Desert Rain
Tramway, Glasgow ★★★★★

Blast Theory's Desert Rain is an experience that lasts only 30 minutes; but if you go for it, I can guarantee that you will come out changed, and perhaps even humbled. First, you wait on a row of red plastic seats in the Tramway foyer with the four or five others who will make up your group; then a man in an anorak comes and escorts you into a briefing room, where you are given a number and the name of your target, asked to leave your coat and dress in an army kagoulé. One by one, you are led forward and zipped into gauzy canvas cubicles, with a strange virtual landscape projected on the shifting screens around you, your feet on a giant control-pad in a pool of water, and a microphone headset for communications with the others, if you ever find them in cyberspace.

Then it begins: 20 minutes, in this weird desert landscape, to find your target, regroup with the others, and make your way to the exit. The game is utterly gripping; you feel a huge sense of triumph as you find your target in time, and begin a frantic process of teamwork to help others do the same. But suddenly, it's over. Your team is led over sand into a strange two-dimensional hotel room, where you watch short video interviews, made in the real version of the same room, with people recounting first-hand experiences of the Gulf War. Then you walk out, and on the way encounter the artistic killer punch; hung on a piece of perspex, the story of the Air India flight, with 290 people aboard, shot down over the Gulf by a US battleship because the computer system identified the plane as a fighter.

And the point is that you now know that for the last 20 minutes you have been the boy who found that target and pressed that button. You know that you have been totally absorbed in the task, proud of your speed and accuracy, thrilled by the technology, unquestioning in your determination to help your own team and to destroy the others, the targets. And when you get home, in a final detail that speaks volumes about the depth of thought behind this slender, brilliantly-judged experience, you find a tiny perspex box of desert sand in your jacket pocket. Lest you forget, you see; lest you forget.

Joyce McMillan
THEATRE

Desert Rain

OK, prepare yourself to be zipped along with five other people into a fabric cubicle, where you'll be forced to stand in front of a wall of rain interacting with other people and with the virtual world projected before your eyes. The subject of this latest show by performance group Blast Theory is the Gulf War of 1991, filtered through the MASSIVE 2 software of Nottingham University's Computer Research Group to expose the media manipulation and propaganda that reached new heights during that war. The experience will be weird, sweaty and probably disturbing; but since it only takes 30 minutes of your life, why not go for it?

Joyce McMillan

Tramway, Glasgow, 0141-287 3900, noon-9pm, £6 (concessions £3), until 8 July.
Theatre highlight: Desert Rain

- Blast On!

Obviously, one multimedia extravaganza - the Wooster Group's electrifying "House/Lights" - wasn't enough for Tramway during its celebratory re-opening month. Taking up the baton from the stellar New York company, Blast Theory lift the interaction between reality and representation to a higher level in Desert Rain. Infamous for their Kidnap project, staged in 1998, in which members of the public paid to enter a lottery, the winners of which were spied on, kidnapped and held hostage for 48 hours, Blast Theory are not people who do things by halves. Footage of the kidnaps was broadcast on the internet, and a chatroom set up for comment. Some felt the captors didn't go far enough; while others argued that Blast Theory were guilty of transforming crime into art. The muddy distinction between criminal behaviour and artistic purpose that Kidnap relied on not only echoed the paranoia-fuelled world of futuristic science fiction, but questioned the implicit participation of society in the abuse of rights for the sake of entertainment.

Two years later, Blast Theory have surpassed this. A work developed in collaboration with Nottingham University's Computer Research Group, Desert Rain is a complex and elaborate questioning of the treatment of war in post-modern society. Jean Baudrillard famously declared that the Gulf War never happened, that the images fed to the West by news-gatherers became hyper-real - not reflecting reality, but creating a new one - questioning the belief that what we watch is what really happened.

This detachment manifested itself in the Allied authorities at the time as a desire to downplay the costs of war to the citizens of Iraq and concentrate on the remote use of smart bombs and laser-guided missiles. Blast Theory are confronting it by digitally recreating a section of war-torn desert and placing six participants - the show's "audience" - inside it. Their task is to locate their targets and find the exit within 30 minutes. Forced to interact with both the virtual landscape and the other participants in order to survive, each member of the audience is a member of the cast, required to question his or her priorities when faced with the fear and disorientation that this digital desert creates.

In developing Desert Rain, Blast Theory are attempting to fuse the use of technology with the moral system that exploits it, examining the way in which information is distorted, censored and manipulated by governments and the media. The ramifications of selective coverage, the perceived impartiality of the media and the problems raised by waging an allegedly "just" war are laid bare by Desert Rain. It obfuscates the division of the real and the imagined, removing the boundaries between life and art, between spectator and participant, between innocent and guilty.

Leon McDermott
Tramway, Glasgow, 0141-287 3900, Thu 29 June to Sat 8 July, £6 (£3)