

13TH JULY 1998

FOR WOMEN WHO KNOW WHERE THEY'RE GOING

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TM

BATTERED BUT UNBEATEN

Assault victims and the fight for justice

DOMINIC TAYLOR

Cindy Beale's screen lover on life outside Walford

HOSTAGES TO FANTASY

People who pay to be kidnapped

THE CREAM OF THE CAPITAL'S JOBS

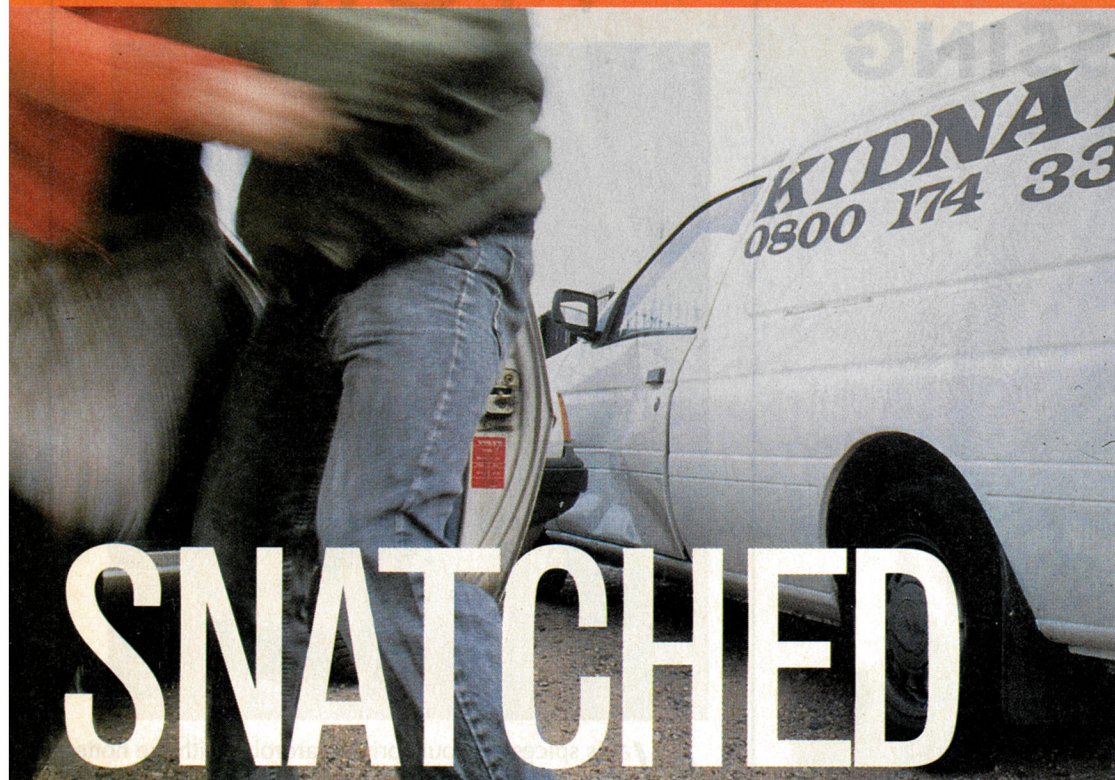
Lofty living

Upwardly mobile in the heart of the capital

CINEMA DINING OUT BOOKS SHOPPING REALITY

UNUSUAL PURSUITS

What sort of person applies to be kidnapped for the entertainment of others? Kate Hilpern investigates a bizarre new interactive theatre production



IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

“Wish you could get away from it all for a couple of days? Imagine all your responsibilities

disappearing for 48 hours. The bills dropping unopened on the mat, the phone remaining unanswered and you leaving the rat-race behind. An appealing advert and one that you might well have seen on your way to work during the last few months. And if you didn't read the small print, the image you probably conjured up was of a luxurious hotel or a desert island or, at least, a place where all stress could be left behind. But stress is, in fact, an integral part of this particular getaway package. The advert is an invitation to be kidnapped. Yes, you can actually apply to be bundled into a van by a bunch of people in balaclavas, and locked in a room with a complete stranger for two days. Optional extras include verbal abuse, no bedding and interrogation.

What's more, over 300 people in England and Wales have signed

up. Having paid their registration fee of £10 to the Kidnap project, these entrants actually spent valuable time hoping to be the 10 people randomly shortlisted last month.

Those who were picked were put under strict surveillance, just as they would be in a real-life scenario (although this only became apparent to them when they received a brown paper envelope in the post containing photos of them going about their daily lives).

The next step was a second lottery in which two of the 10 finalists were selected – again at random. On Wednesday this week, those very same people (with one or two back-ups, just in case it all goes horribly wrong), will be snatched off the street and whisked away to a safe house in a secret location. And, depending on the boxes they ticked on the registration form, their kidnappers may be Nazis, New York cops or clowns. Other options which apply once you're in the safe house include being kept in underwear and allowed only one phone call, a

story at bedtime, one piece of music and a set of juggling balls. If the two volunteers – who will be kept in the same room – manage to escape before the 48 hours expires, they'll win £500.

But surely the money can't be the only motive; £500 seems a miserly substitute for two days of deprivation, and the security is so well planned that any breakout will be almost impossible. Indeed, the 48 hours will be constantly monitored, using concealed video and audio equipment, the results of which can not only be watched by the kidnappers, but also by any member of the public on the Kidnap website.

Blast Theory, the radical theatre group that set up the project, is quick to agree that money isn't really the issue. “What we are doing is an exciting experiment in interactive theatre, rather than setting up any kind of competition,” explains Blast Theory's Ju Row Farr. “It's a chance for two members of our Internet audience to actually become the actors, and loads of people fancy being Robert De Niro for a couple of days. What makes it even more appealing is that for everyone involved – whether it is as the

kidnappers, hostages or the audience watching on the Internet – the ending is uncertain. And that is one of the main reasons that this project appeals to people; it's a chance to interrupt the pattern of everyday life with something unpredictable. No-one knows how being kidnapped is going to affect them, but everyone comes out of a kidnap changed in some way.

Although initially it seems impossible to conceptualise the Kidnap project as anything as conventional as ‘theatre’, when you think about it, this is fiction and there are directors, actors and an audience. The very act of people-watching turns it into a performance, stresses Blast Theory. Once you've got your head around that, it starts to become clear why people might want to register. One entrant who wishes to remain nameless explains: “Think how much more exciting this is than going to your local playhouse. You get the chance of starring as the main lead and, even if you don't, the whole event is so profound. Once you've given someone permission to kidnap you, walking down the street will never be the same. It's so thought-provoking.”

But some organisations are not so sure. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, set up to draw attention to the dangers facing women working alone after the disappearance of the 25-year-old estate agent, is shocked and outraged. Condemning it as a blatant attempt to glamorise kidnapping, the Trust had this to say: “Kidnapping is extremely serious and it is very dangerous to make it seem appealing in any way. For one thing, you never know whether someone will decide to copycat the scenario.”

Indeed, in the last decade alone, there has been a 700 per cent increase in kidnappings. And Matt Adams, a director of Blast Theory, has already expressed some concern about receiving word from an ex-SAS soldier determined to take “us arty types down a peg or two and show us what a real kidnap is like.” Nevertheless, the group rigorously defends the Trust's allegation; claiming films like *A Life Less Ordinary* play a far bigger part in putting a gloss on the idea of kidnap – and yet nobody seems to criticise the film producers.

In addition, claims the Trust: “You can never really know how you are

going to deal emotionally in a situation like that, and with all the preparation in the world, Blast Theory can't be sure they will be able to cope with extreme responses of volunteers.” And this, of course, is the most contentious aspect of the entire project. How can you be sure of creating a truly safe environment for the players?

Ju Row Farr explains: “I'm trained in first aid and will be there the whole time, as will a psychologist. Additionally, we made sure there were clear questions about phobias, allergies and medical conditions on the form. But, more importantly, the participants are able to walk away from the kidnapping at any point by just quoting a pre-agreed ‘safe word’.”

All very well, but is that enough in terms of the law? “We are quite nervous about that side of it,” admits Row Farr. The law is very ambiguous about the extent to which a person is allowed to have physical harm done to them. It does seem that, in England, you

next-of-kin or whoever you want contacted when you're kidnapped. We also insisted that employers were warned. So theoretically, there won't be a need for friends or relatives to worry.”

Also on the application form were instructions to tick any of the following: “This scares me but I've got to do it...” “you'll never catch me, I'm far too good for you”... and most worryingly of all, “I fantasise about being kidnapped.” So isn't Blast Theory at all perturbed by the possibility that sexual deviants or the mentally unstable will be attracted? Its 0800 number had one caller who just said: “Do you sexually interfere with your victims?” then hung up. Row Farr shrugs. “The entry form included a clause obliging participants to provide certificates of mental health, so I suppose that is something.”

Blast Theory has a history of ground-breaking work – and, equally, of questionable taste, some might say. During their production of *Gunman Kill Three*, members of

KIDNAPPERS CAN BE NAZIS, NEW YORK

COPS OR CLOWNS. EXTRAS INCLUDE

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can't consent to a crime that is perpetrated against you. Just look at the Spanner trial, during which consenting sadomasochists were found guilty of committing illegal acts.” But apart from worrying the group, the legal aspect is also part of the attraction to the project. “I suppose Kidnap is one way of highlighting the fact that people in this country can't legally say, ‘yes, I want to have a surprise weekend away’. It's ridiculous.”

The National Missing Persons Helpline is another group showing some concern: “We urge anyone who is attracted to the scheme to think seriously about the possible distress it could cause. Whether someone is missing for 48 hours or 48 years, the effect on everyone involved can be extremely upsetting,” says Sophie Woodforde. But Blast Theory think they have it covered. Says Row Farr: “On the entry form, you had to fill out the name and address of a

the audience were asked to fire a gun at point-blank range at members of the cast. In *Invisible Bullets*, a murder was reconstructed over and over again. And in the most recent production of *Something American*, a New York cop detailed his sexual fantasies whilst playing videos of his top-five favourite Hollywood explosions.

Hardly surprising, then, that Blast Theory claims it is quite used to being treated by the media as wacky. “If you insist on putting your head in the lion's mouth, you have to expect the odd scratch,” says Matt Adams. Depending on what happens in the Kidnap safe house this week, it's possible that this particular scratch might bleed. But Blast Theory would probably just say that that's half the fun.

● Kidnap will be on the Internet this Wednesday on www.newmediacentre.com/kidnap/