bubble-wrapped painting of Christ, body pierced with swords but holding out a flaming heart. We go down the stairs and through the courtyard into Manhattan's harsh summer sun, pacing along Clinton Street, talking

Connecticut. She was, Zehentner notes in the same volume, 'Belligerent, very intelligent and possessed an American imagination'. She was never going to fit into a conformist immigrant family or blue-collar New England society. Her southern Italian kin were, she says, pagan and peasant; it was, 'Like being raised by superstitious wolves'. Her father was put away. She always thought he was criminally insane. Then, in 2004, three months before her death, her mother ('The Marlon Brando of Italian mothers') told her that actually she hadn't wanted to deal with his manic depression. 'She was in her rocking chair saying, "You know, your father wrote me every day and he wanted to come out of that place...I could have let him out. But our family didn't do the kind of things he did".'

Susana Ventura's questioning of everything – not least the received notion that her gender and sexuality made her less worthy of respect – was never going to be indulged by her family, or her hometown. As she grew up, boys called her a slut and girls believed it. At 13, she was put in reform school for two years for, 'Manifesting the danger of falling into the hands of vice' – that is, just in case she turned out as bad as they said she was. Later, she climbed out of her window to go to gay bars, then to Provincetown, then, in 1967, to New York City. She fell in with the right kind of queer junkies – the kind with taste and wit and talent and contacts with the arts scene. Never wholeheartedly embraced, she feels, because, 'I wasn't a boy', this was

nevertheless the environment in which she honed her self, and her sexuality (Arcade describes herself as bisexual). 'My entire sexual orientation came from gay men,' she tells me over Skype, a year after we parted at Dixon Place. 'The first sex I saw was between two gay men. You know how these things affect you when you're 14 so of course my entire sexual life has been very open.'

At 17, while on acid, she became Penny Arcade. 'I stumbled into this scene and was accepted because they recognised my curiosity, they recognised my wit, and they recognised that I knew they were superior to me,' she recalls. 'The values of the era I came of age in, which remained till about 1987, was that you had to earn the respect of people. You weren't just entitled to it.' Arcade met the experimental performer, John Vaccaro, worked with the pioneering queer theatre troupe, the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, and performed in Jackie Curtis's *Femme Fatale*. (Jackie reinvented drag, absolutely. Modern drag is Jackie Curtis. But Jackie was also incredibly self-educated and was a phenomenal poet and an incredible thinker and these things aren't passed on, unfortunately. They always want to focus on Jackie as a drag queen.) She met Warhol and in 1970 appeared in *Women in Revolt*, the Factory movie starring Curtis, Candy Darling, and Holly Woodlawn. 'Andy wanted people who were great performers, who were weirdos but who were kind of grounded, which is hard to get.'

This period, for Arcade, is ground zero. 'The world now is influenced by the life and lifestyles of all of these people who are largely obscure. These ideas and these ways of being came from a

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specific group of people who were all interacting with each other in the late 1960s. We were afraid but that did not stop us. We didn't have approval. We didn't have anything. But what we did have was this dynamic presence. Anywhere we went, we just capsized whatever was going on. Not because we were going in and making a lot of noise – there was just something in the energistic presence of these people who were told by society that, "You don't have a right to exist", and we were saying, "Fuck you!" You know? Yes, she was at Stonewall.

In the 1970s, Arcade went to Amsterdam and Formentera, where the police thought she was a drug dealer, and London, where, 'Everything was in black and white and everyone was incredibly poor and we would just drink loads and loads and loads of tea the whole day and there was never anything to eat except scrambled egg.' She spent much of the late 70s with a man, 'In the woods in Maine'. Back in New York in 1981, she befriended and made work with Jack Smith and Charles Ludlum.

Then came the cataclysm. For Arcade, the AIDS crisis was both a personal tragedy from whose trauma she feels she is barely recovering today ('How can you explain that you were young and 300 of your friends died and you're still here?'), and, more broadly, a disaster for queer culture. 'I sometimes wonder,' she says in *Old Queen*, 'If AIDS did to the gay intelligentsia what the Nazis did to the Polish

intelligentsia. You know, there were Polish jokes for a reason....' Arcade started her own improvised solo performance practice in 1985, with shows at PS122, La Mama, and other seminal venues, interrogating her own past and the current political climate. But it was bitterly bad timing. 'My audience died,' she says. 'In the 80s, when I was at my most physically beautiful, my most outrageous, that audience that would have carried me to the mainstream died and I did spend a lot of time taking care of people. I didn't just focus on my career. My friends were dying and I was bringing them food and taking them to the hospital and doing the things that all of us did.'

Despite this, the work continued to develop. In 1990, she debuted *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, which is still her signature piece. A 'Sex and censorship show' inspired by the Reagan-era culture wars, it sees Arcade, as herself and in character as several sex workers, dissect sexuality, economics, morality, immigration, taxation, political correctness, religion, and, of course, AIDS, to a backdrop of Prince, Isaac Hayes, the Rolling Stones, Blondie and Gloria Gaynor – plus, to the consternation of certain feminists, a troupe of erotic dancers. (Arcade is uniquely able to stake claims to kickstarting both the performance art and the neo-burlesque movements.) In 1992, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* began a year-long run off-Broadway then toured internationally to two dozen cities. It continues to be revised and performed today. 'It's just interesting how little things have changed,' Arcade says. 'It's so scary. In 1970, we thought we'd handled this shit. Homophobia – all this stuff was going to be over. And nothing really

important has changed.'

Arcade's other pieces include *Bad Reputation*, about Catholic reform school and life on the streets of New York, *La Miseria*, which put working-class immigrant America in tension with responses to the AIDS crisis, and *New York Values*, about the mainstream takeover of the city. She also developed a long-running on-stage dialogue with Quentin Crisp throughout the 1990s. Recently, Arcade has regularly collaborated with Earl Dax, creator of Pussy Faggot and other performance parties, who praised her last year in these pages for her ability, 'To identify the fault lines in contemporary culture, contrasting an increasingly sanitised and homogenised New York with the bohemia in which she had grown up'.

A few years ago, Arcade came across Foucault's *Fearless Speech* in a Turkish second-hand bookstore. 'The book is all about parrhesia, about truth-telling in ancient Greece,' she says, 'And I met myself in the first four pages. A parrhesiast is someone who tells the truth, from their point of view; in telling their truth, they put themselves at risk; and they tell their truth from a sense of duty and responsibility. And I thought, "Wow. That's me!" It hasn't always been a comfortable role. 'I don't know how it turned out that I became this provocative truth-teller because really I'm just obsessed with fashion and beauty and drama and comedy, you know? Every time I'm in a position where I





have to tell the truth, there's a part of me inside that's going, "Oh, please don't say that! Please, please, please don't put me in that position!" Because I'm very delicate inside and I really like to be liked, you know? And contemporary neuroscience tells us that it's very easy to trigger the flight response in people. When there's a threat to their status or their certainty about anything that they experience, it's the same as if someone has a knife to their throat.'

These days, truth-telling for Arcade is not just a matter of self-expression but of duty to the past. 'People started referring to me as a legend in 1990, when I was 40,' she says. 'You're a legend not only because of what you do but because of what you live through. I have a very particular gift: I can give the past. I can give history and I can give people to the public. All these people that I love, you would love.' Her mandate is simple. 'I lived. I lived! There is no reason why I didn't get AIDS. I had lovers who were gay male hustlers – after you hustle for a certain amount of time, you'll have sex with anyone – who died of AIDS. I used a lot of drugs when I was younger. But I lived and how could I not (bear witness)? I'm surrounded by dead people and they all want one thing: publicity! Every single one of them is going, "What have you done for me lately?!" But I'm so informed by them. Every time I go on stage, in the wings, I say, "Okay, Ethel Eichelberger, Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling, Peter Hugar, Andrea Whips, Ondine: come, help me, assist me. Help me go to that place, keep my standard high". It's very real for me.'

The need to communicate this knowledge and culture is the reason

**'I CRACKED A MOLAR, I FIXED IT WITH BUBBLE GUM. WE WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO FIX SHIT'**

*Old Queen* is Arcade's first piece in which the queer experience is, "The complete focus". The show really came about out of my realisation that the gay world that I grew up in had disappeared. I mean, it hasn't really disappeared, it's just underground.' She feels minimal identification with post-AIDS mainstream gay identity: too consumerist, too ingratiating to normative values, too indifferent to the legacy of queer struggle. She recoils at, 'How boring and idiotic and empty it is. It's empty. It's empty like the real world, you know?'

Also, too complacent about its own precariousness. To illustrate, Arcade recounts two exchanges that followed a 1994 performance of *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* in Manchester:

Young gay man: Oh, Miss Arcade, you're such a heroine of mine! I'm so excited to be able to show you our gay village.

Penny Arcade: (Warily) Gay village...?'

Young gay man: Oh, yes. We have one part of Manchester and we're all living there.

Penny Arcade: Have we learned nothing from *Kristalnacht*?

Cut to a telephone booth, in which Penny Arcade is dialling long distance to New York City. In a messy studio apartment, a wrinkled hand lifts the receiver.

Penny Arcade: Quentin, I'm in Manchester.

Quentin Crisp: You must leave immediately. They hate queers there.

Penny Arcade: Well, they have a gay village here now.

Quentin Crisp: (Surprised) A gay village?'

Penny Arcade: Yes, they're all living in the same place.

Quentin Crisp: Oh, I see. A kind of concentration camp, is it?'

'I don't think people realise how quickly a backlash can come," Arcade insists, 'Especially in America, where we're facing the idea of Sarah Palin for president. As long as you're adopting a baby and go to work from nine to five and don't wear any outlandish clothing (you're okay. But still) it's not safe to be different.'

ON A BALMY APRIL EVENING, AS LONDON GEARS UP FOR KATE AND WILL'S WEDDING, PENNY ARCADE STANDS SMOKING AT THE BUSY ROUNDABOUT OUTSIDE THE ROYAL VAUXHALL TAVERN, in a sheer black and white top, short black skirt, fishnets, and shiny black heels. She's a few hours off the plane from New York but it isn't jetlag that's bugging her. 'I cracked a molar,' she says matter-of-factly. 'I fixed it with bubble gum. We working class people know how to fix shit.'

Arcade has come to London to firm up plans for a West End run of *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* in the autumn. Tonight she's at the pub – south London's leading queer performance space – to take part in catty comedian Scott Capurro's live talk show. Nestled at a table at the back of the room, she's transfixed by the first guest, Ricky Sinz, a porn star who seems to have his head screwed on. Capurro asks him about his sexuality. 'The minute you start labelling yourself, you're putting up barriers,' he says. Arcade cheers – 'Yaaaaaay!' – and applauds loudly.

When the interview ends, she launches herself from her seat. 'I'm gonna meet him!'

Penny Arcade likes to meet people. As one of her axioms runs – she has many axioms, perhaps one day to be collected alongside her memoirs – "There are only two kinds of artist in the world: the kind who want to be worshipped and adored and the kind who want to be friends with everybody: and unfortunately that's settled by the time you're nine years old.' As one of the latter, Arcade is an enthusiastic Facebooker. Her Skype account solicitously bills her as a, "Theatre artist and real live human being".

'The most elevated quality in my personality is curiosity,' she says later. 'I was really beaten down and abused and like a public figure of derision in my town as a 12-year-old girl – and yet I did have the wherewithal to leave at 13. Of course, I always felt there was some sense of failure that I couldn't stay in my town, that I couldn't stay with my family, that I was this outcast. There's a lot of pain around that: the pain of being a queer person being thrown out by your family. It's impossible to measure the kind of damage that that does. But I just went out there and wanted to know people. So I do say to everyone, "Write me and I will write you back". Just today, I'm writing back and forth with this little girl that I met in Dubuque, Iowa...'

Arcade is determined to earn the sociability she craves. 'I need a great deal of affection because I got no affection,' she says. 'But I think

that, because of the gay men that raised me and the strictness with which they would not suffer banality or mediocrity, I have standards. [I resolved] that in return for this attention that I obviously desperately need, like all performers, I was going to give back something of quality. Let's face it, my work is not trite, you know? So the people who like my work are going to be people I'd want to know. As the gay world spins out into a thinner and thinner membrane of the most shallow thinking imaginable – not willing to do the math, this gay world! – there are also young people out there who really want a rigorous inquiry into things. What's the point of being alive?

Arcade's own interview with Capurro is more fraught. She comes peeping through the curtains ('I'm not sure about this'), jetlag setting in, and praises her host city. 'It's all about London now,' she insists. 'New York's a wash. I've been in London a few days and people ask, "Are you here for the wedding?" I say, "No! I'm here for the revolution!"' The audience aren't biting, and Arcade grows defensive. She chastises the crowd ('That was a joke. You didn't laugh. What'd I do to you?'), corrects Capurro ('I am not a heterosexual female! Never have been! Hello?! Did you Wikipedia me?'), and insists on her sincerity, 'I'm so serious!' she says, thumping the mic. 'Yeah,' drawls Capurro, 'Turn that on "Funny", will you?'

A monologue about the suburbanisation of New York goes down well ('Ah! They're starting to get me! They're starting to laugh! It's called laughing and thinking at the same time!'), but the audience bristle at other lines ('Gay people used to not be stupid and not be

an outsider. What's she talking about? I used to see her all the time with her long brown hair going to play piano in the West Village. She's a manufactured creature. She's got a team around her that took one part from Elton John, one part from Freddie Mercury, one part from Grace Jones, one part from Madonna. Six parts from Leigh Bowery! I'm really mad that there's never been an acknowledgement of the total appropriation of Leigh Bowery. I think she's an all-right person, at the end of the day, but she's 23. If she knew that all these things are being stolen from Leigh Bowery, she'd acknowledge him. But this is the problem. It's the erasure of history.' \*

It's Good Friday, a beautiful spring afternoon. Birdsong, sunshine, bees buzzing, church bells chiming. Penny, in a magenta top, jeans and white sneakers, is lightly stoned. 'Fucking lilac all over the place!' she exclaimed as we found a bench on which to eat raspberries. 'They aren't this colour in New York. It must be the light....' She's crushing on London in a big way. 'There's a thickness here,' she says, reaching for words. 'It's a lot more like honey than it is like sugar water. It's a lot more like marmalade than it is like jelly, you know? It's thicker, it's stickier. I don't know how to explain it. Maybe I'm just being swept away by a true English spring, which is also incredibly intoxicating.'

She's been protesting the cultural decline of New York for a decade and more, and sees little cause for optimism. 'I never thought I'd be the one to say New York's a great place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there. What goes on in London in a week in ballet and opera and films and theatre and performances and talks – although you can't

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ignorant'). Perhaps, Capurro suggests, they're thinking, 'Who's this woman talking to? Does she know who we are? She doesn't even live here. Fuck off!' Arcade rises to it; she can do combative. 'It's shoot the messenger,' she says. 'Look, I'm not for everybody but the people who hear me want to be supported in their individuality....' A second monologue goes over even better and she leaves to a warm ovation, mentioning her excitement to be performing two days later at Duckie, the RVT's seminal performance club night. 'That crowd doesn't take any shit,' she says. 'It's like running with the bulls at Pamplona.'

48 hours later, she's back on the stage, facing down the bulls. Drunk, Duckie bulls. Again, she's tried to be ingratiating, peeping through the curtains, handing out dead roses as her tits struggle, mostly successfully, to remain in her sheer, silver-sequined dress. She declares herself a refugee from the performance art scene, which she compares to socialism ('If you have real talent, you're regarded as being at an unfair advantage'), repeats her rousing line about the wedding and revolution, then proudly declares that her own audience, 'Has an attention span longer than three Lady Gaga videos'. The response is swift and surprising: a barrage of booing. Arcade looks taken aback. She tries to soldier on but the booing intensifies. Has it come to this? Will Duckie take Gaga over Arcade?

'This whole thing with Lady Gaga,' Arcade scoffs when we meet a week later in the churchyard of St Mary's, Islington, 'She's never been

afford to go! – is what we get in New York in three months. I know that Quentin Crisp would be truly mortified, but I think nothing would have prepared him for how quickly New York has capitulated to being like America. New York's no longer a cultural capital, it's a marketing capital. It's one thing if you can choose the amount of bad consumerist capitalist culture you're fed. In America, you cannot. There's no mystery left in New York now.' She adores Old Brompton and Highgate cemeteries, 'The beauty of the rot and the collapse.'

Arcade herself, meanwhile, goes from strength to strength. 'I'm very lucky because I'm one of those people who's become more beautiful as I've gotten older,' she had told me earlier. 'Anyone can be beautiful when they're 20. Ugly people are beautiful when they're 20 – you know, the bones and the skin and all of that. But to be able to be beautiful when you're 50 is quite a delicious thing.' Now she's 60. 'I've just had a lover for the first time since my marriage (to musician Chris Rael) ended three years ago, so it's the first new lover in 14 years. We've been having sex like it's 1969. I'm serious. Just unbelievable. But the problem with sex is the more sex you have, the more sex you want. My body is not philosophical, not at all. It wants what it wants, you know?'

Things were different a few years ago. 'At 55, I was in menopause and menopause is nature's way of saying it's through with you. And society says the same thing. At that point you're looking back and you're saying, "My God, what was all that about? All that sex, all that

\* During our conversations, Arcade paid tribute to the following people, along with those mentioned elsewhere in the article and many others: Bruce Benderson, Michael Billington, Bette Bourne, Jeff Buckley, Simon Casson, Earl Dax, Dougie Fields, John Giorno, Jeremy Goldstein, Deborah Harry, David Hoyle, Lois Keidan, Fran Lebowitz, Judith Malina, Jack McKeever, Taylor Mead, Jonas Mekas, Chris Paccitti, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Schulman, Ryan Styles, Jay Wegman



romance, all that drama – you mean I could have learned to speak Chinese and cook Thai food?!" All of a sudden it seems so diminishing. You have to think about what you think of yourself. You have to say, "This is no longer about what my parents did or the family I was born into or the class I'm born into". You have to take responsibility for your life at that point. I'm 60. I'm in the youth of my old age. And if you have a rigorous inquiry into your life at 60, you actually get to be the way you thought you would be at 20 but this time raised by you. You're your own mother, your own father, your own best friend. No more of these excuses of the past. What do you believe life is?

'All the holies, all the broken creatures, all of us, we are strong because of what we've survived. There are all these young queers who are hungry to learn that world and I'm there to tell them it's now as well and we need you. We need you to be an individual because I need an audience and I'm here to be with you. Stop trying to get the approval of people who are hard to please in your 20s and 30s because you're not going to know them in your 40s. Don't waste your time. If they don't like you, fuck them! You don't have to muck in with everyone in the world. It's about the world around you. You can't just say the world is boring. You must take it on yourself. All those people you admire took it on themselves and they were alone. They were alone.

'So in that moment at Duckie, when the entire audience – a

fucking gay male audience who are my people! That's my audience, that's my community, that's my tribe! I'm an elder in that tribe and I started out as a child in that tribe! – when they were booing, and the booing became louder and louder and louder and I was standing there thinking, "Holy fuck, now what?", then I thought, inside my head, "What's true for you?" And then suddenly it rose – and you were there and you saw it where I became like Joan of Arc and I said, louder than 200 gay men booing, I yelled, "Where is your loyalty to Leigh Bowery?" And the whole room went silent. And I marvelled. I marvelled and I thought, "Well, Miss Arcade, you have become quite the mistress of your form, have you not?" And that was tremendous. And that was being an artist at risk and being with an audience that was also at risk because they showed who they were but they also heard me. They heard me and they got it and they did the math really quick. They understood it. And afterward I met nearly everyone I could in that audience because I always go and talk to everybody because I do want to be friends with everyone in the world.' ☺

*Penny Arcade regularly gives talks and performs internationally: check her website, [www.pennyarcade.tv](http://www.pennyarcade.tv), for details of upcoming events. Ben Walters is cabaret editor for Time Out London and producer of BURN, the platform for moving images by cabaret artists.*