



Diamanda Galas—photo by Kent Strother

Wild women with steak knives

by HANNAH CHARLTON

I first saw Diamanda Galas perform in the extremely incongruous setting of a gymnasium at ten o'clock in the morning. Moers festival 1980. The workshops were in a school set aside from the main festival area in amongst the quiet residential streets, and in a gym complete with basketball goals dangling ropes and workout mats, Diamanda Galas was tussling with a young technician, natty in two-tone, but not wild about all the mikes required for her PA system. She is an imposing figure—slinky black jeans, black shirt and boots, with a mass of black hair framing a face more likely to be seen on a Greek movie. Imperious, silhouetted, a chiselled, cultivated tragedienne image which brooks no nonsense.

When she starts, it's unnerving. The hackles rise, the skin prickles at the sound which is like a laser beam streaking out of some turbulent past. The incongruity of the place becomes all the more apparent as the day light and the trappings of the gym seem to isolate her, to cast in relief this iron and steel anguish.

The voice is immense. She has chosen a route far from any notion of the voice as a singing instrument. Instead the vocal chords are a keyboard to be pummelled, hewn, tautened to the point where it is obvious that the physical strain involved is extensive. At times it seems like self-inflicted punishment as though the voice had to make reparation for mental and psychic torment.

This invariably makes for a distance between her and the listener—it is as though there is a carefully guarded performance territory which cannot be shared by an audience but venerated, like a temple. This means that I felt certain emotions being nurtured—rather like feeling subservient to the artiste.

This was not a journey for the audience to make with the performer, but a private, meticulous operation to be watched and even feared. Why feared? Perhaps because there was something glacial at the heart of this music, something so painfully constructed, so consciously torn out of private suffering. There was an incredible mixture of nakedness and conscious cultivation of pain. Expressionist, of course, but at some point I could not bring anything of my own to identify with it, to share it, to learn from it. It was as though the walls were too high, too

impenetrable. I could only stare in amazement.

There are other women using voice as an instrument which do not have this effect. Tamia, for an example. I would like to see Diamanda Galas in the context of her theatre work—in a total environment of her own making. Perhaps then I would not feel this distance, this gulf which was so apparent in that gym. She is a performer with an outstanding presence, an artistic identity which she projects in massive detail down to angle of hand movements, the quivering body, the rapid fire of the voice, the inchoate babbling, the searing keening. She is undoubtedly a performer who stimulates extreme reactions—and I would watch her again and again, perhaps most of all because she mirrors and dramatizes neurosis in a way that blurs the distinction between the public and the private self.