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THEATER

THEATER; Warrior Girls Aswirl in an Artist's Mind

By BARRY SINGER

LIKE a painting still in progress, "Jennie Richee," the hallucinatory music-theater piece inspired by the work of the outsider artist Henry Darger, continues to receive new artistic touches. In its latest brief appearance in Brooklyn -- a homecoming of sorts -- it now has fresh choreography and additional music.

The production, by the avant-garde Ridge Theater, written by Mac Wellman and directed by Bob McGrath, was developed in 2000 at St. Ann's Church in Brooklyn Heights, the original home of Arts at St. Ann's. On Tuesday, it opens at St. Ann's Warehouse on the Brooklyn waterfront for a dozen performances.

Darger, who was born in 1892 and died in Chicago in 1973, is probably best known for the illustrations to his 15,000-page novel "The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandelinian War Storm, or the Glandico-Abbiennian Wars, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion." The manuscript centers on seven prepubescent crusading sisters called the Vivian Girls, who set out to liberate a population of children held captive by the Glandelinians, voracious adult males. The girls succeed, but not before enormous battles and loss of life.

The more than 300 illustrations range from dainty watercolors to 12-foot scrolls, many double-sided. The pictures, dense with huge flowers and butterflies, show hordes of baby-faced girls clothed and naked, some with horns, some with penises, some being disemboweled, others being strangled.

Describing these as "skewed versions of Kate Greenaway's Victorian illustrations," the critic Robert Hughes said it would be a mistake to consider Darger "a sort of Poussin of pedophilia." The art, he said, showed its maker's genuine talent, power of formal arrangement and sense of color.

In 1997, the Museum of American Folk Art in New York mounted a major Darger retrospective. Mr. Wellman, a downtown playwright celebrated for his off-center sensibility, saw it.

"The show made a huge impression on me," Mr. Wellman recalled recently. "Seeing those paintings in their actual size is very powerful emotionally. There's a sense of monumental sculpture to them, a bit like Michelangelo. When I met Bob McGrath, I asked if he was familiar with Henry Darger. When he said he wasn't, I gave him my copy of the catalog. That's how it started."

Mr. McGrath, a founder of the Manhattan-based Ridge Theater, a 15-year-old collective, said he was "amazed by Darger."

"He was a sad visionary," Mr. McGrath said, "who lived his life by himself, who couldn't interact with people, and created this entire world for himself. It is a disturbing world, but he had a tough life; his dad whipped him, he wound up at the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Ill. But, you know, all boys draw pictures like this in class. Darger just never grew up."

Perhaps the most intimate elements derived from Darger for "Jennie Richee" are contributed by the designer Laurie Olinder, who conjures, on slides and scrims, the play's visual universe. "Most of my imagery is directly from the paintings," Ms. Olinder said. "I kind of got myself into the head of Henry Darger to make my slides. I sort of traced his own tracing method." (Darger used children's books, comic strips and advertisements to trace the figures in his art.) "I got seed catalogs for pictures of flowers, just like he did," she continued, "plus children's coloring books. It hit me how incredibly facile he was with all this. Because it's hard! Putting 47 figures into one composition, that's not an easy task."

The mixture of Mr. Wellman's text, taken from Darger's writings, and Ms. Olinder's visuals, supplemented with short films by Bill Morrison and a multitiered set by Fred Tietz, all swirl around the actor Daniel Zippi, who plays Darger, and the seven actresses portraying the Vivian Girls. Similarly swirling is Julia Wolfe's music, an electronic, postmodernist pastiche of haunting children's choruses and churchlike motets interwoven with songs in early music hall styles, composed and sung by Cynthia Hopkins.

The full title of the piece is "Jennie Richee (or Eating Jalooka Fruit Before It's Ripe)," but what does it mean? "Jennie Richee," Mr. McGrath said, is the hideout for the Vivian Girls during the war -- "their safe spot, their haven." As for the subtitle, Mr. Wellman said he cribbed the phrase from Darger, who wrote the words onto one of his paintings. What they mean, Mr. Wellman added, is anyone's guess.

The show has been reworked since its last, even briefer appearance in New York, at the Kitchen in April 2001, where it won an Obie. (The world premiere was at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in February 2001.) "Some parts will be entirely different," Mr. McGrath said. "For example, there was a section where we really just created tableaus from the paintings, that I didn't like. It was too meditative. So I asked Julia to compose new music, and we brought in the choreographer David Parsons to make that section his own. Now I hope it will be much more chaotic."

Ms. Olinder said that she believed that the latest incarnation had been altered in a more fundamental way. "I felt we didn't touch on the violence toward women as much as we might have the last time," she explained. "We're approaching it more head-on. The energy in his work does seem more toward violence than sexuality. When you look at the art, erotic it's not."

As a woman, did Ms. Olinder find Darger's vision disturbing?

"I don't know," she said. "I'm so bowled over by the beauty of his images, the facility of his hand. I obviously find the really violent stuff extremely perplexing; he was a very disturbed person. But I don't

think he acted on any of this stuff. He had to have been way too busy. I feel that's where he placed all that awful energy -- in the art."

Mr. Wellman said his view of Darger was not that complicated: "There is a side of Darger that is very dark. But misogynistic? I don't think so. I think his was a very clear-eyed view of the hell humanity creates for itself. There are also a huge number of images of paradise alongside the little-girl bloodletting. I think he was both things. He seems scary because there is a grandeur to the violence that's repellent to most right-thinking people. But I don't see him celebrating it. He just doesn't run away from it, where we tend to avert our gaze."

He paused. "I think Darger was actually a profound moralist."

Jennie Richee

St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water Street, Brooklyn.

Opens Tuesday; through Jan. 26.

Photos: Detail, above, of Henry Darger drawing "At Jennie Richee, Frustrate the Enemy Second Time"; below, a battle scene from the music-theater piece "Jennie Richee." ([c] Kiyoko Lerner/Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York); (Bettina Stammen)