

THE BIG PLAY: DESERT RAIN



USING THE Gulf War as a starting point for their latest work, Nottingham-based **Blast Theory** has created a piece with an interactive approach that puts the audience, quite literally, in the frontline of the action. As rain pours down the walls, acting as a backdrop for the series of computer-generated images that form the heart of *Desert Rain*, a maximum of six participants are thrown together in a fabric cubicle. Here they must travel through a series of both real and virtual spaces, working together to search motels and

bunkers, trying to find their target before their time is up. The outcome of a two-year collaboration between Blast Theory and Nottingham University's Computer Research Group (using the latter's MASSIVE 2 software), *Desert Rain* exposes the media manipulation and propaganda surrounding the Gulf War through a truly two-way experience.

Neil Cooper

Tramway, Albert Drive,
Glasgow, June 29, 4-9pm,
June 30, noon-9pm, every
30 minutes, £6, concs £3
(0141-287 3900)

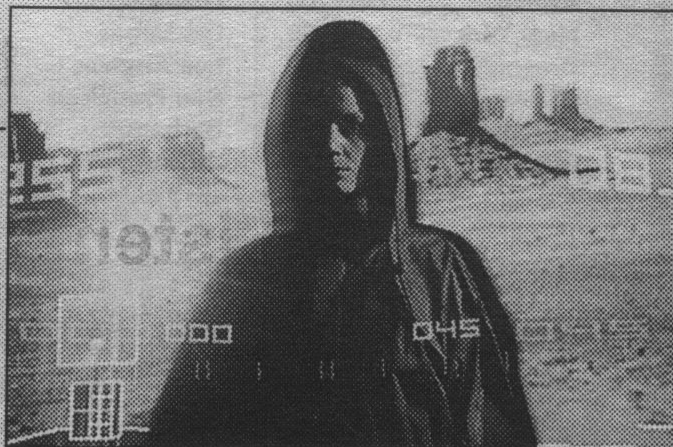
THEATRE REVIEW

desert rain

★★★★☆

Until Sun, Riverside Studios, Crisp Road W6, performances every half hour from noon to 10pm, £9. Tel: 020 8237 1111. Websites: www.blasttheory.co.uk and www.riversidestudios.co.uk Tube: Hammersmith

Desert Rain is the disturbing, provocative new production from Blast Theory, the experimental London-based theatre group that during a recent piece kidnapped and incarcerated two people for 48 hours. Only six audience members attend each performance of *Desert Rain*, which sends you all on a mission to find specified targets. One by one, you are zipped into a fabric cubicle. Projected on to the screen of fine water spray in front of you is a dark virtual landscape of desert and underground bunkers. You can't see the five other members of your team but you know they're there. You have just 30 minutes to work together and



complete the mission. Intent on breaking the barriers between audience and performers and making us question the role of popular culture and the media, Blast Theory use state-of-the-art technology and theatre to explore and challenge perceptions of reality. *Desert Rain* is at once game, installation and performance. Recalling the media's bizarre 'translation' of the Gulf War – where screen grids replaced cities, hitting targets inspired the same satisfaction as taking out enemy spaceships in *Space Invaders* – it could as easily be a military exercise.

Bel Jacobs

RATINGS GUIDE

Don't miss ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★

Good ★★★★★ Adequate ★★★★★

Poor ★★★★★



Wargame: Desert Rain offers the audience the experience of conflict in the form of a Disney ride

INTERACTIVE THEATRE desert rain

Thu to July 8 (not Sun or Mon), Tramway, Albert Drive, Glasgow, every half an hour from noon until 9pm, £6, £3 concs. Tel: 0141 287 3900

Blast Theory, who last year kidnapped willing members of the public and broadcast their captivity, have created a new and controversial theatrical event with Desert Rain.

Based on the Gulf War conflict, it's an interactive game where six members of the public take part in a hi-tech video game.

One of the four members of Blast Theory, Ju Row Farr, explains: 'It's a half-hour event where you work as a team, talking to each other through headphones.

'What makes it different is the live element, using human beings as well as walls of water spray and video projection so that the experience feels more like a Disney thrill ride.'

Standing on a footplate and zipped into a cubicle, it's hardly a normal theatrical experience for the audience.

Having already played in London, Desert Rain is heading across Europe on tour and has stirred heated debate about using a real conflict as subject

matter. Is a game an appropriate way to address the Gulf War? In Farr's view, it's a relevant one.

'We're not looking at the horrors of the war, we're looking at the medium of how it comes to us, how we define and enjoy what is presented to us as fact but is, in fact, fiction. We wanted to raise issues about what's real and what's fictional.'

Stimulation for the senses and for the mind is the promise, and a welcome change in the gaming field; for once content and relevance are to the fore and the appeal should be well beyond the average knob-twiddling cyber-geek. *EH*

EVENT REVIEW desert rain

★★★★☆

Tue until Sat, Tramway, Albert Drive, Glasgow, noon until 9pm, every 30 mins, £6, £3 concs. Tel: 0141 287 3900

After all the hype and raised expectations, it's difficult to know where to start when describing the Gulf War adventure of innovative performance group Blast Theory.

The game is hard to describe, specifically because you will have never experienced anything like it. The event is designed for six players but it's certainly a far cry from Monopoly.

You stand in separate stalls while various rooms and landscapes are projected on the walls, responding to the movements of your feet. You search for targets, locate exits and try to get your team out in one piece.

The game is easy to play but the difficulties are genuine and practical. The real challenge lies in getting the entire team out, so there's no benefit from finding your target and standing smugly by the exit. You feel like six cats trying to find their way out of a virtual-reality sack and, unlike video games, this is physical and relies on your communication skills with others.

Blast Theory's decision to use this game as a way to reflect upon the complexity of the Gulf War is a provocative statement, not entirely borne out by the simple dynamics of the game. It's as if someone has handed you a copy of Doom and told you it is a comment on the tragedy of human loss in war.

Although the graphics are fairly simple and the technology will be laughable in ten years, this is a novel and original experience which represents a cutting-edge experience in entertainment. *EH*