

Comrades in virtual war

INTERACTIVE ART

Desert Rain

Tramway

Run ended

ART guerrillas Blast Theory made a critical splash two years ago when they held a series of raffles and then kidnapped the winner for two days. This blurring of crime and art happening caused a bit of a brouhaha, even though the kidnapee was complicit with the group.

But their latest project, a touring work produced with Nottingham University's School of Computer Science, doesn't take any such prisoners. Using the hyper-reality of the Gulf War as a jumping-off point, Desert Rain combines installation, video, water, sand and – woo hoo! – an interactive computer game with walkie-talkie communication to create a surprisingly insightful and thought-provoking critique.

Would-be commandoes are deployed in groups of up to

six, each kitted out in drab macs, assigned a specific target to track down and led into the isolation of a fabric tent. Inside your own little theatre of war, a pair of headphones hooks you up to ambient battle babble while a microphone allows you to awkwardly communicate with other players.

The first-person perspective game engine is smooth and well-executed, and the usual blockiness of computer-generated virtual reality is diffused by the clever use of falling water as a projection screen. Your mission is to rescue your target and escape to the exit with all your comrades-in-arms within 20 minutes.

Swiping the credit card bearing your rescued target's name conjures a video of their real-life experience in the Gulf War. And when you're ushered out of a side-door, blinking and disorientated in the sunlight, you find a tiny box of sand in your jacket pocket containing roughly 10,000 grains, alluding to the unclear number of Iraqi dead.

A beautifully realised and unexpectedly involving experience.

Graeme Virtue

Performance

Desert Rain, Tramway,
Glasgow
Keith Bruce

I WAS taught to swim three times (I forgot twice), so it is no surprise that I am completely rubbish at video games. Hence the fact that I cannot tell you what happens at the end of the virtual reality sequence of Blast Theory's devastating critique of the Gulf War. I did find my target, Tony, who turned out to be a tourist who found himself in the wrong place at entirely the wrong time, but I fear I failed to find my way out of the war zone. Rather more fatally true for others, that was.

Desert Rain takes the memories most of us have of the Gulf War – the CNN pictures of cruise and scud missiles – and puts them in context. Briefed and sent on our way, the first part of the experience is a less boisterous version of *Laser Quest*. Others are clearly better qualified than I to assess that but it is certainly involving, if disorientating.

You exit through a shower and over a hill of sand into a mock-up of an anonymous hotel room, much like the one where the people you and your fellow players have been stalking have videotaped their testimonies. Every word they utter alters your view of the experience you have just had – and subsequent reminders of the downing of the Iranian Airbus and a post-match programme listing the songs the BBC un-playlisted at the time only reinforce that revision process.

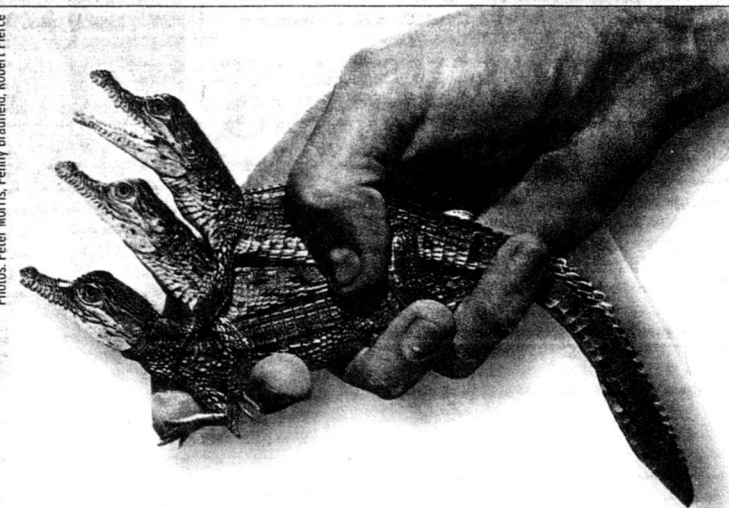
It is brilliant, brief, and to the point – and available every half-hour between 4pm and 9 pm until next Saturday. Incidentally, this was the third different show I've attended at Tramway since it

SPOTLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT PLANNER

Edited by Peter Munro



Photos: Peter Morris, Penny Bradfield, Robert Pierce



the 2010 Youth Refuge, the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation and the Luncheon Club, which provides meals for people with HIV and AIDS. Sunday, 8pm, \$48/\$38, Footbridge Theatre, Parramatta Road, Glebe, bookings 9266 4800.

BEST HORSE FLESH

Dangerously Volcanic:
Liverpool and the Boer War

Forty-six men from the Liverpool region were among the soldiers who fought in the Boer War. The world's first modern conflict, it incorporated guerilla militia and media-driven battles. This exhibition includes the stories of the Liverpool soldiers and examines the controversial commemoration of their commitment. It opens at noon on Saturday with a special display by "K" Troop New South Wales Lancers and a South African barbecue, including *boerewors* (sausage) and *biltong* (dried meat). Tuesdays-Saturdays until January 25, 10am-4pm, free, Liverpool Regional Museum, corner Hume Highway and Congressional Drive, Liverpool, 9602 0315.

BEST COLD SHOULDER

Meet Live Saltwater Critters

Get up close and personal with a live baby saltwater crocodile, slithery (non-venomous) snakes, lizards and freshwater turtles. Brave souls with quick hands can hold and pat the reptiles. Keepers from the Reptiles Galore park will give talks about the animals, their diet, habitat and the threats to their continued survival. Weekends until December 1, 1-2pm, free with museum admission \$10/\$6/\$25 family, Australian National Maritime Museum, 2 Murray Street, Darling Harbour, 9298 3777.

BEST YOUNG WRITERS

Juvenilia Conference

Before they wrote the works that established their literary reputations, writers such as Jane Austen and the three Brontë sisters

they created imaginary worlds peopled with romantic heroines and brooding heroes. Speakers will examine the juvenile works of great writers, hoping to uncover their enduring appeal. Sunday, 10am-4pm, \$35 (includes lunch and refreshments), John Read Lecture Theatre, Australian Graduate School of Management, University of New South Wales, off Botany Street, Kensington, 9380 5894.

BEST VIRTUAL WAR

Desert Rain

The virtual-reality war game Desert Rain sends people on a mission into another world. Six participants are zipped into a cubicle to explore motels, deserts and underground bunkers projected onto a screen of falling water. Players are given 30 minutes to find the target and complete the mission. A special viewing of the game opens futureScreen2002, a festival of media arts, which runs until December 7 and includes installation-art exhibitions and talks. For more information on the festival, go to www.dlux.org.au/dataterra. Daily from Sunday to Friday, every half hour from noon-9pm, \$11/\$6.60, Artspace, 43-51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo, bookings essential, 9380 4255.

BEST ORGANS

Len Rawle and Cherubim & Seraphim

British theatre organist Len Rawle has 40 years' experience at the keyboard and his own Wurlitzer organ in his living room. This weekend he will play well-known orchestral hits and the best of the British composers on an original Wurlitzer Orchestral Pipe Organ. Sunday, 2pm, \$18/\$16.50, Marrickville Town Hall, Marrickville Road, Marrickville, 9629 2257. Music ought to be heavenly. Listen to the divine sounds of Guerrero, Vaughan Williams and William Harris with performances by organist Bernard Kirkpatrick and Sydney a cappella group Coro Innominata. Sunday, 3pm, \$20/\$15, St Scholastica's Chapel, corner Avenue and Arcadia roads, Glebe, 0413 440 173.

'Til the wheels fall off

Pedal the special bike lanes, catch some Santa action or join the dreaming in Bicentennial Park.

BEST SMOOTH RIDE
RTA Cycle Sydney

Tackling Sydney on a bicycle is usually a tough ride along tight streets full of traffic. Sunday will be different as cyclists take advantage of special traffic-free lanes on an organised ride from North Sydney to Parramatta. There are two options: the 50km ride starting in St Leonards Park, North Sydney, or the 20km ride starting from Bray's Bay Reserve, Rhodes. Both finish at Parramatta Park. Bicycle lanes will be open on the Harbour Bridge, around The Rocks and Darling Harbour. Old Club

BEST BEARDED BLOKE
David Jones Christmas Concert

Christmas comes early for the kids with a free, 90-minute family concert in Hyde Park featuring Bob the Builder, Fireman Sam, Blinky Bill and the Hooley Dooleys. Santa will make a grand entrance at 10am aboard Thomas the Tank Engine. He will then be joined on stage by Christmas fairies and carollers. After the show, Santa will ride back to David Jones's

Good Food, Wine and Coffee weekend includes tastings of about 100 wines from Western Australia. There will also be coffee workshops, including instructions on making coffee cocktails, at 11am, 1pm and 3pm each day. Food will be cooked up by the Forum Piazza cafes and restaurants and celebrity chef Bart Beek will hold cooking demonstrations. Saturday and Sunday, 10am-6pm, \$10 (for wine tasting), Italian Forum, Norton Street, Leichhardt, 9518 3396.

Wheels of life: clockwise from main, pedal 50km with the RTA's Cycle Sydney; meet some tiny crocs at the National Maritime Museum; celebrate indigenous culture in

BEST MUSICAL DEBUT