

# MISS PENNY ARCADE



by Henry Edwards and Lisa Robinson  
photos by Peter Hujar

**F**atigued? Battle-scarred? Not sure you're in the Seventies? Then you're not Penny Arcade. Life has become Theater and Theater has become real. Yes, meet Penny Arcade.

"I never realized that people are startled by me," she states in a little girl's voice, slightly husky with a whistly edge to it. "I mean I only realized that I blow most people's minds immediately when I started to go to the music business press parties. People there are aware of packaging. I've thought about packaging myself but these people thought I was and it brought out this weird reaction."

Too bad if the fact that she is a distinct item makes people uptight or makes them wonder. This is the way she has decided she wants to look. And that's enough to make her a *rara avis*.

She was born in New Britain, Connecticut ("It was like the West Village only not picturesque.") And before she knew it her parents had her in a convent. "I went to a progressive Catholic school," she recalls. "Not all of the nuns were dykes." She stares into the air envisioning beads and crosses and laughs as she says, "The nuns from my convent called me up and we're going to have a reunion."

At fifteen she left the convent and went to Provincetown. Then she went to Boston and spent six months on the streets. The next logical step was New York.

#### ABBIE HOFFMAN INDIRECTLY

"In New York," she recalls, "I became involved with a semi-psychedelic sect. I went to Millbrook to stay awhile and got very bored, came back and got involved with a legendary amphetamine cult. I became Queen of Amphetamine. I did that for about a year and became very bored with that, and I got political. Mainly with high school kids, just talking to them, radicalizing them, it was very groovy. I was working indirectly with Abbie Hoffman, and a whole bunch of old Yippie people, this was after Chicago. I got involved with Women's Liberation groups when they were first setting up, but decided that they were just bridge clubs for revolutionary women. All the women who were involved with Women's Lib two years ago were women whose husbands and boyfriends were revolutionary men and *no one* is more chauvinistic

than the revolutionary male."

Her political activity led her to a bust at Whitehall Street and to a juggling of names. "The people who got busted with me at Whitehall Street during the pacifist demonstrations thought my name was Holiday Golightly because that's what I told the cops. I had originally said my name was Susanna Ventura and that I was 16 and he didn't believe me. So then I said my name was Holiday Golightly and I was 34 and he believed me. Also some people knew me as Gidget. I have used different names for different lifestyles."

#### FLOATING WITH THE HOG FARM

After she returned from court she began to hang around with a bunch of Thirties Marxists and decided that with her charisma she should be out recruiting for the revolution rather than amusing the druggies she had been hanging out with. The Yippies had begun to evolve into the Crazies but she knew that the Crazies were a CIA front and the Marxists were uptight about drug involvement anyway. Movement politics had begun to bore her.

She had begun to realize that what really appealed to her was the *theatrical* aspect of the Millbrook movement and Yippies and Crazies and getting busted. "The people who I did drugs with there really sick, but a lot of them had a great deal of style, and it was almost constant theater. I tried to combine my political thing with my natural urge for theater. I got involved with the Hog Farm when they were hired by the Electric Circus to be freaks for atmosphere. I was so entranced by Rugh Romney that I joined them at the Circus and stationed myself for a week in the ladies' room. I really dressed like a hippie, jeans, workshirt, no makeup, and all the chicks would come in and see that I wasn't competition, so then they would talk to me. I had been there for seven days and seven nights, very carefully underdressed, and the last night I really got the revolutionary spirit more than ever before. Hugh told me that they were going to float me above the heads of all the people there, and they did! It was the best thing I had ever done, and I was having such an incredible time. I did modern jazz and modern dance stuff, I stood up while they were floating me across the room.

"Afterwards, the lumia artist, Earl Reinback, came over to me and said, 'You have more energy than anyone I've ever seen in my life, have you ever thought of being in theater?', and I said, 'I am'.

"The next day I met John Vaccaro. I had seen his theater once, Lady Godiva or something, and I hadn't understood a word of what was happening but visually I dug it. After that time Vaccaro had come over to me and said 'what's your name', and I said 'Penny Arcade'. That was the first time I used that name.

"When Vaccaro told my friend Jamie, 'she loves me, I know she loves me!', it was true! I was very impressed by him and I was ecstatic. John asked Jamie if I would come and help out with costumes, so I went to help this chick with her costumes. One night she went to have a tooth pulled and never came back, and John said to me 'get out there!' I went out there and did it."

She did it so often that soon she became the Playhouse of the Ridiculous' comedienne extraordinaire. In a time of New York's Superstars John Vaccaro is the acknowledged Super Director, and his staging provided the environment in which Penny Arcade created three antic, athletic performances in the Playhouse's last season at La Mama. Tumbling, pratfalling, mugging and belting out rock tunes, she made one realize what Walt Disney could have done if he hadn't been afraid of sex and accepted what all those birds and bees did to beget other birds and bees.

#### REVLON STUFF FROM THE 1940'S

She's out of bed at 2 pm, only three hours late for a photo session with the other stars of the new Warhol-Morrissey film, *Women in Revolt*. They'll wait. She stretches, yawns and bounces across the floor to scrutinize herself in the mirror. "What I do with all my makeup depends on my degree of dementia that day," she states as she attacks the clown white goeey stuff and incredibly red rouge and thick vivid smeary lipsticks. "I use tubes of really old lipsticks that I bought on a closeout sale on Canal Street, all this old Revlon stuff from the 1940's. Fabulous colors—"Love That Red," "Raspberries In The Ice," I use them for eyeshadow and lipstick. Sometimes when I'm really possessed I use them for rouge. I never

use any of the 1950's basic crap and of course I use red nail polish and some fuschia nail polish and that's all. Nothing else."

Penny puts down her lipstick. "I'm not tired of the underground—it's camp and drag. But I am tired of the gossip, the incestuousness, the diminishing returns. I'm looking for new things. Max's (Kansas City) happens to be a place I can go to and see my friends, but it's a temporary 'in' thing. It serves a function, but the real definition of the underground is that you can't find it. I'm just tired of the Sixties. Even though I have a sense of history and I still read!"

Her hand darts out. She studies the plums and the grapes and the peaches. She selects a peach. She's down on meat, but she's no fanatic. "Juices, juice, juice is the answer!" she exclaims. "It's so intuitively right. I don't eat macrobiotic food, though, it's hippie kosher."

Penny stands up and proceeds to dress in basic black timeless. She gets most of her clothes from her mother's closet. Her lips are painted on wide in a big red grin and her eyelids are trimmed in rose

red eyeshadow. She bends down and throws her long black hair over her shoulders until it almost dusts the floor and gives it a thorough brushing. She pulls on her black stockings and her calf length black dress and laces up her black shoes.

A peacock blue fringed shawl with ripe red roses on it gets thrown around her shoulders and she rises up, ready for the photo session. She leads the way out the door and into the street. We hail a cab.

"The people who I want to communicate with and want to talk to really don't go to La Mama," she announces in the cab as we head up-

town. "The New York theater may be the most relevant in the United States, but it's still an ivory tower. Most of it is incredibly boring."

"My feelings about theater were vague until I saw Iggy Stooze. People were watching me that night and told me how fabulous I looked watching him, lights coming out from me and so forth." She jumped and clapped and stomped. She was overwhelmed by Iggy's performance.

"I'm for taking down any categories

ribly officious. They give off lots of look-how-important-we-are vibrations. It's the Seventies and by now they're sure they're important. Joe D'Allesandro is very kind to Penny. He helps her off with her shawl.

Jane looks around and remarks, "So what if you're in *Life Magazine*, so what if you're on Dick Cavett. It's bread, bread is the most important thing and so far I haven't seen any bread." Holly seems tense and nervous. Penny puts her arm around her

and comforts her. Holly went for a Cavett audition and was told by the Cavett staff that Dick's sensitivity might be threatened by having a transvestite on the show. No one seemed worried about Holly's sensitivity. Prindaville seems occupied by herself. She moves as if the world is watching her when in fact she is being ignored.

The cameramen gather their stars. Music is put on the turntable and the actors are encouraged to dance in the hope of getting some exciting stills. "They want decadence," Penny laughs. Creedence Clearwater obviously won't work. Holly tosses a long green scarf around

and it responds like a dyspeptic snake. Jane stands there totally inanimate. Penny stamps her foot on the ground trying to make everyone else's blood flow. Santana doesn't work either. Finally Jagger begins to croon "Gimme Shelter."

Everyone dances to the music in a parody of grooviness. It is like an NYU undergraduate film satire about the making of an underground movie. But Penny takes it seriously. She struts, she bumps, she throws herself about. She's Penny Arcade. Soon all the cameras are focused on her. With no apparent self-consciousness at all she's captured all the attention.



of theater, whether it's rock and roll, live theatre, circuses or rodeos, and Iggy's completely for that too. And now I can hardly wait to start."

#### SHE'S NO LANGUISHER

The taxi arrives at Carnegie Hall and of course Penny gets stares.

The shooting session is in one of those white *Blow-Up* style studios. It is sterile looking and filled with superstars. Joe D'Allesandro, Jane Forth, Holly Woodlawn, Susan Chiclets and Prindaville Wells—they are languishing about waiting for Miss Arcade. Penny takes them all in, she is no languisher. The cameramen are ter-