

Family Secrets

George De Stefano (May 20, 2015)



Penny Arcade draws on her shocking Italian discoveries for a new show

"All families have secrets," Penny Arcade remarked. "And my family has a lot of secrets."

Arcade – born Susana Carmen Ventura in 1950, in New Britain, Connecticut – is a writer and performer who has told stories about her working-class Italian family in plays and one-woman shows like "La Miseria" and "Bad Reputation." The former portrayed her contentious clan as riddled with fears, insecurities, and prejudices, among them a brutally dismissive sexism. When her character as a young girl says she wants to be an actress, her relatives call her "puttana" (whore). Later, when "Penny" is a young woman living in New York and trying to establish herself as an artist, her brother tells her, "Art is for rich people. And you're not one of them...Nobody wants to hear from you or anything you have to say!"

But Penny Arcade, ever since she arrived in New York as a teenager, has never allowed anyone to



silence her or keep her from telling her stories. The "Queen of Performance Art," as she has been called, is an innovative and challenging artist whose work, according to the author Sarah Schulman, "enable(s) truth-telling about the individual in a social context of American naturalism without the phony kitchen sink pretense of recreating reality."

Arcade started out as a member of the avant-garde Playhouse of the Ridiculous founded by [John Vaccaro](#) [2], which led to Andy Warhol giving her a featured role in his film "[Women in Revolt](#)." [3] In the '80s, she began to create her own improvisational performance art. Her cutting-edge plays and performance pieces like "Based on A True Story," "Invitation to the Beginning of the End of the World," "La Miseria," "Bad Reputation" and her most famous show, "Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!" – have made her an icon of the New York theatrical underground. Since the early '90s, her work also has been produced abroad, in Canada, Mexico, and Europe. When she and I met earlier this month at the Lower East Side apartment where she has lived for 30-odd years, she had recently returned from a European tour that took her to London, Paris, Berlin, and Zagreb.

In "La Miseria", when Penny informs her immigrant mother that she wants to "tell the story of you and Daddy," Penny's Mom objects, "I don't wanna hear it!" Penny insists, saying that her mother's story is hers, too. But Arcade could relate only fragments of her family history in that play, and in "Bad Reputation": there was too much she didn't know. About nine years ago, that all changed.

"When I was 56, I stumbled on all these incredible secrets about my grandmother," she says. Her mother's family, whose last name is Parisi, immigrated from [Picerno](#) [4], a mountain village in the southern Basilicata region. In 2006, Penny and her then-husband were visiting the village and she tracked down a number of her maternal relatives. (Years earlier, when Penny told her mother she wanted to visit Picerno, her mother tried to discourage her, saying, "everyone there is dead.") When she inquired about her grandmother, who had raised her in New Britain while her mother worked in a factory, older relatives told her only that "'your grandmother was a very good person, she was a weaver, she could earn money like a man.' I said yeah, I know that. But my grandfather left Picerno in 1922 and my grandmother didn't come to America until 1949, the year before I was born. And my grandfather didn't bring her – my father brought his mother in law."

So what happened in those years between her grandfather leaving Italy and her grandmother's arrival in America? In conversations with her relatives, she found out something shocking: a chef in a nobleman's home had seduced and impregnated her grandmother, and after she gave birth to the child, she killed it and hid the body in an armoire. She was subsequently arrested and imprisoned.

Arcade heard these secrets from two women, second cousins who are schoolteachers in Picerno. As she peppered her cousins with questions, she noticed their discomfort. Finally, one remarked, "Didn't her grandmother have a child out of wedlock?" The other cousin affirmed that fact, adding that Arcade's grandmother had been seduced by the nobleman's chef.

"I'm totally in shock, I can't even believe this," Arcade recalled. Then one cousin added, "And didn't she kill the baby?" "And I'm like, she what?" One of the cousins told Arcade that her grandfather's sister turned her grandmother in to the carabinieri, who found the baby's corpse in the armoire. According to the cousins, the carabinieri made Arcade's seducer "carry his dead son through the streets of the village just as you would on a procession day, if you can imagine, through the entire village."

"My grandmother in prison? This is impossible!" Arcade continued. "And it had even more of an intense impact on me because I got put away in reform school when I was 14, mainly for running away from home and being gone for six weeks. And this was such a huge vergogna (shame) for my family that it was only until I was in my fifties that I finally was able to get any distance on this with my mother."

"This Italian Condition"

"Sedotta e abbandonata (seduced and abandoned), that was the story of my grandmother. So now, I'm totally in shock. I thought I was the first one who had ever done anything so terrible as to be put away. But the truth is that my mother didn't know any of this stuff about my grandmother. It had



been kept from her. I had been going to Picerno since 1984 and no one ever told me this story. From 1984 to 2006, no one even hinted at this story." One cousin told Arcade "it had been in the newspapers, it was such a scandalous story, and the newspaper named my grandmother's seducer."

"I started to go crazy trying to investigate this story," she said. "My cousins in Picerno hate the story. It makes them uncomfortable that I pursue investigating it."

Arcade's investigations also unearthed a relative she had never met: her grandfather's brother, known as Mingo. She learned that Mingo "was a self-educated man, a great man in this region, an astrologer, a musician, a meteorologist who had a weather station. He had started a school in the countryside, teaching children who otherwise never would be taught to read. He also was known for divination, as a psychic. I was fascinated, because I've always been very psychic, and so was my mother, but I never had any idea where it came from. And it's more than being psychic - we're empaths. I don't get the lottery numbers, but I know a lot about people when I'm near them!"

Her research in Italy also led to surprising discoveries about her father, his family, and her parents' marriage. Her father Vittorio Ventura was born in Savona, in the northern Liguria region. She recently learned from her paternal cousins that he was "a very charismatic figure" who spoke multiple languages, had been a partisan during World War II, and a merchant marine. He came to America after jumping ship in Panama and taking another ship to Florida, where he swam to shore. He vowed that if he survived, he would get married in Italy, in Pompei. But Vittorio was arrested and sent to Ellis Island as an "enemy alien." There, Arcade says, "guards beat him within an inch of his life." When he recovered, he was deported to Italy.

In an amazing coincidence, Arcade's mother Antoinette returned to Italy in 1947 for the first time since she immigrated in 1934; on the same boat was Penny's deported father-to-be, Vittorio. "I have all the photographs of their courtship on this boat," Arcade said. Her father went to Savona, her mother to Picerno. "They wrote to each other, and in August 1947, they were married in Pompei, as my father had sworn he would do." Her father returned to America, but when Penny was three years old, her mother committed him to a state mental hospital - he suffered from mental problems caused by the Ellis Island beating - where he died 12 years later. His daughter never got to know him.

Arcade said she is creating a new show - "a really big piece about this Italian condition" - based on her family research and informed by "epigenetics, the idea that you genetically carry forward not only physical traits like eye color and height, but that in the DNA there are changes that take place based on experiences. Not only traumatic or bad experiences but also euphoric experiences." She sees her psychic abilities, her "Southern Italian peasant irony," her love of ecstatic dance like the pizzica and of storytelling as traits "carried on generation by generation."

The new show, which she hopes to present in 2016, is (currently) titled "A Whore Like the Rest."

Early in her career, Penny Arcade learned from and worked with such figures as Warhol, Living Theater founder [Judith Malina](#) [5], theatrical pioneers John Vaccaro and [Charles Ludlam](#) [6], underground filmmaker [Jack Smith](#) [7], and many others. But the world of those Arcade calls "eclectic, highly self-individuated artists" is disappearing. Her 2002 show, "New York Values," identified the culprits - "gentrification and hyper-gentrification, of the city but also of ideas." Her latest show, "[Longing Lasts Longer.](#)" [8] which Arcade has been performing at Joe's Pub in Manhattan, is "about colonization, about what happens when gentrification is three-quarters done as it is here in New York. It's not a continuation of 'New York Values,' but all my work resonates with what came before it."

Though she has lived and worked in New York for nearly five decades, Arcade obviously feels closely connected to Italy. She says she visits almost every year, staying for months at a time. But one thing particularly rankles her about Italians: the attitudes of many towards immigrants, current and past.

"I'll be at dinners with 30 people and they'll be ranting about immigrants," she said. "I'll say to them, you spent 20 years in Sweden, you spent 20 years in Germany, come on! But they don't see it that way."

The ignorance of, and lack of interest in, the experiences of Italian immigrant families such as hers



also disturbs her. "Their lives were very painful. I tell people, my family did not come here for a better life or for jobs. They came here for food. These people were starving. And I have had to say this to my cousins in Italy, because one of the things I find really shocking is the complete lack of interest native Italians have for the Italians of the diaspora. They have no interest, no concept, and I find it shocking."

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