

# Captivated by kidnapping

Aleks Sierz on recent London performance by Blast Theory, Improbable Theatre and Station House Opera

On the television, a handcuffed and hooded woman begs her kidnapper for mercy. No, it's not a film, it's an official police reconstruction of a real event. As the British media debates the ethics of using dramatised life stories as entertainment, one performance group has investigated our fascination with random acts of terror by staging a consensual kidnap. Judging by the media coverage, *Kidnap* by Blast Theory has been one of the most talked about performance events of the year. During the summer, the group used a short cinema film and newspaper arts pages to advertise their project. Volunteers were invited to fill in a form to qualify for abduction.

Along with legal immunity and questions about allergies and next of kin, people were asked to specify what kind of kidnap they desired: "leftist revolutionary kidnapped by secret services"; "kept in underwear"; "verbal abuse"; plus more cuddly options such as "bedtime story" and "jam doughnut." To be on the hitlist, about 200 people paid the £10 registration fee—on June 12, 10 were selected at random and put under surveillance. At this point, says Blast Theory's Matt Adams, things got spooky. "The stress of spying on people meant we barely slept. It was very weird. I found the whole experience very affecting and emotionally draining." Those under surveillance were unaware of being watched until they received a photograph of themselves.

Next, 2 names were picked at random from the shortlist. On July 15/16, Debra Burgess, 27, and Russell Ward, 19, were seized and bundled off "to a completely secret location." "To this day," says Adams, "they don't know where they were held. The next three days were a slightly psychotic episode in which we had to play this double act: on the one hand, we had to fulfil a fantasy image of firm and harsh kidnappers, on

the other, we were incredibly careful about their well-being."

Both cruel and caring, Blast Theory kept Burgess and Ward under constant video surveillance. "We had a psychologist on hand and we worried all the time about how they were coping." The Kidnap Project website kept the wider world informed about the event. After 72 hours, the two dazed but healthy hostages were released at London's ICA. What was it like? Debra Burgess, who lived in Melbourne before coming to temp in London, says: "It was very emotional. The room was really small and I paced up and down a lot. Much nervous energy. I was alone for the first day and had so much time to think about my life. When I was allowed to see the kidnappers at the end it was bizarre—they were the only people I could share this experience with. At the end, the press conference was nerve-racking."

After hours alone or imprisoned with her fellow hostage, she suddenly found herself "in a room full of journalists who completely misunderstood the event—they were looking for psycho-sexual motives and missed the element of audience participation. It felt so surreal—then when I was free and walked down the road I just wanted to tell people: 'You have no idea what sort of experience I have just had.'"

For Blast Theory, *Kidnap* "evolved from a conventional theatre piece called *Succumbing*, which explored the impulse to give up control to other people," says Adams. A heavy emotional content has always been part of the group's activity. In *Gummen Kill Three*, their first show in 1991, audience members were given the chance to fire a gun point blank at nude cast members. "The audience is a key figure," says Adams. "Kidnap is a daily presence in our society—but it's always experienced at a distance. In the project, we tried to break down

that distance." Publicity was easy because "it was a very media-friendly idea—in fact both Burgess and Ward heard about it through the press. They were ordinary punters—not arty types." Blast Theory attracted some adverse publicity from victim-support groups, who criticised their "light-hearted approach", but stress that "there are many different kinds of kidnap: people kidnap each other for their birthdays, even *101 Dalmatians* is a kidnap story." While the group learned a lot about the logistics of kidnapping, they also gained a lot from the event being playful. In September, the video of the Kidnap Project is showing at Manchester's Green Room.

If Blast Theory have moved away from venues, Improbable Theatre have found that people are more important than locations. The group—which was formed in 1996 by Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson and Julian Crouch—toured *Lifegame*, in which different invited guests are interviewed about their life and scenes from it are recreated on stage. While some guests were big names—actress Joanna Lumley and West Yorkshire Playhouse director Jude Kelly—others were not. When I saw *Lifegame* at London's Purcell Room, the guest was Phil Clarke, who works in the media. At the start, he summed up his experience: "Life is unfair." By the end of the evening, the truth that emerged was that "life is fair enough." Based on an idea by impro-guru Keith Johnstone, *Lifegame* is a memory-fest: embarrassments at school, teenage love, and parental conflicts all emerge despite the cosy talkshow format. Simpson says: "We decided to do a totally spontaneous show where what happens is completely in the hands of the guest—it's a leap of faith."

Watching Improbable Theatre's mix of naff impro and highly emotional recall—when Clarke's life suddenly reminded you of your

own—feels like group therapy. But live theatre has its surprises. At one point, an audience member ran out, vomited profusely at the exit, and left. As the rest of us edged away from the stink, the actors kept a grip on the situation, enacting an emotional scene from Clarke's life and proving that every person's story is special.

Site specific work can also turn the humdrum into magic. Using the balconies of Bow's Old Fire Station in East London, Station House Opera performed *Snakes and Ladders*, a "three-dimensional sculpture with performers, lights, video images and ladders." Formed in 1980, the group produce highly visual and evocative work in locations such as Brooklyn Bridge, Dresden's Frauenkirche and Salisbury Cathedral.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, the everyday acts of individuals are played out, parodied, repeated on video. Incidents become increasingly ridiculous as doubles of the actors mimic their every action. But while the doppelgangers can easily transport themselves around the building, even moving into space, the actors are impeded by gravity and vertigo. As director Julian Maynard says: "This is a celebration of a building (which has just been converted into artists' studios). It is also about the way we identify with particular spaces—any place can be both deeply personal and full of ghosts. How many people have lived in your house, woken up in your bedroom and washed in your bathroom?"

In different ways, all 3 productions illustrate the sheer diversity of groups in Britain (especially those set up in the 1990s). But problems remain. Blast Theory found that the Arts Council rejected its bid for *Kidnap* funding. Instead, Firetrap, a hip clothing company, gave them £12,000 for the project. With sponsors, who says that crime doesn't pay?

*Kidnap*, Blast Theory, unknown location, July 15 - 16, website: [www.newmediacentre.com](http://www.newmediacentre.com); *Lifegame*, Improbable Theatre, directed by Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson, Lyric Hammersmith, London, June 23 - 27 (plus tour); *Snakes and Ladders*, directed by Julian Maynard Smith, Station House Opera, Bow's Old Fire Station, May 27 - 31