

This pair are going to take two people hostage and film the results. And they call it theatre

Lyn Gardner on Blast Theory

If you've been to the cinema recently, you've have seen this ad. A flat, featureless landscape flashes by in a shot taken from a moving vehicle. A voice asks: "Have you ever wanted to be on your own for a while? Let someone else take control?" An 0800 number is then flashed on the screen and the voice continues: "Pay a small registration fee and be added to the hit list. This is not a game, this is not a joke."

The 45-second film, made by the multimedia performance group Blast Theory certainly isn't a joke. They are deadly serious in their intention to carry out a kidnapping on the streets of England or Wales. They are not alone. In the last decade there has been a 700 per cent increase in kidnappings. In Britain alone in 1996 there were 1,421 kidnappings. The difference with Blast Theory's kidnap is that people are paying for the privilege of being snatched.

Blast Theory have always been obsessed with crime and violence. In *Gunmen Kill Three*, members of the audience were asked to fire a gun at point blank range at members of the cast. In *Invisible Bullets*, a ten-hour installation inspired by *Crimewatch UK*, a murder was reconstructed over and over again. In the most recent *Something American*, a New York cop detailed his sexual fantasies whilst playing videos of his top five favourite Hollywood explosions. Blast Theory is not the sort of company you'd want to mess with on a dark night.

But plenty have already signed up and later this year the names of 10 people who have paid a £10 registration fee, filled in a detailed questionnaire and provided a recent photo of

themselves will be drawn at random. Over the following few days these people will be kept under surveillance using video and photographic monitoring. If the surveillance team do their job well, the first time the 10 will realise that they are being watched is when a brown paper envelope arrives in the post containing photos of them going about their daily lives.

It is at this point that a second lottery will take place. Out of the 10 people under surveillance, two will be selected — again at random. On July 15, Blast Theory will will snatch two people and whisk them away to a safe house in a secret location where they will be held for 48 hours in the same room together. During this time they will be constantly monitored using concealed video and audio equipment. The resulting feeds will be transmitted to the kidnap website and monitors in the Nash Room at the ICA in London.

One web terminal will allow control over a moveable video camera in the safe house which the viewer will be able to pan, tilt or zoom in and out as they wish. It will also be possible to e-mail the kidnappers, although whether they will reply is another matter. Press briefings will take place regularly throughout the event which will in itself be an exercise both in media manipulation and a study of the way the media responds.

Whereas Hamlet could, if the performers so chose, be played night after night to a completely empty auditorium, shows such as Enrique Vargas's *Taro Labyrinth Oraculos* and Fiona Templeton's *YOU-The City* both seen as part of London International Festival of Theatre, owe their

existence to the participation of their audience — in both cases an audience of only one. Like Blast Theory's Kidnap, they demand that the potential audience is prepared to risk all, stepping into the darkness of the labyrinth in *Oraculos* or in filling in questionnaires in strange office blocks and being whisked away by taxi and dumped in an unknown location in *YOU-The City*. What Kidnap shares with these is an element of tantalising come-on, of coaxing and coercion in equal measure.

There may be some who see what Blast Theory do as more crime than art. Certainly one of the reasons that the project has taken over a year to develop is because of the need to con-

'If somebody's fantasy is to be kidnapped and beaten, we will try to do that within the law'

sider all the legal ramifications. In the light of the Spanner trial, where it was ruled that even sado-masochists cannot consent to have something illegal done to their body, they could take no risks. To avoid complications with the Scottish legal system, Kidnap is only open to residents of England and Wales.

All those registering for Kidnap must sign a disclaimer in which they accept that the kidnap will involve a degree of physical contact and verbal abuse, and that "the entrant will take all necessary precautions and make arrangements for the eventuality of being kidnapped. Blast Theory is not

responsible for missed appointments, disruption to domestic affairs or any other outcome of kidnap."

The issue of consent becomes rather more blurred when one considers that the kidnap pays for the privilege of playing the lead role in an improvised drama of set duration but unknown ending.

On the registration form the entrant can pay in advance for a number of optional extras. These range from six jam doughnuts (40p each) or a story at bedtime (£6) to a copy of Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling* (£16) or a particular fantasy scenario (£30 each), such as being the son or daughter of a multimillionaire or a leftist kidnapped by the secret service. Entrants are also invited to make up their own favourite kidnap fantasy.

"We will," says Blast Theory's Ju Row Farr, "Take our cue from who we get whether to be scary kidnappers or polite kidnappers. If somebody's fantasy kidnap is all about being strapped down and beaten we will have to try and deal with that within the law." As an extra precaution, potential participants are asked to select a safe word. The participant will be freed immediately if they quote this word.

"Part of what interests us about the whole idea of kidnapping is the ambiguous relationship between the kidnappers and the kidnapped," says Blast Theory's Matt Adams. "Who has the real control in a situation when neither party knows the outcome?"

The members of Blast Theory have no way of knowing how the kidnapped will react. They are as much prisoners of the situation as the kidnapped, just as in any hostage scenario captors and captives are dependent upon each other. Hence the development of the Stockholm Syn-

drome, in which strong bonds are formed between kidnappers and their victims. In the case of Patty Hearst, the kidnapped heiress turned terrorist, for example, the outside world became the enemy.

In many ways this mirrors the relationship of the performer to audience in traditional theatre, where the audience is told where to sit and behave and persuaded to believe in a scenario that is false. If almost all theatre is a mutual act of seduction, then the surveillance necessary to undertake the kidnap is about the subsumation of self in the image of another, which only ordinarily occurs during the most intense love affair.

In the early 1980s the French artist Sophie Calle initiated a number of projects in which she trailed complete strangers on the street. In her most famous, she was briefly introduced to a man at a party who told her that he was about to go to Venice. Without his knowledge, Calle followed him and put him under intense surveillance for 14 days during which time their lives became merged. Just as the kidnapper becomes the captive audience of his or her hostage, Calle discovered that the follower is also always being led. For Blast Theory, Kidnap is another step in exploring the possibilities of putting the audience centre stage. Row Farr puts it succinctly: "Our dilemma as artists and theatre makers has always been about whose opinion counts the more — the artists or the audiences?"

"It's the slipperiness of Kidnap that really appeals to us," says Adams. "On one hand it could just be taken as a development of paintball sports and on the other it's conceptual art. Besides," he adds grinning, "it's the best fun we've ever had."

For a form for Kidnap call 0800 174336.



Blast Theory theatre company will kidnap you and then charge 40p for doughnuts

PHOTOGRAPH: SEAN SMITH