

17th July 1998

□ TO THE theatre. Well, actually, to the state-of-the-art cool theatre of the future, for a historic performance by Blast Theory, which is "one of the top five theatre companies in Britain", according to *Time Out*, the London listings magazine. What is new here is that the audience members were all on the Web.

If you wanted the company of an actual breathing audience, you had to visit the new media suite at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Pall Mall, where lots of us sat at computer screens. A Blast Theorist called Helen said the event was sponsored by Firetrap, a radical men's fashion label. "That is one of their jackets," she said, drawing attention to a street-credible anorak hanging on the wall.

In fact this show started months ago, when lots of people paid the company £10 to kidnap them. On the registration form there were optional extras, including interrogation for £10, verbal abuse for £3 and being kept in their underwear for £1.50. Strangely, Blast Theory also offered Continental breakfast for £6 and full "secretarial support, including letters typed, faxes, Post-It notes provided" in case they kidnapped an achiever.

On Wednesday they kidnapped a talkative Australian woman called Deborah and a young fellow called Russell, who were both driven off with bags on their head and locked in a safe house for 48 hours. In a strenuous tribute to the stiff upper lip, they made small talk for 12 hours, whereupon the kidnapers finally lost patience and burst in to force-feed them pizzas.

Although a historic theatre moment, the event was marred by technical problems. We could see Deborah and Russell sprawled on the floor, but it was impossible to make out what they were saying. This made things rather boring, so we were encouraged to look at the on-line dialogue page, in which a German called Yet spent all day insisting that they be tied up.

Helen said that, in this drama, ordinary people become the actors and the plot consists of watching their relationship develop. "I hope they fall in love and it will become a romantic drama," Helen said.

On the face of it, full-blown romance seemed unlikely with everybody watching on the World Wide Web, but the people at Blast Theory thought otherwise. At their last show in Berlin, they set up a camera in a room full of wigs, masks and pistols, with a viewing screen next door. People entered the first room knowing that others were watching, and there was no evidence of inhibition. The show ended with a woman dancing naked, bar a wolf mask, while being held at gunpoint by her friend. It certainly knocks spots off *Starlight Express*.