

AS A RECLUSIVE JANITOR by day and a deranged brilliant artist by night Henry Darger touched the imaginations of anyone who ever had a hankering to be self-taught in any discipline. Although Darger passed away in 1973, his glory never fades, thanks to the other artists he's inspired and who keep his memory alive in their own work. One particularly glorious example of Darger's sanctification is *Jennie Richee* (or eating Jalooka Fruit Before its Ripe),

a musical and art spectacle by playwright Mac Welman. The production is inspired by a completely mind-blowing 15,000 page (no, there is no extra zero in there.) fantasy manuscript, which Darger wrote and illustrated and that his landlord discovered posthumously.

Wellman's Ridge Theater production, directed by Bob McGrath of *Jennie Richee* took place in January at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse. In the performance, as Darger's tome dictates, the Vivian Girls, seven hermaphrodite virgins, go to war against their enemies for the freedom of enslaved children. In Darger's work, *Jennie Richee* is the name of the heroine's hideout.

In the musical Laurie Olinder replicated and enhanced their refuge, surrounded by sky-high trees and flowers, onstage. Using Darger's work as a template Olinder projected her own imagery from slides onto massive on stage scrims which served as the colorful ethereal backdrop for the crusade of the Vivian's girls, all dressed up like something out of a Fairy tale, with pretty dresses and pigtailed. Fifteen thousand pages is no easy challenge to rise to. But Welman, Olinder and the other designers, musicians and actors who worked with them did so well at it they won an Obie award. And the Ridge Theater crew sustains its momentum; you just might be able to catch *Jennie Richee* in a theater near you.

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