

**SON OF SAM & DELILAH** by Charles Atlas

review by Anne Tardos/Jackson Mac Low

The 1991 video *Son of Sam & Delilah*, by Charles Atlas, is as entertaining as it is disturbing. It opens with the confession of a raging homophobe, whose raving (expletives deleted) is suddenly interrupted by his being shot through the head by a mysterious gunman. The killer reoccurs throughout, without any of the usual cinematic warnings — the viewer, like the characters, is taken by surprise. The killings are always bloody and always fatal, taking place with universal indifference. The merciless killer is sometimes shown as a beautiful long-haired young man, portrayed by the tall and energetic Almon Grimsted, who alternately dances with total abandon and plays the indifferent and inevitable killer. He also appears as Samson in the romantic love scenes with Delilah, exquisitely portrayed by John Kelly. (THERE APPEARS TO BE A BOX OF CONDOMS ON THE NIGHT TABLE AS DELILAH SEDUCES SAMSON.)

We are taken into the apartment of a transvestite, played by the witty Hapi Phace, who has a visitor, another transvestite. They both parody rich, spoiled women, whose main concern is shopping, shopping, gossip, sex, and shopping. We are told that Hapi's apartment is smelly, something we can actually "perceive" from the screen. Hapi points out that while her visitor is from Queens, she is from normal parents. Hapi bends down to reach for something in her refrigerator and Atlas cuts to the killer, seen from the same angle, bending down to fight with a big black dog. The killer shouts "You're crazy!" at the dog, who seems to reply (an allusion to the "real" Son of Sam's dog, who he claimed told him to kill). If you look carefully, you see the dog is just playing rough, but this is supposed to be a horrible animal-teasing situation. Many scenes are intercut by Delilah's arias from *Samson et Dalila* (by Camille Saint-Saëns — unfortunately uncredited) sung by the enchanting John Kelly, dressed as Delilah. She stands in front of several excellent sets painted by Max DiCorsia, Elizabeth Eaton, and Fernando Santangelo. Atlas lets us gaze at the "Temple of Baal" set for a while, after Samson and Delilah exit.

All this is punctuated by a very energetic and witty dance performance by DANCENOISE — two very tough women hack at decapitated stuffed dummies, screaming at each other and terribly

annoyed at running out of stage blood. The killer enters and shoots them both. We watch them as they bleed to death, calling this experience worse than getting their periods.

UNEXPECTED INDIFFERENT KILLINGS, BLEEDING, AND DYING ARE RECURRING THEMES THROUGHOUT THIS VIDEO, as are Delilah's arias. Disco dancers are shot down one by one while others continue dancing, as if to say, life continues, no matter what. One by one they too are shot down. Every time a scene gets too painful, Mr. Atlas quickly cuts to the seductive Delilah, singing from the enchanting opera. In one scene, she is removing her make-up backstage, all the while singing, her voice a little muffled, as she wipes her lips with the tissue. She looks at the camera coquettishly, as the video itself does from time to time: by allowing production



details, such as calls to cut a scene or clapboard countdowns to stay in the final version. This "unveiling" reminds one of the last scene of Fellini's *E la Nave Va (And the Ship Sails On)*, which reveals the structure on springs under the stage that was the ship's deck.

Crisp photography and thoughtful editing make this video an aesthetic pleasure to watch, while alerting the viewer to the problem it addresses. The indiscriminating killer among us, kills us one by one, without asking any questions, without giving any reasons. Son of Sam killed lovers just because they were lovers. Delilah's betrayal in the guise of love led to Samson's eventual death. Today's major killer also comes in the midst of love.

Charles Atlas's *Son of Sam & Delilah* is full of camp and vaudeville, tough women and sweet men, and many tongue-in-cheek pop culture references. Paul Gibson's thoughtful lighting and mindful photography and Scott Lifshutz's art direction provide a rich, clear, and uncluttered mise-en-scene. Mr. Atlas's editing is fast paced — he never bores us. He edits to say what he has to say, but also takes care to soothe us after he shocks us, and then makes sure to wake us up again after he has calmed us down. The viewer of *Son of Sam & Delilah* is in good hands. ■

Still from  
*Son of Sam & Delilah.*