

Review/**Performance Art**

Diamanda Galas Explores Pain, Obsession and Faith

By JON PARELES

A girlish giggle. An old crone's cackle. A medical technician's cool, impersonal tones. A Southern preacher's confident oratory. An opera singer's vibrant soprano. A manic babble. A piercing scream. Those are some of the voices in Diamanda Galas's "Vena Cava," the solo work she is performing at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street) through March 8.

The program notes say "Vena Cava" (the name of two major veins into the heart) draws on "the relationship between the dementia of severe depression and what is referred to as AIDS dementia." Although "Vena Cava" was originally to be a part of Ms. Galas's "Plague Mass," which is explicitly about AIDS, it has become a separate work; any references to AIDS are indirect.

"Vena Cava" joins Ms. Galas's other works as an exploration of pain, madness, obsession, death and, in a way, faith: operatic concerns freed from the conventions of opera and from narrative. While there are passages of singing, far more of "Vena Cava" is a bedlam of speaking voices, jumbling past and present, memory and reality. Ultimately, it sets the boundless depths of an individual mind, even one that is crumbling, against the banality and kitsch of ordinary life.

A diva's self-effacing, elegiac work about AIDS.

It is a small-scale work for Ms. Galas, who stands alone on the Kitchen stage before two microphones. Dressed in a white mini-dress, white stockings, white boots and black horn-rimmed glasses, she is more demure than in her recent guises as a blood-spattered or knife-wielding banshee; she is illuminated only by white lights that flash or strobe through an enveloping darkness. Now and then a single, indistinct projected image, perhaps a skeleton or ghost, appears behind her. Bits of music (some of it by her brother, Philip Dimitri Galas, who died of AIDS) and mundane chitchat join her voice and its electronic echoes, which use digital delays and filters to send eerie whispers fluttering through the darkness.

"How do you feel today?" comes the dispassionate query, one that has no simple answer. A preacher intones, "This is my blood"; another voice recounts dreams of shooting herself and lying in a pool of blood; another intones, "Soulmate to the worms . . . old body, skin and bones," or muses about rising like a phoenix. One voice frantically babbles numbers, as if holding on to the quantifiable; another giggles about sex; another croons a lullaby. The dying patient is no saint and no philosopher, just one more person full of memories and fantasies, facing mortality too soon.

Divas love mad scenes — they have full license to show off — and "Vena Cava" is, by design, an hourlong mad scene. Yet while Ms. Galas makes full use of her extraordinary virtuosity, "Vena Cava" doesn't come across as a showpiece. It is, instead, an elegy. The rage that animated "Plague Mass" has been turned inward and transmuted into a despairing, sobering memorial.