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Arcade said this idea of "teaching theatre" was first articulated by Bertolt Brecht, who used theatre as a way of imparting "factual information to the masses".

"And, given what has been going on in America with the censorship issue and that incredible right-wing fascistic trajectory that we seem to be on, and knowing how little Americans know about what is really going on in their own country, I wanted to give them all that information," she said.

"I suppose I took the bitter pill and covered it with sugar in the form of one of my characters, Charlene the southern prostitute — she's the one who talks about issues such as the separation of church and state."

She admits the issues she talks about are "American issues" and may not be as compelling in Australia as in the US, but she argues Australians have always had an interest in what is going on in other places — an interest, she says, many cultures lack.

The other thing Arcade is attempting to do with her shows is re-instate some of the emotion and passion into theatre.

"When I was 17 in the '60s and I came to New York I felt like I was tied in to this long history of art — someone told me the only history that mattered was the history of art and I believed that and felt connected back all the way to the first person who stood up in a cave and started entertaining and trying to make sense out of a nonsensical world," she said.

"We are living in a time of great cultural amnesia — young people have the attention span of two Madonna videos.

"The culture hasn't been lost forever but I'm talking about the creeping Americanisation, homogenisation and shopping mall culture that is taking over."

And out of her frustration with what she saw as the concentration of New York avant garde theatre on form rather than content, losing its own connection with the history of performance art, was born her show True Stories.

"The last stage of consumerism in the arts had latched in so I decided I was going to do characters, people who lived expressive lives," she said.

"This whole change had taken place from the '60s to the '80s, a volatile political theatre scene had been replaced with this very academic, minimalist type of theatre."

But Arcade says although she rages against the dying of culture and the homogenisation of the world, her work is largely an exercise in pointing out people are not really very different.

"I have always been accused of being very subjective in my work and I feel that through my absolute subjectivity a universality comes out," she says. "We are not really that different from each other — there are just five or six different things people go through emotionally over and over in their lives."

The true stories in Arcade's piece are drawn from the characters she has met since running away to New York at 16, when she was adopted by a tinselly bunch of drag queens.

She became a teenage superstar for pop art king Andy Warhol at the age of 17 and has been working in experimental theatre ever since.

She said as a younger woman strange people "collected her" but as she aged she began to collect them and they have become the subjects of her piece.

Dame Margot Howard Howard, the drag queen who came from a German-Irish family in New York but managed to have the city's society convinced of her/his bloodline to the British royal family, is one of her more famous mimics.

Not so easily dealt with is her portrayal of "girl" — a pregnant black homeless junkie street prosti-

tute with AIDS, and Charlene, the prostitute who had facelifts so she could keep plying her trade.

"The thing is these characters are real. Who needs fiction? Reality is so much more amazing and complex," she said.

Arcade also says she is totally against the idea of elitism in art and that her work is for everybody.

"The idea of elitism was personified by a German film maker who came to see me after my show and said 'doesn't it upset you that the audience were cheering at the end of the show?'" she said.

"I said 'no' and he said 'well if half the audience doesn't walk out of one of my films I know I'm doing something wrong'. To me that is so condescending to the audience.

"But there is a tremendous amount of art being made that is predicated on only a very small, select group of people being able to understand it."

Arcade sees herself as an artist whose main function is to pass on information rather than blind her audience with intellectualism.

And if that makes her "controversial", so be it.

"People are overwhelmed and under-informed," she said. "(But) I am performing to give people who do not have a voice in society a voice — (because) those who do have a voice just won't stop chattering."