

Suspension of disbelief at kidnap for art's sake

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YOU could call it the world's first kidnap, though as it is people rather than paintings who are being stolen away there are many who would query the stunt's right to use the word "art" at all. Nevertheless, a controversial theatre company, Blast Theory, will today kidnap two members of the public and hold them in a life house for 48 hours.

The victims have been chosen from the 300 who signed up to take part in the "game" - and paid £10 a head for the privilege - and the interaction between the victims and their captors will be filmed and broadcast on the internet for the world to see. The only information Blast Theory will give as to their intended targets are that they are a woman from West London and a male teenager from Essex.

The nine Philippine students freed by Muslim rebels earlier this week after a 72-hour kidnap ordeal probably won't be tuning in to the internet broadcast; neither will Brian Keenan, John McCarthy, Terry Waite or the parents of Camilla Carr and Jon James, the British charity workers snatched in Chechnya almost exactly a year ago. They, like many others, will turn their backs on an act many see as pathetic and empty; or perhaps raise their voices against it, as the Lazy Lamplugh Trust did when it

branded the project "a blatant attempt to glamorise kidnapping".

Matt Adams, a director of Blast Theory, which was formed in 1991, has denied that the company is setting out to offend kidnap victims. However he does agree that the project flirts with what he calls "kidnap chic". Despite the furor surrounding the project, however, London's trendy Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) is screening the entire broadcast in its new media centre. Meanwhile, the project has received sponsorship from clothes company, Firetrap, and an established London public relations company has been handling the publicity side of the stunt. In fact, drumming up would be a more appropriate phrase as few people outside the world of performance art had even heard of Blast Theory before the project began a year ago.

The 300 or so recruits were initially attracted to cheaply made commercials for the stunt shown in London cinemas accompanied by a voice asking: "Have you ever wanted to be on your own for a while? Let someone else take control." Interested parties were to ring an 0800 telephone number and then pay a £10 registration fee. For that they had the chance to be one of ten people placed under surveillance - which meant they would be photographed, have the pictures sent to

them and then, possibly, kidnapped. The ten have been under surveillance since 16 June when their names were drawn out of a hat in Manchester.

Today, the dream/nightmare will come true for two of that number. They can choose to have their captors dressed as Nazis, New York policemen or clowns and there are added extras they can pre-order on top of the basic kidnap package. These range from being fed jam doughnuts (40p a pop) to verbal abuse (£3), full-on interrogation (£9) or a copy of Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling* (£16). Other fringe benefits include a story at bedtime and a massage. Anyone who manages to escape receives £500.

Legal forms will have been signed prior to the snatch and code words worked out which will allow the victims to walk away from the stunt at any time. Otherwise they will be delivered to the ICA at 10am on Friday for a press conference at which they will talk about their experience. Secrecy is necessary for another reason: it is a hair's breadth short of illegal. Even though the two victims have given prior consent, English law states that you cannot consent to a crime which is committed against you. That law has been used to convict masochists who have consented to acts which amount to assault and have done so



Blessed release: Terry Waite, left, and John McCarthy, the former Beirut hostages, with Diane Wells, mother of Paul, still held by Kashmiri separatists

in the privacy of their own homes. Added complications involving our own legal system meant the project was not even open to those living in Scotland. Thank heaven for small mercies.

Quite what the participants will get from the whole experience of being snatched in broad daylight is hard to fathom (unless, of course, they are practising masochists themselves).

Blast Theory plans to provide internet viewers with a sort of real, unscripted piece of theatre. "Will the

victims fall in love or fight?" says the Kidnap Project press release, as if this is some saccharine Hollywood movie. It's hard to be romantic through two inches of gaffer tape, so a bit of sobbing and an outbreak of cards seems a more likely outcome. The chances are it won't make for riveting viewing.

For many people the stunt smacks not of a daring and relevant artwork, but of the dark memory of human rights abuse in many countries such as Argentina, Chile and, more recently, Iraq and Algeria. Organisa-

tions such as the Missing Persons Helpline have warned of the trauma the victims may feel, even though kidnapping is not real.

It is not known whether or not two bedraggled-looking fools will be presented to the media. Friday morning have or haven't vested £16 in a copy of Brian Keenan's book. What is certain that if they had just paid £7.99 to read it before they even thought of applying for the Kidnap Project they would have learned all they needed (or wanted) to know about being locked up in a room.

And if their captors had done the same maybe they would have learned that being denied liberty isn't about art, or theatre, or television installations in the antiseptic whitewashed rooms of trendy London galleries. It is about facing a long dark night, with no hope of sunrise.