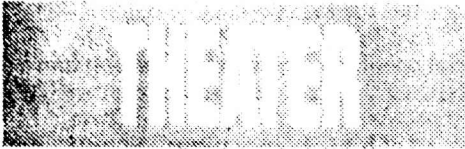


# You And Me, Born Of The 'Black Dirt'

by Alexandra Grilikhes

Robert Whitman's *Black Dirt*, a large-scale theater piece with direct roots in the "happening" of the '60s, is being performed at the Painted Bride. Together with the Fabric Workshop, the Bride has co-commissioned the piece with the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), MIT and the Kitchen (N.Y.).

Whitman, one of the original happening artists of the early '60s, is still deeply involved with the form,



which he interprets as installation work with its own carefully defined determinants.

For this piece, the rectangular inner space of the Bride has been completely redesigned. The audience must file in to the now semi-circular seating through an enclosed passageway. This re-framing sets the space apart as ceremonial; you find yourself divested of ordinary space-time expectations as you enter the artist's rhythms and sense of real time.

The interior has become a large white tent of soft muslin. On the stage area we see a large pile of dirt. Before us, on the floor, an exuberantly painted plastic runner. Two fir trees hang from the domed ceiling.

By means of an aerial projector, the image of an onion makes a 360-degree revolution around the tent's circumference, rotating as it goes. Somewhere, beyond the edge, an animal growls. The lights go red, then dark. This is the territory of magic.

In a beam of light, sand falls from the "sky" onto the pile of dirt. You watch as

if the sand were going to fall forever.

Behind the scrimlike wall of the tent, a woman and a man with softly-lit faces chat together in a foreign language. This motif is repeated throughout—a man and woman engaging in verbal communication, always reading from a script—something that could lend itself to interpretation.

But in this large, magical space, set apart from the dailiness of life, you prefer to stay where the artist has taken you. Whitman's *mise-en-scene* brings you fully into the non-linearity of consciousness and works as a poem does, by its own logic.

The pile of dirt suddenly seems to move as two figures, a man and a woman, like monoliths, stand, throw off their wrappings, push the dirt into the center of the cloth, draw the edges of the cloth together to make a huge sack, then attach the sack to a hook

## This 'happening' for the '90s brings us inside our life.

that pulleys it ceilingwards, where it hangs and slowly turns.

Later, we see the fir trees drop down and the ceiling and wall of the tent (read: body) inhale and exhale deeply, trembling like vulnerable flesh. A fiery ball pulses and glows under the runner (which looks like veined skin in the light) and eerily disappears. The woman and man in white, twinned figures, coolly sidestep their way across the stage in perfect alignment.

They face us, turn, do the same steps facing away. Centered on the wall behind them, a huge image of an open book appears, with hands turning the pages. Whitman skilfully juxtaposes



*Black Dirt: An allegory of life.*

magnified human movement, projected visually at one speed, against the motion of two human figures crossing the stage, enigmatically removing three layers of shirts and hanging them on the soft wall of the tent, at another speed. In the silence, the differing rhythms work together like music.

The beauty of Whitman's vision is that the tent (house) stands for the body—ours, as well as the world's. This piece is Whitman's dream of the coming together of the natural, human and cosmic worlds, his dream made manifest in a space he's made sacred.

The walls that surround us breathe as we breathe. Inanimate objects have a life of their own; they can move upwards or downwards. At the edge of the stage, the white cloth under the runner upends like a medicine wheel that's been prayed over. It becomes a projection space on which we see a large eye in a face that's greatly magnified, with fingers just in front of the eye.

The image moves steadily before us

in its semi-circle. There is the sound and picture again of a man and a woman, this time separated, talking on the telephone in a strange tongue. We can't make out the words, but the nuances are familiar.

This is a private world where technology is present but hidden. The subtle lighting changes make everything seem surreal. *Black Dirt* is a dream of consonance, of taking the wolf-growl and the inchoate shape, the exposed teeth that appear in the open mouth, the distant shapes of the woman and man, and putting them together in the same house.

Hadn't the man and woman been born from the dirt? Wasn't that fiery, pulsating ball the movement of life? They had paused, waited for it to happen, then continued their way. This is the house that can breathe. The artist is dreaming awake and wants you to enter the dream. ▼

*Black Dirt: June 29-July 1, at the Painted Bride, 230 Vine Street. \$12. 925-9914.*