

Diamanda Galas
Plague Mass/Masque of the Red Death
(1984-End of Epidemic)
The Kitchen

I first heard Galas's work almost a decade ago, in a huge cavernous hall beneath the Brooklyn Bridge where she was performing a sort of song cycle—perhaps it was *Wild Women with Steak Knives*. In that huge grim stone hall, bathed with lurid red light, she sounded like the voice of the very Devil screaming and gibbering up out of the open Pit. My companions on that occasion still speak of it with a shudder. In those days she sounded totally inhuman; now, animated by a deeply-felt cause—the fight against AIDS, which has taken her brother and so many of her friends—she seems somehow more human, more approachable. Not that you need expect a pleasant evening in the charnel house; now that the horrors are real, the shrieks of the devil have been replaced by the cries of the damned. Here is a crisis for which Galas's demon-priestess persona is appropriate, and she gives a searing, deeply human—and humane—performance.

Of course there is still enough lurid, monstrous horror here to sate a graveyardful of Lovecrafts. Dan Kotlowitz has provided a lighting design of awesome dramatic power—clouds of smoke, deep red rays thrusting skyward, hellish glowing precipices, and lots of candles. Galas appears in this setting stripped to the waist and covered with what certainly looks like blood. In the red light she looks merely

wet, with matted hair; only when the light turns white do we see the blood. Her eyelids remain free of the substance and glow pale and horrible like huge blank eyes. Periodically the blood dries out and she has to pour on a fresh coat. She hurls invective at the "dirty angels," undulates weirdly, and sings: "I looked over Jordan and what did I see... A band of Devils calling out my name, coming for to drag me to the grave." Sometimes she is a bit like Karen Finley, but far scarier. She intones sections from the Bible (the Law of the Plague from Leviticus, Job, Revelations), poems by Tristan Corbiere and Nerval; there are also texts in Italian, Spanish, Greek. She points a gun at us; she sits at the piano and sings and plays.

I can't imagine forgetting this performance, can't imagine missing it, can't imagine wanting to see it again. Galas has constructed a passionate, harrowing tour of Hell as seen through the eyes of those who live there. It is certainly unlike anything else. She is signalling to us from the heart of the flames: an untirance appropriate to the horror that called it forth.

Performance date: 4/23/91