

When She's Very, Very Bad

Penny Arcade returns to PS 122 after a year-long absence from the New York scene. On the eve of her new production *BAD REPUTATION*, she sounds off on confessional art, lessons of the 60s and the Hippification of the East Village.

by Julie Blumenthal

"We'll find it. We'll find it." Penny Arcade strides across the rehearsal space at Charas/El Bohio one Saturday morning, neatly sidestepping half a dozen girls strewn about the floor around her. The rehearsal is for her new show, *Bad Reputation* (See Listings), and "it" is one of the several portions of the piece still to be discovered and defined. The girls are a Greek chorus-cum-sex show, whose function is everything from testimony to T&A, and for those who have worked with her before, the fact that the script isn't set three weeks before opening night is not a surprise. *Bad Reputation* has been appearing in various guises internationally for over five years, always as a work-in-progress, and Arcade's search for authenticity in the work means the show may never be the same from night to night.

Arcade's work may be changeable, but her opinions are rock-solid. Thirty years of living on the Lower East Side have cemented in her a respect for the area's history and a concurrent irritation with those who would ignore that history in favor of declaring it "the new hip hangout for NYU students pretending to be artists." She is quick to point out that the focus of her work is education and connection, rather than total self-exposure: "My work is not confessional; I don't say everything. I say only that which I know other people are experiencing and that no one's talking about."

Talking with Arcade is a lesson in autodidacticism; for a self-proclaimed dropout she is impressively erudite. She bewails the lack of apprenticeship in the 90s theater system: "If you don't know where it's coming from, you can't go forward" and has the chops to support her belief. Born Susana Ventura, she was re-christened Penny Arcade while the youngest member of John Vacarro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous and on her way to becoming a teenage Superstar for Andy Warhol's Factory. She explained the difference she feels for young actors today: "When I was 18, I didn't think I'd live to be 24. 24 seemed incredibly old. Now, there are people who are 18 who can't imagine life after 24 if they don't have their own sitcom. When you have that tight a timeline, you can't develop ... If people in their 20s aren't being the conduit for experimentation, then you don't have it." Mixed with the disgust at the current scene is a genuine idealism and respect for

those who have taught her, from Jack Smith and Warhol to her current assistant, whose ideas she champions as freely as she defends those of the Wooster Group.

Her emphasis on using truth to connect with an audience is immediately apparent in performance. Combining startling imagery with in-your-face monologue work, Arcade's work is a scream—sometimes literally so, as she rips into childhood memory and current court cases with equal fervor and venom. It's no coincidence that the striking final sequence of *Bad Rep* is accompanied by James Brown's "Scream". Part of Arcade's philosophy has always been to "say what no one else will, because it has a need to be said." In this case, it includes her personal viewpoint on feminism, taking women to task for their role in the patriarchy. "No one talks about the way women betray each other," she laments.

Bad Rep is subtitled "An All-Girl Revenge Show", but it's not that simple. Revenge, absolutely; but revenge is only one facet of this examination of women's relationships with men, with sex, and with each other. Arcade notes that one of the most positive aspects of the new production is her relationship with the eight younger women who form her chorus:

"it's a healing process," she says.

Discussing the idea that young women now see her as a mentor in the way she once saw elders like Warhol, Smith and John Giorno, she doesn't shy away from the comparison, but acknowledges it can be unsettling to be viewed as a link between the 60s and the 90s: "When Penny Arcade is the craziest person in the East Village, you have a problem, 'cause I always used to be the sane one."

Perhaps it's just a function of a changing world and her changing place in it; the sane witness of the 60s could very possibly mature into the crazed prophet of the 90s. Arcade, once the student of the downtown scene, has come full circle. She's grown up to follow those who taught her, and become the teacher herself. Now she's teaching her audience, as well as learning from them, and someday us sane little NYU students will be the crazy prophets. But that won't be till 2025, and who the hell knows who will be living on the Lower East Side by then.

Above: Penny Arcade and young Penny (Jennifer Belle) in *Bad Reputation*. Photo by Jeffery Price.

