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Drama group finds captive audience ready

By Nigel Reynolds, Arts Correspondent

AN experimental theatre company is to kidnap two members of the public off the streets, keep them hostage for 48 hours, verbally abuse them and deprive them of most comforts — all in the name of performance art and in the quest for novelty.

Hidden cameras at a “safe house” will relay live pictures of the hostages’ ordeal on the Internet and to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.

Surprisingly, almost 400 people have volunteered as victims. The theatre company, Blast Theory, has been refused an Arts Council grant for the “project” and has raised £35,000 to cover costs. It has also had to engage lawyers to advise on the legality of the exercise. Qualified psychologists will be on hand in case the victims become agitated.

The “project” will test Kipling’s question “It’s clever, but is it art?”

Volunteers will pay £10 to register to become a hostage. Blast Theory will pick 10 “winners” at random and put them under surveillance. All 10 will be advised that they may be the successful volunteers.

On July 15 two of the 10 will again be picked at random and two seven-strong

“snatch squads” will grab them. Each “squad” will be made up of actors in balaclavas, a psychologist and “a liaison officer” to tell the public and police that the kidnappings are theatre.

The victims will be blindfolded, bundled into vans and driven to a rented safe house. They will be thrown together in a room to see how they get on.

Only basic nourishment will be provided. But volunteers can, for extra payment only at the time of registration, choose luxuries.

Examples include 20 cigarettes (£4.50), massage and hot bath (£12) and a bedtime story (£10).

They can also choose and pay in advance for certain fantasies, including being kept naked (£1), having no bedding (£8), and have female kidnappers (£19).

Matt Adams, a director of Blast Theory, said: “On one level, it’s artistic, it’s a piece of pantomime.

“The other point is that it’s a very interesting psychological exercise.”

The “project” is launched publicly next week and Mr Adams said he expected more volunteers to add to the present 400. Those with 48 hours to spare can phone the company on 0800 174336.