Diamanda Galás on making difficult work

March 30, 2017 - Diamanda Galás is an American vocalist, composer, and avant-garde performance artist. Galás is known for her operatic soprano and a body of work that frequently addresses issues related to disease, despair, and mental illness. Her most recent collections are *All The Way*, a collection of jazz standards, and *In Concert at Saint Thomas The Apostle Harlem*, a live album recorded in 2016.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1908 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Anxiety, Inspiration, Independence, Focus.

You stepped away from touring and appearing in public for a number of years. Given the intense nature of your work, was it necessary to take a break? Was it an artistic choice?

There were many different reasons why I was gone. The first reason was that for a long time most of my work was happening in Europe and I was always there. It was a wonderful time, actually. But during that period my father died. And then, within two months, I heard that my mother was ill and was given only a short time to live. So I stopped everything and went to see her—and it was terrifying. I had canceled tours previously because of my father, to be with him, and so I decided it was time to step away from this world and be with my mother. She is the only one left in my family, having lost my brother to AIDS a long time ago. I just decided that I wasn't going to leave her. We decided not to listen to the doctor about her prognosis and just focus on taking care of her and following a very rigorous procedure of treatment. She is alive now, seven years later.

During the AIDS crisis there were so many discussions of things like this—dropping everything, doing whatever you could, to take care of the ones you love. You didn't desert people who were sick, you stood by them. Oddly, when it came to people's parents, there was often a very different attitude. I just found it very peculiar. You might do anything and everything to see your boyfriend or girlfriend stay alive, but as far are parents are concerned, if they have go to off to a nursing home that's somehow all right. No, no, no, no, no. The same should apply to all. I certainly believe in the importance of honoring one's art, but that's all very hollow if you aren't also taking care of the people in your real life.

Also, my work is all about that. All my work is concerned with mortality and the fear of death and protecting those who who might be closer to it than others. Everything I've ever done has had to do with that, and for me to suddenly turn into a different person would be a very curious thing. If you were to look back on my body of work, which I don't need to, you would see that literally everything has to do with these things: military invasions, the AIDS crisis, mental illness, death. So for me, suddenly, when confronted with the real thing, in my own family, to desert my mother or my father, would make no sense. You can't pretend to care about these things in your art if you don't actually care about them in your real life.

How does it feel to be performing live again on a regular basis?

I love it. Working at home is sometimes dreadfully boring. I'm often working on translating things, turning these ancient texts into music. It's real work. Once you really get into the language, finding yourself surrounded by Greek and Latin dictionaries, trying to get to the roots of all these words, trying to gain a deeper understanding of this poetry… then it becomes intoxicating. So many translations are actually full of shit, so you have to do your own work to really understand the material. If you're a singer, you'll never get anywhere unless you really understand the words you are singing.

At least at the beginning of the process, sometimes doing the research and hard work isn't enchanting. A lot of poets will say the same thing. Look, it's my job, I do it every day. Sometimes I'm inspired, sometimes I'm not. Sometimes in order to get inspired you just have to sit there for an hour and plug away at it, but I think that's what you have to do with basically any job, any work, regardless of what your passion is. You just have to work to get to that point in which you're taken over by it, and then you're free. Then comes life. Other than that, you're just a dead person walking around. At least I am.

How has your voice changed over the years?

I was going to say that you can develop lower notes with your voice as you get older, but I recently saw this thing that I did about seven years ago and I was singing notes that are just as low as I sing now, so maybe that is all a bunch of garbage. You know, I really can't tell you. I wish that I could, but actually I'm glad that I cannot, because there is a cliché about certain singers as they get older that they don't sound as strong. That's usually just because they're out of shape, because their body is out of shape and they don't have any stamina. I'm not just talking about the voice, I'm talking about their physical body. A lot of people as they get older, they don't tend to walk as much and they don't do these things to properly care for themselves. Breathing is essential to being a good singer. Breathing *is* the voice. So, if you don't know how to breathe then you don't know how to sing. Period, that's it. And you won't be singing well.

People ask for advice about things like this all the time: *How do I sing? How do I take care of my voice?* All of those kinds of thinking are cliches and the greatest singers don't have time for that. I mean, if you see Placido Domingo, he may say "Well, my voice has gotten lower but now I'm singing bass" or baritone, or whatever, I don't know what he sings, baritone I guess. And he's doing that, singing the hell out of it. So I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen with my voice, but I've been singing for quite a long time and seems to be just fine. I discovered that I'm able to sing far longer phrases than I was able to do in the past. Much longer phrases with extreme relaxation, so that's good. So I guess the advice I have is very basic—take care of your body. Sing about things you understand and care about.

Much of the music that you put out in the late '80s and early '90s—particularly things like *Plague Mass*, which deals explicitly with the horror of the AIDS epidemic in a very brutal way—is harrowing to revisit. For those who lived through it, those records are painful documents. How do you maintain a relationship with that material? And how does it feel to perform it now?

They want me to perform *Plague Mass* again, and I will, but it's interesting to me that the work I'm doing now is actually very similar. I've always been drawn to these stories about epidemics and plagues, but those stories never stop being relevant, sadly. When I was first involved in doing *Plague Mass*, I myself was in excruciating pain. When I work on any of the work that I'm doing, it's because I feel a sense of horror at what's happening, and I feel it being very, very close. There are people who want me to perform this work, but it's also hard to find producers, especially here in the United States, who will help me stage the material. It's almost impossible.

Because they are afraid of the material?

There's just no money for the arts. Or, I should say, there's no money for *this* art. I mean, there's money if you want to do something really stupid, then there's money for you. Make sure it's *really* stupid, and it sounds stupid and it will appeal to lots of people and it won't make anyone too miserable and it's just fine and groovy and right on, and then someone might pay you for it. I've never been interested in that. I've never been interested in pleasing people in a traditional way.

Well, judging by your shows in NYC last year—which will soon be released as a live album—a lot of people are pleased by it. There was a sense of euphoria at those shows, at least among the audience.

I was very happy at those concerts. I felt such love from the audience, and I don't really base my performance on that. I never ask for that. It was something unexpected that made me very happy. Of course everyone wants to be liked, but you don't ask for it when you do the kind of work I do. Ever. And as a matter of fact one of the biggest things you worry about doing the kind of work I do is hurting people by doing it. You worry that people can't handle it. So it was nice to play those shows and feel that from the audience. It was more than nice.

The idea that you could hurt your audience with your performance is something I've never heard an artist talk about before…

One day I saw a son in the audience sitting with his mother, and I thought it would kill me because he was visibly very sick, I could see it. And I thought to myself, *how dare you do*

this work, how dare you break his heart. And then I found out later from his mother, that he had wanted to come to the show because it made him feel better. And it made him feel better because someone was actually telling the truth about how he was experiencing life. And there were other people there who were experiencing life the same way, so he didn't have to feel alone.

How does it feel to make work that's so much about these extreme states of being and feeling?

It takes a lot out of me physically, but it's not as hard for me emotionally. What's hard for me emotionally is *not* to express what I feel. I couldn't do all that Pollyanna shit because then I wouldn't be expressing me; I wouldn't be expressing what I feel. When people ask me about using my voice in a different way, or why I don't try singing happier songs, or make music that's more easily accessible, I always feel compelled to ask, *don't we already have enough of that in the world?* Aren't there enough women singing nothing but love songs? I mean, I love love songs. I think they're wonderful, but Jesus Christ, you know there is life outside of love affairs. I mean, unfortunately, there is life outside of love affairs… or shall we *not* say unfortunately because love affairs can also truly be the most horrendous things in the world. Right now, because of the state of the world and because I'm trying to get so much work done, singing love songs or having a love affair is just about the last thing I need. I'm putting that off for a few years. No one need apply, please.

Essential Diamanda Galás:

1982 – The Litanies of Satan

1989 – Masque of the Red Death

1991 – Plague Mass

1994 – The Sporting Life (w/John Paul Jones)

2017 – All The Way

Name
Diamanda Galás

Vocation
Vocalist, Composer

Fact

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Austin Young