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THEATER REVIEW

Performance artist Whitman digging deeply in 'Black Dirt'

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In "Black Dirt," his new theater piece at the Southern Theater, performance artist Robert Whitman creates an imaginary world and invites the audience in. *Literally* in, for the presentation takes place inside a large white tent whose sides completely enclose the seating area as well as the forestage. Watching "Black Dirt," you feel as though you've entered a large cocoon.

Whitman has been making multimedia theater pieces for three decades, and he continues to work in the linear, low-tech style of the early "happenings." Although events occasionally overlap in "Black Dirt," there's rarely more than one primary focus, and sometimes there are fairly long pauses between events. The piece unfolds at its own calm, unhurried pace.

Even so, a lot happens in 45 minutes. At the beginning, the sound of spring peepers fills the air, and the projected image of an onion, serenely spinning on its axis, circumnavigates the room. After a while, two figures (Alan Linblad and Kris Miller Helm) emerge from a pile of "black dirt" — it's actually reddish-brown and appears to be vermiculite — and peel off layers of clothing, each time revealing an identical layer underneath. Two other figures (Alex Alexander and Charles Schuminski), stationed outside the tent but faintly visible through the tent's translucent muslin wall, begin reciting a text in Latin.

And so on. The images and sounds accumulate. The "movers,"

WHAT: "Black Dirt"**WHERE:** Southern Theater, 1420 S. Washington Ave., Minneapolis.**WHEN:** Tonight and Saturday.**TICKETS:** \$9-\$7.**BOX OFFICE:** 340-1725.**CAPSULE:** A poetic theater piece by one of the founders of performance art.

who never speak, perform a variety of tasks; at times, their bodies serve as screens for projected images. The speakers, who remain outside the tent, recite texts in Italian, Russian and gibberish ("decomposed" Melville, according to Whitman).

Objects, including two pine trees, descend from the ceiling. Other objects, including the aforementioned pile of black dirt, ascend from the floor. The tent itself begins to "breathe," expanding and contracting rhythmically as though exhaling and inhaling. At the end, the spring peepers are heard again, and the performance is over.

Whether these elements add up to something specific and concrete is for each viewer to decide. On the whole, I tend to think not; although it seems clear that Whitman's intent in "Black Dirt" is to peel away layers until he arrives at something resembling the essence of life, he never tells you what to think.

Instead, like a Rothko painting, "Black Dirt" invites an emotional response to sensory stimulation. That it does so entirely on its own terms, with the gentle eloquence of a lyric poem, is the essence of its considerable charm.