THE OUTRAGE OF DIAMANDA GALAS

Larger Than Life,

By Martin Johnson

IN HER LAST performance piece, "Plague Mass," composer-singer Diamanda Galas stalked the stage half naked, covered with blood, often screaming at the top of her lungs. In her new work, "Vena Cava," which premiered tonight at The Kitchen, she's doing something different. Although she'll still let loose the multi-tracked, piercing operatic vocals that have become her trademark, she'll do it in a white dress. And she's going to stand still. Furthermore, between arias, she's going to recite texts she's written for the performance.

For Galas, the piece (which runs every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday through March 8) represents a departure from her previous efforts, which may have seemed to the uninitiated like the Doonesbury take on performance art. But her work has won praise and sparked controversies: She was banned in Italy for blasphemy. She's been walked out on at Lincoln Center.

Since 1984, Galas has focused her efforts on the plight of AIDS victims. But her work is no plea for sympathy. She vents rage in her performances, a fury that was highlighted in "Angry Women," a recent compilation of interviews with cultural activists in the avant-garde journal ResCarch.

Gagas, a slight, wiry woman, camouflage her rebellious attitude behind a pair of thick, black framed librarian glasses. She looked more academic than angry woman as she sat in a small Polish coffee shop in the East Village.

Once she was called "the Mike Tyson of voice," an accolade she is trying to reframe (and no, "the Evander Holyfield of voice" wouldn't cut it for this visceral singer). Instead of using the pastehe method of many performance artists, who patch together their offerings from many different disciplines, she has constructed a presentation style around her musical skills.

Before pushing the limits of vocal performance, the San Diego native studied clinical psychology, sang opera and played jazz piano. In the late '70s, she sung the lead role in "Un Jour Comme Une Autre," Vinko Globokar's opera based on the true story of a Turkish woman sentenced to death for "political crimes." She toured widely, performing the works of Globokar and Xenakis with L'Ensemble Intercontemporain, Musique Vivante and the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

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And Full of Fury

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She said she's a firm believer in Stockhausen's edict, "to be honest you have to change the vocabulary." For her, that has meant developing solo works for amplified, electronically multipacked voice which she began doing in the late '70s.

Galanis said of "Litany of Satan," one of her early pieces, "I wanted to capture that sense of emotion of a witch as she is hit by the flame."

She also wrote "Wild Women with Stab Knife," about battered women, and "Tragethia apo to Alma Eson Panada" (Song from the Blood of Those Murdered) about victims of the 1967 coup in Greece. She has performed in 25 cities, her "Plague Mass," dedicated to "AIDS victims forced to live in a hostile environment." A member of ACT-UP, she has the words "We are all HIV positive" tattooed on the fingers of her left hand.

AL MY WORK has been about a schizophrenic state of mind induced by incredible pain," said Galas. "Vena Cava" isn't less angry than her previous works. Rather, the anger is too embattled to be aggressive. There's a lot of aggression in the piece but it's not attack energy.

She began working on the piece, she said, when she realized that "Plague Mass," which is about the relationship between victims and society, couldn't convey the internal details of an individual's suffering.

"There's a lot about the new piece that's like a nightmare," she said. "I'm doing things that I don't think I've ever done before."