

# Culture

## in Review



2004  
Fringe  
Preview

## The game of progress

The latest Thinkers in Residence are a surprise Fringe attraction, as **David Sly** reports.

**T**O dwell on The Fringe is to take risks, pushing the limits of artistic endeavour to engage audiences with challenging ideas. This is why Adelaide's latest Thinkers in Residence will stage a performance season during Adelaide Fringe 2004.

UK new-media collective Blast Theory has forged a stellar international career by challenging perceptions about interactive technology and its common uses. Ju Row Farr, Nick Tandavanitj and Matt Adams have forged a 15-year partnership in testing the theory of new media in artistic performance environments. In essence, they introduce cutting-edge technology through interactive games – a strategy designed to present broad audiences with new scientific, artistic and social possibilities.

Adams admits that Blast Theory comes to South Australia's continuing Thinkers in Residence program from an oblique angle; still, common themes of taking risks in areas of new opportunity voiced by previous "Thinkers" Charles Landry and Herbert Girardet resonate in Blast Theory's objectives. And beyond simply delivering reports, the UK trio will engage in a tangible project with Adelaide technicians and artists.

"This is what we do, put theory into practice," says Adams. "There is an empirical process to what we do; we and others learn by doing things. We push to find the break-

ing point in new, leading-edge technology."

This is the way Blast Theory has worked at Nottingham University over seven fruitful years: set up a hypothesis then see if it works, to test the merging of real and virtual spaces. This isn't science fiction. It's already present in mobile phones with cameras – the real-time illusion of being there when you're not actually there. And this will be a major component of the Fringe game being created by Blast Theory, *I Like Frank in Adelaide*.

The fulcrum of this Fringe performance, being staged from March 1-12, will be the use of G3 handset wireless technology, allowing great volumes of digital information to be transferred in real time across broad bandwidth. Blast Theory has previously used other wireless technologies with success but wants to push more recent innovations in Adelaide rather than take a safe, proven path.

Such bravery has built a cult of Blast Theory supporters – likely to form a keen global audience of online players for their Adelaide game – though there is no guarantee the ambitious project will work.

"Yes, it's terrifying, because we have to deliver" said Adams, soon after arriving in Adelaide to commence an intense eight-week construction of the game. "We can't just theorise. Our outcomes have to entertain and delight people. Our work can't be dull and uninspiring.

And it's only really complete once the public engage with it, so we don't know how good or useful or successful our idea and work is until it is used in public.

"That's what innovation is all about; risk. We like that area, but it's critical to have an environment where failure isn't going to mean the end of our career – even though we are desperately concerned not to make a mess of what we do. We try to find ways around the limitations of working technology; we try to resolve the area where technology breaks."

The game will engage up to 20 online players (they log in for free via a web site) with 10 street players (they buy a ticket and get a handset which issues instructions) and their mission is to find "Frank" on the streets of Adelaide. Completing the game should take players about one hour, though it will not simply be a matter of solving clues; solutions will depend on how real and online players react and communicate with each other as they roam a real/virtual space between the Adelaide University campus, North Tce and Rundle St.

"To play this game, you don't need to be a techie," says Adams. "We work at the intersection of art with technology, drawing opinion away from the narrow assumption of a what a computer does."

As such, the implications of what Blast Theory presents are more than a game. They pull focus on the pos-

sibilities of technology and its implementation, and, looking at the wider social implication of mobile phone technology, they raise issues of copyright protection for new-media ideas, how far privacy limits stretch, even what policing limits should apply. All these social by-products of advances in technology are in an amorphous state and Blast Theory is determined to include them in the progressive technology debate.

This reflects the trio's wider work as part of the Thinkers in Residence program. In addition to building and presenting the game *I Like Frank in Adelaide*, they have conducted technical masterclasses, engaged five local technicians/artists in their project – and drawing people to their work base in the EDC Technology School of the Future at Hindmarsh has highlighted the significant growth of technological learning facilities in SA. Indeed, Adams says an objective of Blast Theory's visit is to show that it's not physical location that influences opportunity but imagination and a will to innovate.

"We have to ask how you harness the potential of the changes to technology, not just in terms of revenue and commerce, but socially – how they change the way we behave and interact with each other. You don't have to be in London to do that; we're doing it in Adelaide and our results will be examined around the world."

**T**HE Fringe program is a maddening labyrinth of pleas and promises. Many artists come to trial new shows, many more arrive on the strength of their reputations, others aim to cause a sensation. Compelled by swelling attendances at previous Fringes, more than 400 artists come to feed off a crowd seemingly inspired by the volume of choices – and The Fringe's policy of open access to all players means the shape of the event is most unwieldy.

As critics, we can only speculate as to the merits of most performances. Essentially, it's a gambler's paradise. Take a punt and tell your friends of the horrors or delights over a beer afterwards.

The real battle for Fringe patronage isn't in the tiny performance venues where artists ply their wares; it's at big outdoor meeting places, where famous names perform late into the night while beer and vodka coolers flow freely as cash passes briskly through the till.

Curiously, Fringe organising bodies have struggled in recent years to create their own successful Fringe club; they've been usurped by interstate promoters. However, shrewd planning will see the Fringe transform Adelaide University into a busy hub of venues. In addition to shows in Union Hall and surrounding buildings, a new venue will transform the Barr Smith Lawns into a Fringe Lounge for music and cabaret from sunset, then into the Fringe Club for late-night music and revelry.

They aren't the only ones to get organised. Adelaide Festival director Stephen Page has created the Universal Playground (a funky Festival late-night meeting place) at Torrens Parade Ground, while Melbourne's finest rock'n'comedy'n'funky cabaret will come to the East Parklands. This won't feature the Famous Speigeltent (the portable tavern is being repaired) but a ring of canvas tents, harbouring everything from rock stars in the Regal Tent (Dave Graney, Joe Camilleri, The Blackeyed Susans, Stephen Cummings) to sideshow freaks (contortionists at the Happy Sideshow). This array of key late-night venues should encourage a flow of pedestrian traffic between the sites, though Fringe crowds are notorious for staying put. What to do? Pore through the program – and take a few tips from our critics on the following pages.

David Sly

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