Don't Look to Diamanda Galás for Comfort

By WILLIAM HARRIS

Diamanda Galás defies simple categorization. She is a writer, composer and performer, yet the term performance artist fails to capture her rage or vocal skills.

Musician is my slightly more accurate. True, Ms. Galás, 41, has released eight albums, and is a classically trained pianist and opera singer known for her three-and-a-half-octave range. But what comes out of her mouth in performance is a visceral collage of notes, chants, shrieks, gargles, hisses — you name it — often at extreme volumes, frequency distorted electronically and accompanied by a torrent of words. Ms. Galás typically shapes a Ritmeto by mangling passages from the Bible with her own writings.

On Thursday at Alice Tully Hall, Ms. Galás will perform her new solo, "Insecta," for the opening of the Straussian Film Festival at Lincoln Center. It will be repeated the next evening.

In the fall, she will embark on a four-week tour of Europe, followed by a seven-city tour of the United States.

Two things about Ms. Galás are clear: She has a formidable stage presence, and by design her work is not soothing. The performer, who wears her jet black hair lengh straight, parted in the middle, and on whose left-hand fingers are tattooed the words "We are all H.I.V.s," is a cultural activist. Her art is about — and tries to physically embody — the emotional and physical pain of people who have been marginalized by society, particularly those suffering from AIDS. Conceivably, her work is close to that of the late David Wojnarowicz, the visual artist-writer who died of AIDS in 1992. Theoretically, Ms. Galás conjures up the spirit of the classic Greek heroine Antigone — outspoken, passionate and defiant, both on stage and off.

"I don't know anyone or anything quite like her," said Christopher Hunt, who produced Ms. Galás in 1993 at the American Repertory Theatre. "She says things that are so outrageous and so on the point. She doesn't care if you agree with her or not.

However, her music is often disorienting and unsettling. "She's a bit of a schizophrenic," Mr. Hunt said.

Her art — chants, shrieks, hisses — is about the pain of people who have been marginalized by society.

"I don't look to Ms. Galás for comfort. I look to her for a kind of truth," said Gregory Pardlo, the author of "The New York Times." "She is one of the few artists who are able to speak about the pain of living with AIDS in a way that is both unflinching and profound."
difficult to sidestep, much less sneer at. Ms. Galda is a kind of terrorist. She sabotages old

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ways of making music, just as she is an unassailable presence in the cold war against AIDS.

Ms. Galda defends “Plague Mass,” explaining that it “is for and about persons who are fighting to stay alive in the face of indifference. I’m showing modern-day saints crucified by society. When I chant, ‘Were you a witness? On that hot day and on that bloody day, were you a witness?’ I mean, did you protest the action of this crucifixion...? The extermination, the execution, or did you just watch as a voyeur, an audience of onlookers?”

Because of her AIDS activism — she was one of the many AIDs Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) arrested during a demonstration at St. Patrick’s Cathedral four years ago — many people assume that Ms. Galda is either a lesbian or HIV-positive herself. She is neither; her brother, the playwright Philip-Dieter Galda, died of AIDS in 1988. “A lot of straight men assume I do this work as a reaction to the death of my brother,” Ms. Galda said. “They dismiss it as a hysterical female reaction. I find that attitude irritating, because it assumes I have no reason at all. It belittles grieving and implies that there is something intrinsically wrong with a woman who would respond to her brother’s death from AIDS.”

Ms. Galda, who will perform her new solo work, “Insecta,” to open the Serious Fun festival at Lincoln Center on Thursday.

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OR “INSECTA,” MS. GALDAHAS been researching biological defense strategies as well as the language of schizophrenia and the use of drugs like Thorazine and Mellaril to control behavior. “On the surface,” she said, “the title refers to something that is small and insignificant. I’m also using it to refer to a faceless population, such as one that is found in mental institutions or in a prison, and therefore, a population that is invisible to experimentation.”

Ms. Galda, who moved to New York in 1980 after years of living in both the West Coast and in various European capitals, grew up in San Diego, the daughter of first-generation Greek immigrants. She began studying the master’s degree in music performance, she became fascinated with the jazz compositions of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Jazz encouraged her to experiment with sound. Her interest in, and study of, voice followed.

Gospel remains an important component of her work, which is not surprising, since Gospel requires hope and was, for Ms. Galda, “an oasis of natural spirituality in the social equation.”
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