

THE SUNDAY TIMES

CULTURE

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11



**This man
was snatched
from his desk,
blindfolded,
trussed up
and held
in a cell
overnight.
Terrorist
outrage?
No, it's
the latest
'theatre
project' at
the ICA**

PLUS BRITAIN'S BEST 7-DAY TV AND RADIO GUIDE

The theatre of cruelty

The kidnap, when it came, took me by surprise. I was in an LBC radio studio, talking on-air, when the gang burst through the door, covered my head in a bag and dragged me out of the room. As they hustled me down the corridors, I could hear Steve Allen, the presenter, expressing horrified concern. I couldn't see where we were going, but I guessed it was to the car park, as I could smell exhaust fumes. They bundled me into the back of a vehicle, holding my head to the floor and telling me to stay quiet. I was having trouble breathing.

After rattling through the streets of London in the back of a van, I was hustled, shoeless and with my arms in a lock, through a building and thrust to my knees on a cushion. They told me I was under video surveillance, and if I did anything wrong they would take action. I could take the bag off my head when they left, but I was to put it on again if I heard a key in the lock. They told me to lie on my face until they left the room. Then they left.

I had always known I was going to be kidnapped on June 18. I had arranged it with the theatre company Blast Theory weeks ago. Blast Theory plan to snatch two members of the public, for 48 hours, on July 15. Each victim will be under round-the-clock video surveillance during their ordeal, and you can log on to the Internet to see the camera view throughout the kidnap. If you're in London, you can go to the ICA, where Blast Theory will run the whole operation from a control room. You will be able to move the surveillance camera around a bit, if the victim is trying to hide.

The snatchees have agreed to let this happen, of course. Two hundred people paid a sign-up fee of £10 to be considered as one of the lucky two. Well, lucky isn't quite the word I'd use. This takes Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty to its logical extreme.

Being kidnapped has a strange potency in our society. Street crime or terrorist bombs constitute a greater threat to our safety, but there is something about the longevity of a kidnap, about the organisation of it, about the psychological games and asset-stripping of your personality while completely in someone else's power that makes kidnapping seem especially horrific. Like children anticipating an invasion by aliens, most of us have wondered how we would behave. Would we bravely chat to the kidnappers? Would we resist? Would we sympathise with them? Would we survive? What would you do, lying face down in a strange room with a pillow-case over your head, as you heard the door lock behind you?

I removed the hood and looked around the room. It was divided in two by a small screen, which could give me privacy from the camera if I wanted. I waited. Nothing happened. I waited and waited. I became bored. They'd removed my watch and I had no idea what time it was. This began to bug me, but at least there was a window, so I knew it was the afternoon. I was even quite cheerful, despite having nothing to do. I decided to try to escape, to stay in the spirit of the thing, so I worked loose a table leg. It looked tiny, so I turned my attentions to a lead pipe on the wall. After pulling at it for a while, I was shocked when it suddenly sprang a leak and began to pour water onto an electric wire.

cover story

Two volunteers will be kidnapped on July 15 as part of an ICA project and their ordeal will be screened on the Internet. On a trial run, STEPHEN ARMSTRONG found his own captivity chillingly uncool

At this point, I felt like a schoolboy waiting to see the headmaster. This was breaking the rules, and I didn't know what they'd do to me. Calling for the guards, I donned my hood and felt their fury when they saw what I'd done. My hands were bound behind my back in a leather strap and I was rushed to another room, where I was forced to kneel for ages, then dragged to my feet and told to stand. I could hear people around me, banging and crashing metal. My legs were tired, and I felt I couldn't stand any more. I knew they were



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angry, but I didn't know what they were going to do.

The experience wasn't quite panning out as I had expected. It had seemed quite fun when I'd started out. I was planning on a bit of rough and tumble, 24 hours of a new experience and then I'd be down the pub, impressing my mates with tales of derring-do. Now I was in severe trouble with a bunch of people who had strapped my arms behind my back and could, quite possibly, be complete nutters. I had to hold down the rapidly developing symptoms of a panic attack.

Finally, they let me sit on an adjustable office chair, where I waited, hearing them rustle around me and feeling them snatch objects out of the path of my feet. If I had to spend the next 20 hours here, I'd be in terrible pain, as I couldn't sit comfortably on the chair. My shoulders ached and my nose

itched, but my captors didn't respond when I tried to speak to them. Suddenly, I was rushed into a lift that hurled me down a few storeys. I found myself alone in a room and, when I removed my hood, I realised what a grave error I had made in fooling with that pipe.

This second room was a closed-off brick cell that had probably seen life as some sort of storeroom. It was cold, with no windows, and I was told I would receive no bedding until I co-operated, but I had nothing to do so I lay down and tried to sleep. On the one hand, I was relieved they hadn't hit me. The form I had filled in placed responsibility for my physical safety in my hands rather than theirs. The form also said the kidnap would involve a degree of physical contact and verbal abuse. During my wait in the office, therefore, I had been anticipating some form of retribution, whether violent or subtle. It seemed I was going to escape that.

After some time, and it seemed an age, some bedding was thrown into the room. Three sofa cushions and a pillow wrapped in a blanket. I found myself struggling with a rising frustration and sense of boredom. They were watching me on camera, but there was nothing to do. Nothing to read. Nothing to look at. Nobody to talk to. I was just waiting to see what happened next and, without a watch, I had no idea how long that would take. It was a strangely disorientating experience. Simply not knowing the time of day began to get on my nerves. How much longer was I going to be here? Was it time to go to sleep? I found it scary to think how I would feel if I didn't know absolutely that I was going to be released the following day.

They threw a sandwich into the room at some point. It was a stale store-bought egg mayonnaise. I had some water, too. On my kidnap order form I'd booked jam doughnuts, attractive female kidnappers, a daily paper, a piece of music, a phone call, continental breakfast, an interrogation, a bath, a copy of Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling* and a bedtime story. Over the next few hours, I received all of those apart from the bath, but, like the man who is granted three wishes, asks for a million pounds and gets it in compensation when his wife is killed in a hit-and-run, the requests made things harder when delivered on their terms rather than mine.

They came in and interrogated me in a sort of therapy session, asking me about happiness and love. They delved pretty deep into some areas of my life. I answered all the questions truthfully, scared of them since I had trashed the first room. The cosy bond between journalist and theatre company had gone in my mind, if it had ever been there in theirs. At the end of the interrogation, throughout which I had a bag on my head and lay on the floor staring into a bright light, they asked if I'd ever been called facetious. I bit back a facetious answer and said no. When the interrogation ended, I felt curiously down. It meant I was to be alone again.

A woman came in a lot later. She read me the fairy tale of *Mr Eyes All Over* as my bedtime story. After reading it, she told me that, against her wishes, they were going to throw me in the river at the end of the kidnap but that she would help me escape. I wasn't sure if this was part of the performance or a genuine threat, so I thanked her and agreed to follow her if she led me out of the room during

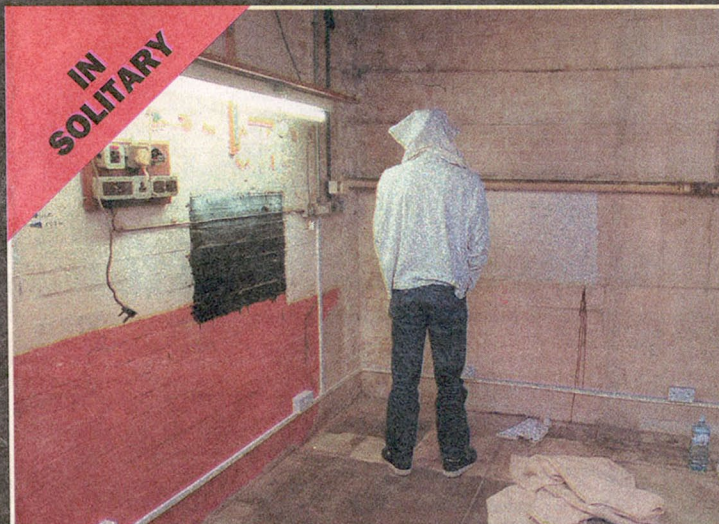
THE GRAB



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THE RELEASE



the night. By now, I was furious. I was cold, tired, hungry and very, very frustrated. I knew I was only there for a day, but I didn't know if I could bear the remaining hours. I couldn't seem to focus my mind on anything. I just had to wait for them to act.

They had given me a copy of *An Evil Cradling* and I read Keenan's account of losing his mind in the first couple of months of solitude. With nothing to cling on to, he began hallucinating and passed in and out of depression and elation. I knew the same thing would have happened to me, although I doubted I would have lasted as long as he had before losing it. With no control over any of my agenda and none of the aspects of my personality that I have constructed — what I do for a living, which books I read, which films I like, what I wear and where I go at the weekend — having any relevance at all, I felt quite pointless. I was freezing, so I faked some stomach cramps and they brought me an extra blanket. I still had no idea what time it was. Did the bedtime story mean it was bedtime? I wasn't sleepy, but maybe I should try to sleep.

The psychologist and author Dr David Cohen, whose book *Aftershock* deals with the psychology of hijack victims, says it is the lack of control that affects most kidnap victims first. He says they then try to identify

with the kidnapper in order to minimise the psychological risk to themselves. When a man entered and forced me to face the wall, hooded, before leaving me a veggie burger and a peppermint tea, I tried to enter into a conversation about the tea. He laughed and his voice seemed to lighten, then he left. I ate and drank, huddled in blankets.

After a lot, lot longer, they took me upstairs to make my one pre-requested phone call, where I found out it was midnight. At least I now had a measure of time, which reassured me enormously. Some time later I tried to sleep, but a nearby cistern flushing again and again kept me awake. When I asked them to turn it off, they said it was my fault for breaking the pipe. At that point, they chose to play me my music choice, *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison, on a stereo outside my door at full volume. It must have been three in the morning. Another wish backfired. Expecting sleep deprivation to continue all night, I finally dozed off. I was waiting for my rescue, but it never came.

They woke me rudely, took away my bedding and dragged me into the van. I hadn't been rescued by the woman. That meant she was probably telling the truth about the ducking. Hooded, I contemplated being thrown in the river. I resolved to struggle, but I felt cold

and tired. Hands rushed me across grass. I tried to shake them off, but they made me kneel. They told me to count to 60 and they were gone. I removed the hood and looked around. I lay in a park, with one or two small boys staring at me. It was 9am. I was safe.

As a performance, I couldn't really judge it. At times, it infuriated me so much that I wanted to hit all of them. At others, it made me wonder how I would have reacted if I had really been kidnapped. I suspect I would have reacted very badly. I suspect panic would have dominated my feelings. Yet here, of course, the performance collapses. I always knew I would be freed. I even knew the day of my kidnap. Real hostages don't.

There have been complaints, as you'd expect. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust and the Missing Persons Helpline have both issued statements condemning the performance. Perhaps they have a point. Cohen says there have been sufficient personal accounts of kidnap to teach us all we need to know. "If there was an ad in *Time Out* asking for people to take part in a rape, we'd all be up in arms," he says. "This is not too far removed from that. I think they will have to be careful how they pick the victim. What happens if someone freaks out? What if you get a masochist? Are these people qualified to deal with these situations?"

Matt Adams, a member of Blast Theory,

says there will be a psychologist and St John's trained first-aider on hand throughout. "All the victims will also have a key word they can say at any time and the kidnap will instantly stop, even if it is in the first five minutes," he says. "We have had people apply who are clearly going to get a sexual charge out of this and, because the final two will be picked at random, they may be selected. We got the idea while trying to work up a piece about control and losing control. We've always tried to get the audience involved and this seemed like the ultimate extension of that."

Does this make great theatre? My view of the performance was clouded by the terror, frustration, boredom and fury that dominated my 24 hours in captivity. Then again, maybe that was the point of it all. Certainly, no other performance I have ever seen has brought about such intense extremes of emotion. The "audience" for it, however, will only be the two victims. Nobody else will learn a thing.

Some of the 10 people on Blast Theory's short list for the July 15 snatch have opted to remain naked throughout the kidnap. It may have seemed fun when they were filling in the form, but their imprisonment will be visible to all on www.newmediacentre.com/kidnap/. It will also be available on video in September. My advice to them is to be afraid. Be very, very afraid. □