

HOSTAGE DRAMA THE THEATRE GROUP WHO KIDNAP YOU

THE EYE



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Kidnapped! And all in the name of art

PHOTOGRAPH: NEVILLE ELDER

A theatre company is offering you the chance to be spied on, imprisoned and generally abused for two days. **James Rampton** has the inside story

Most people's dream of getting away from it all centres on the Bounty Bar ad – deserted beaches and long cocktails with improbably exotic names. It doesn't usually involve being bundled into a van by people in balaclavas and locked in a room with a complete stranger for 48 hours.

But this is just what more than 300 people have signed up to do. "Kidnap", the latest left-field idea from the unorthodox theatre company Blast Theory, invites volunteers to pay a £10 registration fee. For that, they have the chance to be one of the 10 people put under surveillance; like errant politicians, they will only realise this is happening when they receive photographs of themselves in the post. From these entrants, two (un)lucky winners will be selected to be snatched off the street, taken prisoner for 48 hours in a safe house, and filmed interacting with each other in a locked room for live broadcast on the Internet.

For additional sums of money, you can embellish your fantasy kidnap with such *outré* extras as a copy of Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling* (£16), a massage and hot bath (£12), a jam doughnut (40p), or having your captors dressed as Nazis (£24), New York cops (£24) or clowns (£29). For a further financial consideration, you can be kept naked (£1), or pretend to be a leftist revolutionary kidnapped by the secret services (£30). You can even cough up £3 for the privilege of being verbally abused. And if you are determined to make it a truly nightmarish experience for all concerned, you can pay £100 for a set of juggling balls.

So exactly what connection does all this have with art? Doesn't it run the risk of being seen as the biggest fraud since the Emperor paraded around wearing nothing but a smile?

The Arts Council, for one, were not convinced that Kidnap was a project that merited funding. (Blast Theory eventually raised £35,000, largely from the clothing manufacturer Firetrap.)

Matt Adams, a director of Blast Theory, refuses to be photographed without his balaclava on and

describes himself as a "philosophical kidnapper". As you can imagine, he is well-versed in responding to sceptics. "Some people will hate it," he acknowledges. "Some of the media will treat it as a wacky story by performance-art nutters. But we're used to that – if you insist on putting your head into the lion's mouth, you have to expect the odd scratch.

"It's a matter of opinion whether Kidnap is or isn't art. But as far as we're concerned, point of view and context are crucially important. To me, a dead shark in a tank is a fantastic work of art, while to others it's an aquarium with less action.

"I see two people locked in a room together for 48 hours as our very own Pinter play – with the attendant risk that we have no control over the outcome. The framing of most theatre is deeply conservative, so whatever radicalism you see on stage, it still feels very familiar."

'They love the idea of entering the unknown. That's so rare in our lives'

You certainly can't say that about Kidnap.

"Also," Adams continues, "people will be able to log on to our Website and watch the action. The ICA in London and the Green Room in Manchester will have special Kidnap rooms [from where members of the public can e-mail the kidnappers]. The very act of people watching turns it into a performance. In effect, we're running a low-level cable television station for 48 hours."

Predictably, Kidnap has already lured more barkers than Battersea Dogs' Home (the £500 prize for successfully escaping is an added incentive). "You should hear our 0800 number," Adams laughs. "There's one man who phones up repeatedly to spell out his address in RAF call-signs. A lot of other people ring up very excitedly shouting, 'Please kid-

nap me now.' One anonymous caller said, 'Do you sexually interfere with your victims?' and hung up.

"There's plenty of time for more freaks to come out of the woodwork. The S & M community might have a strong interest, and I don't have a problem with that. I'm more worried about getting an ex-SAS soldier determined to take us arty types down a peg or two and show us what a real kidnap is like."

But most volunteers, Adams claims, are not so extreme; they are merely attracted by the idea of being plucked from daily life and having every responsibility taken away from them for 48 hours. "They also love the idea of entering the unknown – that's so rare in our lives. Everyone who's registered will now look at life through slightly different eyes."

This is all very well, but it doesn't answer the obvious question of taste. The police have already been called, "truncheons drawn", to a mock-kidnap that Blast Theory set up for television news.

Adams admits that the company is "flirting with kidnap chic", but doesn't think it is being dismissive of the horror of real kidnaps. "I don't see this as any different from a straight play about a kidnap or paintball games. They all have the potential to upset someone with experience of the real thing, but those are not grounds to consider it inappropriate. We're anxious not to add to the misery of anyone's life – which is why we've made Kidnap light-hearted. We haven't tried to present ourselves as sinister art mafiosi."

Light-hearted or not, the project still aims to throw up serious issues. "The main aspect of it that fascinates me," says Adams, "is the idea of the symbiotic relationship between the kidnapper and the victim [one manifestation of which is the Stockholm Syndrome, where the captives start to empathise with the captors]. We're aware that a kidnap is a deeply traumatic experience, but it does give you time to reassess your life, and it can fundamentally alter your sense of self. Everyone comes out of a kidnap changed."



Kidnap chic: 'Kidnap is a deeply traumatic experience, but it does give you time to reassess your life,' says Matt Adams of Blast Theory

Adams, it seems, has spent much of the year preparing this project in the company of lawyers. The firm of Harbottle & Lewis have been wrangling all over the registration documents for Kidnap. Each entrant will have a "safeword" they can use at any time if they wish to be released (a practice commonly used during S & M). A psychologist, a St John's Ambulance person and a liaison officer, who will explain what's going on to the police and passers-by, will be on hand throughout the 48 hours.

"We eventually took out several options that involved excessive physical contact," Adams reveals. "One of the original options was for the win-

ner to be tied up – but that was deemed too intrusive.

"The key issue has been: can you consent to a crime that is perpetrated against you? The precedent in English law is that you can't – look at the Spanner trial [in which consenting sado-masochists were found guilty of committing illegal acts]. I believe that is a disgusting abuse of civil liberties – when your own body is not yours to do what you want with."

That still does not offer a full explanation as to what on earth would possess someone to sign up for this project. For that, I turned to Roger Plant, a 66-year-old retired investment manager who has enthu-

siastically registered to be kidnapped. "I have been to a number of Blast Theory's performances," says Plant, "and they are good at making you re-think suppositions and re-examine yourself. As Plato said, 'Know thyself.'"

"A common theme – which is serious and not sensationalist – is their investigation of how a habit of violence gets transmitted from people who are violent to those to whom violence is done.

"I see red when politicians say, 'We must understand the victim but not the criminal.' So often the criminal has been a victim, too – as the recent book about Mary Bell by Gitta Sereny underlines. So many

paedophiles were themselves abused when young.

"Blast Theory are examining the relationship between the persecutor and the persecuted, and the extent to which the kidnapped person sets the agenda. I want to examine how far I will defend myself by attacking my kidnappers. Will I take on their characteristics?" He pauses, before adding with a laugh: "I hope I don't end up kicking them in the groin."

It would make for good theatre, though.

You can register for Kidnap on 0800 174336 (closing date 12 June). Kidnap will take place from 15 to 17 July.