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THE OUTRAGE OF DIAMANDA GALAS

Larger Than Life,

By Martin Johnson



'All my work has been about a schizophrenic state of mind induced by incredible pain,' says Diamanda Galas.

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 premieres 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 ReSearch.

Galas, a slight, wiry woman, camouflages 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 pastiche 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 sang the lead role in "Un Jour Comme Une Autre," Yvonne Rainer'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 Full of Fury

and Iannis Xenakis with L'Ensemble Intercontemporain, Musique Vivant and the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

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 multi-tracked voice which she began doing in the late '70s.

Galas said of "Litanies of Satan," one of her early pieces, "I wanted to capture that sense of emotion of a witch as she is hoisted over the flame."

She also wrote "Wild Women with Steak Knives," about battered women, and "Tragouthia apo to Aima Exoun Fonos" (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.

ALL MY WORK has been about a schizophrenic state of mind induced by incredible pain," said Galas. "Vena Cava," her current work, is about AIDS dementia, a state of mind similar to schizophrenia, she said, "exacerbated by an extremely claustrophobic situation."

Although it focuses on the fragilities of AIDS victims, Galas said, "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,"

Diamanda Galas: Larger Than Life

GALAS from Page 45

In the work, Galas moves from snippets of dialogues to internal monologues to singing, sometimes reading from her script. The demands of keeping the text within reach makes the show less of a spectacle — an aspect of her previous work that has made her a popular subject of clandestinely filmed videos. But, she says, it will give her the freedom to improvise and tell the story differently each night.

Certain aspects of the text were inspired by her brother, Phillip Dimitri-Galas, a writer who died of AIDS. But don't for a second assume a causal relationship between Galas' work — which, she is quick to point out, began dealing with AIDS two years before his contracting the virus — and her brother's death.

"It's a very sexist assumption," she said. Some peo-

ple "believe that I'm doing this out of hysteria, not cold, clinical interest. The Greek tradition is not about whimpery tears of sorrow; it's a vendetta culture. You'll never see me get up and sing, 'Oh the suffering of my people, isn't it awful.'"

Galas also harbors wrath for those who believe her newest recording, "The Singer" (Mute / Elektra), includes music unsuited to her talents. It's a compilation of gospel and r&b standards. "If I'm an opera singer, then why not sing black operatic music?" She cited Aretha Franklin as a great opera singer and inspiration: "She sang larger-than-life music that came from the suffering of her people." Like Maria Callas, another of her idols — who she says put the scream back into opera — Galas wants to put blood into her music.

"I want it to be larger than life, almost filmic," she said. "Like war music." //