ART

desert rain

Today until Mon, Upper Campfield
Market, Liverpool Road, Central
Manchester, noon to 9pm, £3, £4
conc, booking essential.
Tel: 200 1500

The Gulf War never happened,
claimed French Philosopher Jean
Baudrillard.

It was just a virtual event, an
experience totally distanced from
what we used to call reality.

This view probably brings little
comfort to our boys maimed by
friendly fire, or indeed to the
relatives of Iraqi conscripts and
innocent bystanders mixed by
surgical strikes.

Performance-artist group Blast
Theory are also not too comfort-
able with Baudrillard’s assertion,
but believe that as a theory it does
point to the way our world is now
so filtered through the media that
it’s very hard to distinguish truth
from fiction.

Their latest venture, Desert Rain,
part of the interface digital festival,
uses virtual reality, installation and
performance to examine these
boundaries by taking visitors on an
interactive journey into the
war zone. Blast Theory’s previous
piece, Kidnap, stirred up contro-
versy by running a lottery in which

Frontline: Blast Theory brew up a virtual war for the audience

the winners had the chance to
be kidnapped and observed on
the Internet.

With marketing boasting ‘state-
of-the-art virtual environment
technology,’ and a format that
gives teams of six just 30 minutes
to ‘complete their mission,’ Desert
Rain ventures into similarly
dubious territory, mixing art, enter-
tainment and a recent enough war
for the wounds to still be sore.

Visitors encounter not just the
virtual war, but the experiences
of some of the soldiers who
fought, who relate just how ‘real’
it felt to them. It aims to give an
insight into the thin line between
Norman Schwarzkopf and Arnold
Schwarzenegger.

Hopefully this didactic purpose
rescues it from being swallowed
up by the multi-media monster
it confronts.

Martin Vincent