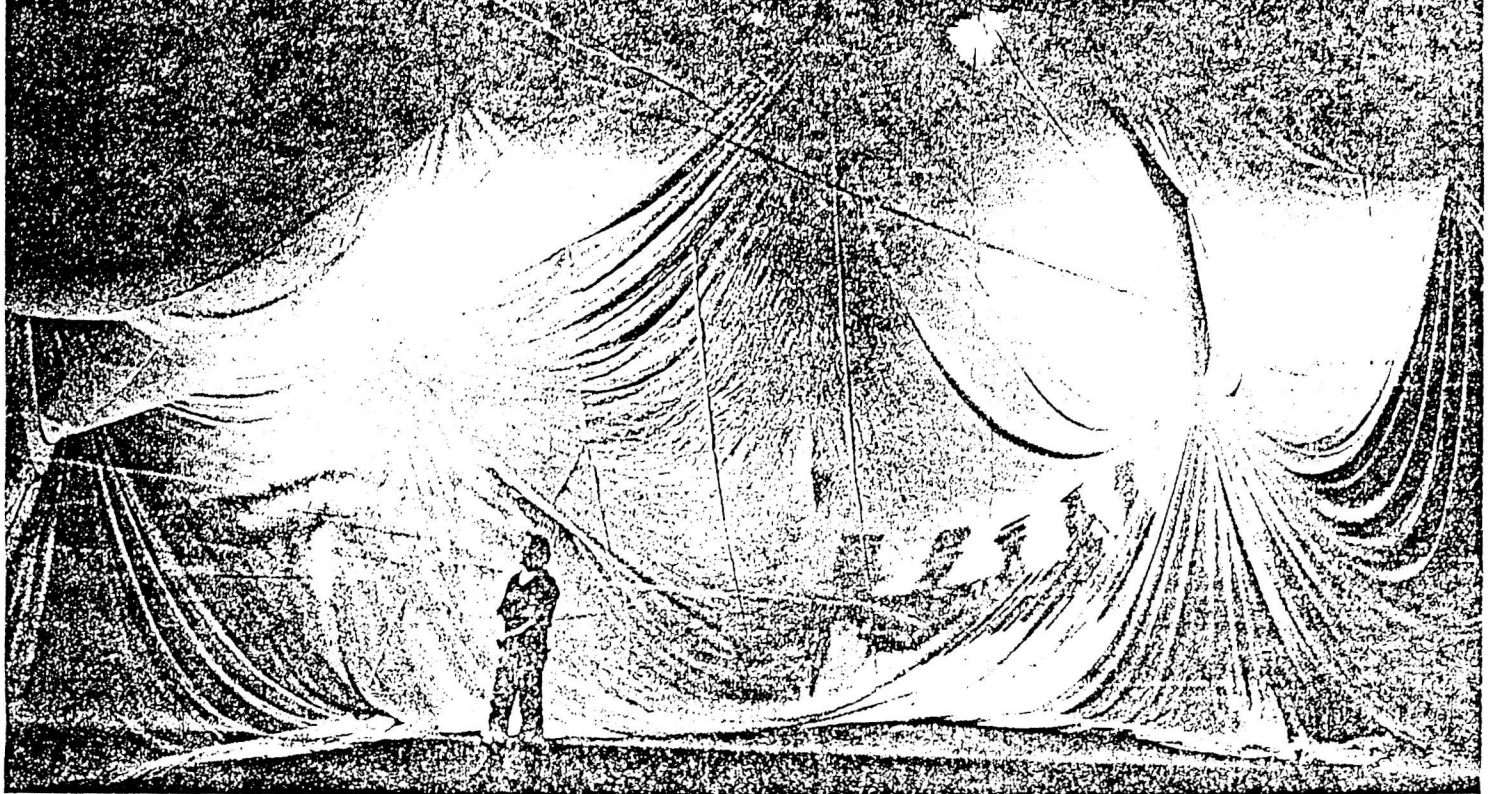


What's happening at MIT theater?



Robert Whitman . . . inside the white dome used for his theater piece "Black Dirt."

Globe staff photo/Eric Antonio

BY PATTI HARTIGAN

An immense cloud seems to have descended on MIT's Experimental Media Facility a.k.a. "The Cube" where New York artist Robert Whitman is dwarfed by the imposing white dome he designed for his new theater piece "Black Dirt." The artist looks small and mortal next to his creation, a structure 20 feet high, made of 500 square yards of cloth sewn together by local seamstress Liz Perlman. Despite its dimensions, the dome has a fleeting quality, featherweight and billowy, as if it might float heavenward at any moment.

The artist may be as elusive as the environments he creates. Trying to embroider literal "meaning" on Whitman's work is as futile and pointless as trying to analyze a sunset or frame a soap bubble. "I can't describe the piece in words," he said. "I like people to supply their own adjectives."

"Black Dirt," which is being presented at MIT at 8 tonight, tomorrow and Saturday and April 12-14, has to be experienced. Whitman, in fact, is reluctant to discuss the process involved in creating the piece.

It was commissioned by MIT and is funded by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts and other organizations. It also will be presented in New York, Philadelphia and Minneapolis.

Whitman speaks in images, not easily

parsed sentences. It's telling that he cringed when asked if he objected to the use of a tape recorder. He consented grudgingly. "I don't like things to be recorded for posterity," he said. As fate would have it, the tape recorder broke.

But what is this bulbous cloud? Whitman, who was one of the founders of the revolutionary Happenings movement in the early '60s, starts with the title. "Near where I live in New York, there is a valley where millions of years ago there was a lake. The bottom is flat, like a peat bog. The dry dirt is black from all those years of stuff settling on the bottom. The ground is used for onion and sod farming."

That image provided the inspiration for the piece. The audience will sit inside the dome, while performers enact various tasks both inside and outside the structure. The dome is translucent, so that the audience can see the performers through the walls. Meanwhile, an image rotator above the dome will pan film images around the dome. The film, incidentally, is of an onion. Two performers inside the dome will wear several shirts, which they will peel off like layers of an onion.

The metaphor is obvious, but Whitman doesn't want to pick apart the layers of the piece. This resistance to codification makes sense when put into context. The Happenings movement revolutionized art and performance. Influenced by Jackson Pollack and John Cage in the late '50s, such artists as Whitman and Allan Kaprow exploded the boundaries of traditional performance.

Happenings were not scripted in the usual sense, although they were not improvised. Working in New York galleries and lofts, these artists created multimedia events that defied interpretation. Whitman's "Mouth," for instance, unfolded in a giant oral cavity where performers enacted various activities.

Happenings grew out of an exciting visual art movement in the early '60s, and its influence on performance is enormous. The ideas and methods of Happenings permeate today's Performance Art scene, as well as the work of such theatrical impresarios as Robert Wilson. Happenings explored the marriage of technology and art, the notion of mixed media performance, environmental space and so on.

Whitman looks back on his early days with detached amusement. Whitman attended Rutgers University in New Jersey in the mid-'50s, where he took an art course from Kaprow, who later coined the term "Happenings."

"When I went to college, I wanted to be a playwright," he said, smiling. "There wasn't much happening in the theater world in those days, and the idea of being a playwright was hilarious."

But the art world was crackling with vitality and energy, and by 1960, Whitman and other artists had formed a collaborative in New York in the Reuben Gallery, where many Happenings were staged. The performers each contributed about \$25 a month to keep the place running.

Naturally production costs have risen astronomically. Whitman does not know

the budget for "Black Dirt" but that's not his department. "I can't do that stuff; I wish I could," Whitman says of grant writing and fund-raising.

Somehow that makes sense. A man who thinks in images isn't one to speak in dollar signs or absolutes. "The film and movement and other parts of theatrical language all come together to make the image. How they come together, that's the art or the craft. It's the same as writing a whole bunch of stuff. You have all these pieces and you sit there and fuss with it."

All those scattered pieces will come together to form something, but last week even Whitman didn't know exactly what it would be. He fiddles and changes things as he works; the piece grows out of the process. Yes, this can be frustrating. Last week at the Cube, a technician finished cutting a green lighting gel and said, "Chances are 300 to 1 that he (Whitman) will change the color."

Whitman knows that the process can be laborious. He displays the poster for "Black Dirt," which features a photo of an onion with its layers peeling away. The image is quite beautiful, for an onion. "Maybe I should have stopped with the poster," Whitman says. As for the piece, it won't be finished until it's performed. "Black Dirt" MIT Experimental Media Facility, 20 Ames St., Cambridge. Telephone 253-4680. April 5-7, 12-14 at 8 p.m. \$8.

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