

DAZED & CONFUSED

JUST KIDDING

BLAST THEORY KIDNAP

TEXT MARK SANDERS PHOTOGRAPHY JUSTIN WESTOVER & GREGORIO PAGLIARIO

It's 5.00am on an overcast Summer morning last July and I am waiting for instructions in some deserted side street near Tower Bridge. It's cold, wet and needless to say, uncomfortable. Even the pigeons seem less than happy with the approaching dawn as they scabble for a spontaneous breakfast of 'deceased' cake, portions of which lie splattered across the pavement in front. Milk floats glide by, their electronic hum vying for attention. Lone strangers eyeball me suspiciously and then scurry back across the road into the safety of the shadows from whence they came. Life has never seemed so theatrical, so staged. Slowly, silently, a white scout van pulls up next to my car, it's windows pasted over with torn out pages of *The Sun*. 'Beckham to apologise to the nation'.

And so it starts. The hunt is finally on.

From top left to right: Russell being kidnapped from Southend-On-Sea and then bundled into the back of the awaiting white scout van to be unceremoniously driven back to London and the security of the safe-house. Photographs Justin Westover



Once on the road the destination is 'revealed' as Southend-On-Sea. Our objective, to kidnap a young 19-year-old called Russell Ward who works at a 24-hour convenience store in an as yet undisclosed location somewhere on the outskirts of town. Looking at his photograph he seems much like any other run-of-the-mill teenager. Dressed casually in plain jeans and sporting a freshly cropped goatee beard, he wears a NOFX T-shirt with added sheep shagging motif emblazoned on the front, all the normal signs of an adolescent with a healthy rebellious streak. Or so you might think, but lurking behind these surface accoutrements lies a hidden agenda, a desire to be more than just your average teenager. Looking further it soon becomes apparent that Russell has decided to temporarily give up control over his life and place his future into the hands of an indiscriminate band of performing artists. He has, to put it bluntly, agreed in writing to become a willing guinea pig in an intricate experiment designed to test the nature and effects of a surreptitious kidnapping. He therefore, has only himself to blame for what is about to happen to him.

By 9.00am we finally arrive at our destination, a quiet, sleepy suburb a few miles from the coast. Parking my car strategically around the corner, I watch as the white scout van drives slowly around the block and eventually comes to a halt some distance up the road. Given further instructions via mobile phone, I am told that now we will just have to wait until our 'target' makes his appearance. For the last two weeks, he has been under surveillance. His daily routine noted, recorded and photographed. His every move annotated to the finest detail. One out of ten finalists chosen out of an estimated hundred or so original applicants, his name, along with one other, has now been chosen by the performance group Blast Theory to become the two 'living targets' who will eventually be snatched from their home towns and then held for 48 hours in a secret safe-house somewhere in the depths of London. Debra Burgess, a 27-year-old Australian receptionist for a N.H.S. hospital, has already been kidnapped the previous night whilst out boozing with friends. Russell meanwhile, remains conspicuously absent and in the early hours of this morning has already accosted one of the surveillance team and challenged him to reveal his identity. Things are beginning to look decidedly pear shaped and the entire operation may end up being aborted.

12.00pm and still no sign of Russell, indeed no sign of anything apart from the odd pensioner out for his morning stroll. By this time the boredom is beginning to take its toll and the situation has gone from bad to worst. The police, alerted by neighbours to a suspicious group of people hanging out in the street, have already passed by once. It is only a matter of minutes before they are back again. Now is the time for decisive action. Matt, a founding member of the group takes control and contacts a friend of the target, soliciting her assistance and arranging for someone to take up residence in the boot of her Volkswagen Polo. Then with bated breath they coast up the driveway towards the front entrance of the house. Within a few seconds Russell appears from the shadows and walks

calmly to the side of the car, jumping straight into the front seat only to have a bag pulled over his head, unceremoniously dragged from the car and bundled into the back of the awaiting van. The noise of tyres screeching on tarmac and the tell-tale whoosh of cameras flashing, only adding to the confusion of the scene. The operation had taken but a few minutes to complete yet over a month to come to fruition in its entirety.

Kidnap is the brain child of the aforementioned Matt Adams and Ju Row Farr, both founding members of the London based performance group Blast Theory. Heralded in cinema advertisements across the country and through a series of articles in daily newspapers, the project, sponsored by Firetrap Clothing, was unique in its 'open invitation' to any individual looking for; 'The most amazing experience of your life'. For the small entry fee of £10, members of the public were asked to take a gamble and enter into 'the lottery of life'. Even tongue-in-cheek modifications were taken into account. For an extra £1 applicants were given the opportunity of being held naked; for an extra £3 they could receive a never ending tirade of verbal abuse; for a further £10 a bed time story; £12 a massage and hot bath and the most expensive item on the list? A set of juggling balls for only £100 because, state the members of Blast Theory with dead-pan faces; "We hate jugglers".

With a hard-core group of four members and many more accomplices around the country, Blast Theory was formed back in 1991; 'In an attempt to make theatre more accountable to the modern desires of our audience'. Stemming from a club orientated background, the aim of its members was to openly attract visually literate people who are into live events but who somehow become alienated at the thought of traditional theatre. Tapping into the varied interests of their peer group, whether via music or film, fashion or street culture, Blast Theory committed themselves to dismantling the perception of theatre as a dead art form and superimpose a series of interactive and technological performances. In 1994 they staged a 60 minute promenade piece entitled *Stampede* in which a system of pressure pads allowed the audience to trigger the recordings of different mind control techniques throughout the event. In the same year, their installation *Invisible Bullets*, unravelled the media's obsession with 'reconstructed crime' by featuring images of exploding bullets, courtesy of a special effects company. *Kidnap* has been their most ambitious project date and gained more than its fair share of media attention over the past few months.

"One of the things that we always held as an ideal when we stated the group was that we would never be driven by the form of any particular work that we devised but rather that we would be only driven by the ideas that we wished to communicate", explains Matt. "In the first four or five years of making work our performances incorporated many elements of club culture but they were all fairly similar in approach so we decided to broaden our perspective and *Kidnap* became part of that process; an exploration of the nature of power and control. The appeals and pitfalls of that process and its relationship to some sort of



political dynamic. All of those ideas seemed to coalesce in an instant around this idea of offering people the chance to actually be kidnapped. Right from the start we decided that it was essential to make use of each individual participation within that process".

And in the days that followed that participation began to be taken very seriously, with not a stone left unturned in their search to recreate the perfect kidnap heist. But hidden within this energetic role playing and often slap-stick, Ealing comedy style approach towards their hostages, Blast Theory's deliberate appraisal of kidnapping touches a raw, collective nerve. In the build up to the event various calls were taken at the Blast Theory offices, criticising their actions as beneath contempt. Official agencies such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and The Missing Persons Helpline both issued statements condemning the performance from the start. A *Sunday Times* journalist even quoted a representative of the latter charity as saying; 'If there was an ad in Time Out asking for people to take part in a rape, we'd all be up in arms.' Matt Adams considers such criticism to be rooted in their critics inability to separate fact from fiction.

"I think it's important to put on the record that I understand that some people will be upset by this and I'm not blasé about that at all", he explains. "The one criticism that I have most respect for has been from someone who was kidnapped, who rang up to say; 'Look, I really believe that what you are doing is trivialising my experience and that you don't have the right to take something that was deeply traumatic to me and turn it into entertainment.' But through talking to him on the phone for three quarters of an hour and explaining what we hoped to achieve through our actions, I think he felt that although he might not necessarily support what we were doing, he at least understood our reasons and felt that they had some integrity. After all, you don't have to have first hand experience of something in order to have something to say about it."

Kidnapping, or the taking of hostages for political or capital ransom is a definitely a modern epidemic that is fast spiralling out of control. As ancient as it is simple to execute, there are now some parts of the world where it has become a daily fact of life. Back in 1874, the kidnapping of four-year-old Charley Ross in the USA sparked off a national controversy in the Union, yet as late as 1900 kidnapers of renown such as Pat Crowe were still able to wantonly extort money through hostage taking and then escape prosecution because the state of Nebraska had no laws to cover the crime. Even the mention of the word itself

the national budgets of the F.B.I. and the US police force combined.

In comparison to such figures, Blast Theory's exercise into the nature and effects of kidnapping may seem but a flippant form of entertainment yet as a look into the psychological consequences to both the kidnapper and the hostage, it has some undeniably interesting things to say. Held in a chip-board square box, approximately 9ft x 9ft, in a safe-house somewhere in London - described by Russell after his release as being; "A little like a hamster in a cardboard box, only marginally better" - their hostages are kept under a constant 24 hour watch. In the corner of the room stands a CCTV camera, footage from which was fed live onto a specially designed web-site and then posted onto the internet. At specific times people from all over the world are able to control the camera and hone in on the captives. At other times access is restricted to The Green Room in Manchester and London's ICA. "Often people look at the door", reflects Ju, who has now stood watch over the couple for the last 8 hours. "If it's opened and someone goes in they'll move the camera up and down and try and see the crack in the door. Details like what we're feeding them are of particular interest, the camera always zooms in close to find out what we're cooking or if there is any chance for escape".

Over the ensuing 48 hours both hostages are put through their paces. Without watches and no sign of daylight, their ability to judge time has been severely impaired. Throughout the course of their captivity they are thrown together into situations that neither of them could possibly have envisaged. At one stage only Debra is given any bedding, then Russell is denied his allocation of food until later on in the evening. Both in high spirits, they deal with such inconveniences with little difficulty. By the second day, they are both a lot more tired although still joking about their experiences. Matt decides to up the ante and try a little mind fuck. Turning off the lights completely, both are left in total darkness.

"We wanted to give them two different experiences to see how they would relate so we turned off the lights in their holding cell and separated them both", explains Ju. "Russell, who thought that he was alone in the room, stood up and started to feel his way around the walls. Then one of us suddenly whispered his name right next to his ear. He nearly jumped out of his skin, poor thing. After that we decided to give a little balance to the proceedings by asking Russell to lie down whilst a kidnapper placed his hand on his heart to feel how fast it was going. He then placed Russell's hand on his own heart as if to say that they were both human and to show that the kidnapper's heart may indeed be beating faster than his

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THE MISSING PERSONS HELPLINE

engenders a set of filmic memories of the likes of Barbara Mackle, who in 1968 was kept alive for 83 hours in an underground capsule before finally being rescued by the authorities. Yet still, out of all the kidnappings that remain the most talked about, it is undoubtedly the spate of political hostage taking of the '60s, '70s and '80s that fired the public imagination the most. From the deliberate snatching of Patty Hearst, kidnapped and brainwashed by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1973, to the Red Army Faction's use of Schleyer as a marketing tool in Germany in the same decade, to the first hand account of Beirut hostage Brian Keenan of his four-and-a-half year ordeal at the hands of the Shi'ite militia, the connection or interconnection of the media to the political kidnap is hard to ignore.

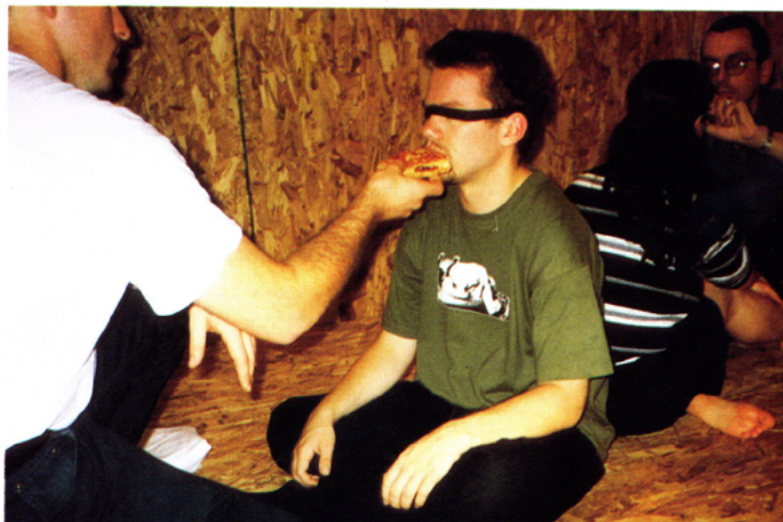
"I think it was the political side of kidnapping that has always interested us more", explains Matt. "Certainly situations like Aldo Moro, the Italian President of the Christian Democrats, is an absolutely classic case where the whole kidnap was played out through the media to the point that there was a sense in which the media was helping to drive the agenda as well as reflect the day-by-day events as they unravelled. That's a classic case, where media bosses (such as Berlusconi) used their influence to effect the outcome to fit their own political needs. Conversely, groups like the Red Army Faction in Germany used the media as a superb tool and turned their kidnapping of Schleyer into a massive propaganda coup by focusing on his SS past and revealing the way in which he seamlessly moved from the SS into the upper echelons of German democratic life. There is an example of a political kidnapping that used the media to great effect to attack the hypocrisy at the heart of German society".

Yet as political kidnappings have decreased over the last decade due to government policy of refusing to pay any ransom demands, kidnappings of private individuals have increased dramatically. Over the past 20 years, multinationals have quietly paid out at least a billion dollars in ransom for kidnapped executives, and the numbers are growing each year. One in three kidnappings go unreported. In some countries ransoms of \$5 million are not uncommon, in fact kidnapers recently got \$30 million for the return of a Mexican banker. In Colombia some companies even pay money to the drug syndicates and revolutionary guerrilla armies in advance to safe-guard against possible kidnappings of the future. For \$60,000 per top executive, a bank can guarantee its immunity from million dollar ransoms and the kidnapers don't even have to lift a finger. In fact so incredible are the prices that can be gleaned from a well executed kidnapping that an entire industry has been built up to service the phenomena. Americans alone now spend more on personal security than

hostage, even though he was supposedly the one in overall control".

Matt joins in; "It's that voyeuristic, slightly distant view of the jailer. It's almost like the panoptic society in perfection, to the point where you're putting the food into a person's mouth and you can see their lip trembling slightly, they're nervous of the fact that you're doing that to them and you're aware that a human being is six inches away from you and they're scared of you because of the situation that they're in. And that instantly humanises them again. And so there is that tension between those two states, of it being not quite a joke, of it being a process akin to metaphorically putting a large spike in their ear and wiggling it about and so running the risk of doing serious damage to them with the tiniest of movements. It all seems very real".

In contrast, Russell describes how one such "mind fuck" effected him on the last morning of their captivity; "Sometime early this morning, I don't know what time it was, there was a knock on the door and so we put our bags over our heads. Four or five people came into the



"If there had been a question mark over whether it was 48 hours or two weeks or two months and then things would of course been very different. Both captives would have been a lot more down for a start", reflects the resident psychologist. "The end is in sight even before it's begun so the boundaries have been blurred somewhat. There are certain guidelines and assurances that make the whole process differ from a real life kidnap. The mental process is just so different. Also the fact that it's a self-selected sample. You don't select yourself to be kidnapped. In fact it's exactly the opposite, you are picked out which causes a sense of fear. Fear of not knowing how much danger you're actually in. It is just impossible to recreate those elements in a performance like this. Of course, if the boundaries get blurred enough then those question marks could arise in the minds of the participants but that is not really the purpose of this action"

So the question remains how far would *you* be willing to go? How would *you* react in a similar situation? As the starting point for the project as a whole, the question of control was always upmost in Blast Theory's minds, not to mention the voyeuristic control meted out by visitors to the internet website. The underling sado-masochist element to the whole exercise was hardly missed by all those who took part in the performance. Yet out of all the conclusions drawn by Blast Theory from this 'virtual' kidnap, the question of who's holding who hostage soon became the most apparant. "One thing that I've noticed from a lot of the kidnapping literature that I've read is that the people that are looking after the hostages are nearly always underlings of an organisation and so are basically stuck with a shitty job. Certainly in the Beirut kidnappings the guards were men who weren't fighters as such. They were often inexperienced youngsters who were, in effect, as



Finally on the morning of the 16th July, both hostages are released. Surrounded by representatives of the press at their drop off point outside the ICA, they look tired and disheveled although apparently none the worse for their ordeal. They even manage a slight smile. And their plans for the next 24 hours? "To shower and then sleep, in that order". The cameras stop flashing, the mics are turned off and they slowly walk away in search of rest and a bus back home.

Blast Theory are currently working on a future performance entitled 10 Backwards, a digital video disc that explores how the future is hindered by our perception of the present. A 30 minute short film of Kidnap, directed by John Hardwick and featuring extracts of the cpatives intheir wooden cell, will be screened at the Green Rooms in Manchester on the September 26 . Copies of this film will also be available from the Blast Theory offices at the Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6LS. Tel/Fax: 0171 375 0885. E-Mail blasttheory@easynet.co.uk Kidnap was sponsored by Firetrap Clothing

Right: Russell's application form, diligently filled out in black pen, above, clockwise from top left:



1 in. Please use block capitals.

ide of the form is full. If you do not fill it out in full your registration may be refused. Fill any box that does not apply with us if any of these details change. Registration is only open to those resident in England or Wales on 15th July 1998.

NAP is for you to have the most amazing experience of your life. Good luck.

NAME

RUSSELL WARD

HOME ADDRESS

10, WILSON STREET, BIRMINGHAM
 B15 2TT

FAX NUMBER

N/A

PHONE NUMBER

0121 455 1234

WORK ADDRESS

10, WILSON STREET, BIRMINGHAM
 B15 2TT

EMAIL ADDRESS

RUSS@WORLD.COM

DATE OF BIRTH

14/9/78

GENDER

MALE

HEIGHT

5'10"

EYE COLOUR

GREY/BLUE

HAIR COLOUR

BROWN

MARITAL STATUS

SINGLE

CLOTHES

describe the kind of clothes you regularly wear
 JEANS (GUESS), T-SHIRTS
 T-SHIRT OR SHORT

VEHICLES

describe any vehicles which you usually use
 RED PEUGEOT 405

TRANSPORT

how do you usually travel?
 CAR, FOOT

NEXT OF KIN

who should be informed if you are kidnapped?
 PARENTS

NEXT OF KIN 1 ADDRESS

MR JAMES WARD
 10, WILSON STREET, BIRMINGHAM
 B15 2TT

NEXT OF KIN'S PHONE NO

0121 455 1234

DINARY NEEDS

are you vegetarian, organ, etc.?

NO

PHOBIAS

do you have any particular fears or phobias?

NO

ALLERGIES

are you allergic to anything?

VERY HARD
PENICILLIN

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

do you have any illness or medical conditions?

NO

MEDICATION

do you take any medication on a regular basis?

NO

SAFWORD

If you wish to cancel your involvement in Kinase this is the word you will use. Quote this word at any time and you will be free to go.
 KEYXER 3026

SIGNATURE

I certify that I have read and understood all the Conditions of Participation (on page 2) and agree to abide by them. I have completed every section of the form on page 1 and enclose a current colour photograph of myself and a cheque for £25 made payable to Blast Theory
 Russell Ward

DATE

7/6/98

Please make your cheque payable to Blast Theory. Please put your cheque card number and its expiry date on the back. Send it with a recent photo of yourself and this registration form to Blast Theory, Townhere Studios, 20 Commercial St. London E1 6AS

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If you have identified about any part of this form contact Karel Thoenig at 011 777 0000 or email at k.thoenig@ecampus.ca