

# WAR AND PEACE



**PRESS PACK**  
ENGLISH

# Gob Squad

## About the group

*"This feels like one of the most impossible, beautiful, courageous and epic theatrical experiences you can imagine"* The Guardian

Gob Squad is a seven headed monster, an **arts collective** with seven bosses. Gob Squad has a schizophrenic identity and a multiple split personality: hermaphrodite, binational and bilingual, both a patchwork family and a social utopia. Gob Squad have been devising, directing and performing together **since 1994**, working where **theatre meets art, media and real life**.

Always on the hunt for beauty amidst the mundane, they place their work at the heart of **urban life**: in houses, shops, underground stations, car parks, hotels or directly on the street, as well as in theatres and galleries. **Everyday life and magic, banality and idealism, reality and entertainment** are all set on a collision course and the unpredictable results are captured on video.

Motivated by a desire to elevate the everyday and empower audience members to step beyond their traditional role as passive spectators, Gob Squad set up often absurdly **utopian scenarios** where meaningful collective experience and genuine **encounters involving passers-by and audience members** are suddenly possible. Audiences seem to like the feeling that anything might happen during an evening with Gob Squad. They might be asked to dance, sing or even kiss one of the performers. They might play guitar in a band, play the part of a lover or liberator in a semi-improvised film, or be asked to explain the complexities of the world to an unknown future. Or they might just simply be asked to sit and bear witness to the organised chaos unfolding on stage before them.

For over 20 years, Gob Squad have been searching for **new ways to combine media and performance**, producing stage shows, video installations, radio plays, interactive live films and urban interventions. The use of audio and video technology plays a prominent role in their work, with the result that **alienated forms of intimacy** have become a central theme. They try to scratch beneath the shiny, pixelated surface of the 21st century, seeking out the dark corners and hidden desires of contemporary culture.

Gob Squad was founded in **1994**, whilst its members were still at Nottingham Trent and Giessen universities. **Berlin** has been the group's creative home since 1999. **Core members** are Johanna Freiburg, Sean Patten, Sharon Smith, Berit Stumpf, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost and Simon Will. Other artists are invited to collaborate on particular projects. The group is managed by Eva Hartmann.

Gob Squad's international reputation has grown steadily since coming to prominence at documenta X in 1997. Their productions have been shown on all the continents apart from Antarctica where projects such as SUPER NIGHT SHOT (2003), GOB SQUAD'S KITCHEN (2007, winner of New York's Drama Desk Award), SAVING THE WORLD (2008, winner of the Goethe Preis at the Impulse Festival), BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES (2011, selected for Germany's Theatertreffen) and WESTERN SOCIETY (2013) have received wide acclaim.



PHOTO: GARRETT DAVIS/CAPTURE IMAGING

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## *About the show*

*“Hold this book. Heavy isn’t it? Actually that’s only half of it. It’s one of the longest in the world. It has 1256 pages (depending on the edition and language you are reading in), originally written in four volumes, there’s more than 300 characters. Have you actually read it?...I’m only half way through.”*

Far from the shifting borders of conflict and violence, in a place ravaged by peace, a group of artists attempt to hold a salon, a gathering similar to those held in High Society Russia at the beginning of the 19th century. Their intention is to contemplate *War and Peace*, a book written over almost a century and half ago, but also real war and real peace which defines history and the perspective from which it’s told.

Throughout the evening, guests are introduced according to rank and status, in a never ending parade of characters that reaches beyond the pages of the novel. Dances are danced, meals are prepared and duels are fought. Performers prepare for scenes as if going to battle, in a game of shifting perspectives and extremely subjective opinions on what actually happens not only in the book, the film, the TV series but also in the world at large.

Playful and improvised, Gob Squad’s *War and Peace* searches the performers’ own backdrops of conflict, notions of freedom, privilege and safety. Duty and the individual versus community are discussed through the ordinariness of day-to-day life, in a modern day attempt to address one of Tolstoy’s concerns: how should one live a moral life in an ethically imperfect world? Or in our times, how can we live inside capitalism, comfortable in the knowledge of the absolute damage and suffering that our daily, ordinary ‘peaceful’ lifestyles promise?

*War and Peace* is a new live video performance by Gob Squad, a collective reading experience of a historic novel, in which art and daily life, history and the present, reality and fiction blur and everybody becomes a potential protagonist.

Gob Squad build on previous works like *Prater Saga*, *Western Society*, *Super Night Shot* and *Revolution Now!* in terms of casting characters from the street or the audience in fictional set-ups, reconstructions and personal storylines.

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## Self-Portrait

### AN INTERVIEW WITH GOB SQUAD

*Gob Squad has existed since 1994. Can you still remember how it was in the beginning? Was there the feeling at that time that you wanted to make alternative theatre? Could you perhaps briefly say how you came together?*

— For me, at the time when we met in England, it was very liberating that the starting point for the work was not text. Text was developed as well, but it wasn't like in Germany where theatre is very strongly connected to text, actually a theatre of literature. Because we went out to real places from the start and had the possibility to frame daily life and occupy it artistically, we approached it with a strong visual way of thinking. In the early work we didn't use video at all. However, it was still a very visual approach and it totally satisfied me.

— We referred to it as Live Art. When we participated in the Diskurs festival at the University of Giessen for the first time they swapped the 'v' for an 'f' and translated it as 'Life Art'. We liked that.

### WORKING COLLECTIVELY

*Was Gob Squad always six people? That probably emerged as a good structure?*

— I think it has more to do with the relationships with each other. It is like being in a relationship, like being married to five people.

— I can't imagine it with more than six or seven.

— It would be hard just to get everyone round a table to meet. There are always decisions that can only be made with all of us present, such as when it is about making a

change of direction, initiating something new for the future or changing the basic principles that we agreed upon.

— In Work, our second professional piece, there came a point for Sarah and I [Sean Patten] where we decided that we actually wanted to form a group and work as a collective. Although we had already written the concept we didn't want to take on the artistic direction. That wasn't our dream. Our dream was a collective.

— Working in a group can be really hard work.

— I don't think very well on my own. I need to talk to people to develop my ideas. When we don't have the time to work collectively during the conceptual phase I find it awful. You might think it would be more like 'at last I have the chance to do everything exactly as I want,' but actually the opposite is true. Of course, when working in a group you also reach points where you've had enough. There's sometimes a moment of frustration and you think, 'Why don't we just do what I think is obvious?' but in the end, working collectively is something we all very much enjoy.

— Being a collective means that all of those who participate in the production of a piece of work have a personal relationship to its material and its making. Everybody feels a responsibility for the work as a whole and everyone has a right to their own interpretation of the work, as does the audience so even they can become part of the collective when they see a show.\*

— You realise that everyone has a mutual interest, that everyone is passionate about the work, motivates each other and that each person feels responsible for the collective project.

*Have different skills emerged over time?*

— Of course we have different abilities that we try to utilise. That is also true in the theatre business, but there there's this classic hierarchy whereby a director makes the pool of ideas his own and his name appears on the programme in the end. Personally, I find this an unsatisfactory way of collaborating.

*Is the aesthetic concept of performance and your work as a collective inseparable?*

— Yes, because the roles of the author, the character and the actor come together in the role of the performer. We have to test out our ideas ourselves and put ourselves on the line for those ideas. As a collective, we reflect the multiplicity and complexity of the culture in which we live. We don't have six identical positions and tastes.

— We always tend to make ensemble pieces. There's never really a lead role in a Gob Squad piece. There's never a lone hero, heroine or protagonist.

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## WILL THE REAL MR G. SQUAD PLEASE STAND UP?

— Almost all of the creative industries are dominated by the idea of individual artists and this idea perpetuates itself, so people often get confused by the fact that Gob Squad has no director. Press officers often ask for a picture of him.

— As a collective, we are committed to the belief that a non-hierarchical team made up of many people can often create a more complex work than a single artist. We thereby counter the model of conventional theatre which postulates and celebrates the cult of the genius of a single director, author or artist.

— In Germany, or anywhere in the art world, there is a longing for genius. The genius of the individual. Being in a collective somehow relieves this incredible pressure. I realise, however, that it is a bit alienating not only in the theatre scene but also in the art scene generally. People don't really know how to deal with it.

## STARTING POINTS

— The starting point for a piece of work can originate from many sources. A request from an institution might spark an existing idea, or the desire to work in a particular place, or to respond to a particular moment in time which might result in the beginnings of a new idea. The goal is to find an idea so clear that you can sum it up in one sentence. This is a fundamental concept. Then we begin accumulating images and moments and look for rules and structural principles. The pieces learn from one another. Often, the things that are abandoned, the 'waste' produced in a working process, become the beginnings of something new.

## REHEARSALS

— The more we work with interaction and open structures the more we need a test audience and test runs in order to try out our ideas. For several years now these open Try-Outs have become part of our rehearsal and creative process. In this way we have learnt (in front of and with an audience) to evaluate our rehearsals and Try-Outs. The feedback from these semi-public evaluations is really valuable in the long term even if in the moment it can be painful.

## THE FOUR R's

— We usually work with structures that combine visual choreographed moments, elements of improvisation and the unforeseeable. A large part of the rehearsal process consists of finding the balance between those three elements. How much can you leave open for improvisation, at the mercy of reality and the unforeseeable, and how strict should the framework be? Then you try to set out an order of events. We start to develop initial, sketchy structures relatively early on even though the individual elements are not at all clear. It is simply a way to be able to proceed without a script.

— Much of Gob Squad's work is based on a dramatic structure that makes it possible to show the pieces without, as is usual in theatre, reproducing the same sequence of events again and again. A Gob Squad cue list is used more as an arrangement to improvise between the performers or gives a framework for the moments of interaction with the audience or passers-by. It is always our aim to find a running order that gives space to both set events as well as the unforeseeable. Our main dramaturgical work is to balance reality and form, developing strategies to be able to react to random events within a dramaturgy.

— With the benefit of hindsight you could say that we have a rule of 'Four R's': Rules, Rhythm, Reality and Risk. Those are the four key ingredients whether in the theatre or out on the streets. You have to have something of each.

— Risk has become an integral part of our work. The unforeseen and those elements that we don't/can't plan and aren't able to predict make up a large part of what interests us about Performance and Art. In our work we often seek out encounters with passers-by, an interaction with the audience, and the conditions and contingency of the street. We do this because we want to surprise and challenge ourselves and because we want to grow and develop as artists and performers.

*Published in Revolver 21, Franz Müller in conversation with Johanna Freiburg, Sean Patten and Bastian Trost on 3.6.2009 in Berlin.*



PHOTO: GARRETT DAVIS/CAPTURE IMAGING



## PRESS QUOTES

Tolstoy would have liked it.  
STAGE AND SCREEN

A triumphant satire about us, our wars, terrorism, shopping and cat videos which really gets under your skin.  
*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

Gob Squad are live artists, literally: they take their forms and themes from the fabric of everyday life as they pass through it. They have created their particular type of art by finding value in the flotsam and jetsam they find along the way. It's not easy to conquer new artistic ground [bringing Tolstoy's novel to the stage], but the likeable British and German performers stay true to themselves, deep in this strange new jungle of high-culture.  
*Berliner Zeitung*

The first half-hour has a certain magic  
*Süddeutsche Zeitung*

They never tell you what you're meant to think. This is what makes Gob Squad shows so pleasurable  
*Zitty*

When Gob Squad take on Tolstoy's classic „War and Peace“, you are not presented with a straightforward staging of the novel, but a parade of characters and viewpoints, a multi-perspective examination of the novel, and of our conflict-laden times.  
*SZ Extra*

It's quite a challenge to reduce a 1400 page novel with more than 250 characters down to one main character and a couple of scenes, but Gob Squad succeed.  
*Taz*

Amongst the dancing, eating and duelling, the performers prepare scenes as if going to the front. They position themselves in a game with far-reaching perspectives and personal viewpoints, not just in relation to the novel and its many filmic incarnations, but also to the real world beyond the page.  
*Berliner Zeitung*



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photo © david baltzer/bildbuehne.de

## CREDITS

**Concept and Direction:** Gob Squad

**Performance devised by:** Niels Bormann, Katja Bürkle, Johanna Freiburg, Sean Patten, Damian Rebgetz, Tatiana Saphir, Sharon Smith, Berit Stumpf, Sarah Thom, Laura Tonke, Bastian Trost and Simon Will

**Sound Design:** Jeff McGrory

**Video Design:** Miles Chalcraft

**Set Design:** Romy Kießling

**Costume Design:** Ingken Benesch

**Lighting Design:** Andreas Rehfeld

**Dramaturgy:** Johanna Höhmann, Christina Runge

**Production Management:** Christina Runge

**Technical Management:** Chris Umney

**Artistic Assistant:** Mat Hand

**Directing Assistant:** Yana Thönnies

**Costume Assistant:** Lena Mody

**Set Design Assistant:** Aleksandra Pavlovic

**Video Assistant:** Iason Konstantinou

**Dramaturgy Assistant:** Thorben Meißner

**Directing Interns:**

Katharina Joy Book, Lisa Käßler, Nora Strömer

**Costume Intern:** Teresa Heiß

**Stage Design Intern:** Hannah Wolf

**Gob Squad Interns:** Aleksandra Jakubczak, Tom Healey

**Gob Squad Management:** Eva Hartmann

**Gob Squad Management UK:** Ayla Syveren

War and Peace is a production by Gob Squad and Münchner Kammerspiele. In coproduction with Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz Berlin, Schauspiel Leipzig, Konfrontacje Teatralne Festival Lublin, Lancaster Arts at Lancaster University, Malthouse Theatre and Melbourne Festival, Gessnerallee Zürich, Nottingham Playhouse and Teatro Stabile di Torino – National Theatre.

Gob Squad is regularly funded 2015 - 2018 by the State Berlin, Senatskanzlei - Kulturelle Angelegenheiten.

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## REVIEW:

*eastmidlandstheatre.com*

*9 June 2016*

From the perspective of a High Society Russian salon several members of the audience are taken on stage by one of the four cast members of Gob Squad and formerly introduced to the audience of their production called War & Peace.

Yes, the show is about Tolstoy's epic War & Peace but never a traditional telling – more an outlandish and often thought provoking investigation into the characters in the book. This book was written more than a century and a half ago and has become part of our history; or is that mainly his-tory – the world written from the male perspective? The piece is playful and part improvised and looks too at our modern day notions of freedom, privilege and safety.

Gob Squad (Sean Patten, Sharon Smith, Sarah Thom and Simon Will) delve into these subjects and lots more with the help of four members of the audience and some deliciously roving camera work projecting images of the collective and their, round the table conversations, on to the main stage. The work that unfolds has a fun degree of unpredictability as the four audience members are cheekily and intellectually brought into the conversation throughout the piece. With Gob Squad you never quite know where the performance is going to lead and that is part of the theatrical intrigue – part of the daft yet delightfully deep diversion.

With them we are challenged to consider War with its background leaders and mass fatalities both from Tolstoy's historical novel and from a modern perspective in the warring hot spots in our real world today. The discussion is brought to life with projections, crazy costumes and a fashion parade of characters from Tolstoy's novel are introduced to the audience with the focus on Napoleon and the Russian Tzar. The side of humanity and an argument for Peace is examined (again with great fun) through the novel's best loved character Pierre Bezukhov and we find three diverse versions of this character vying for top billing on the Nottingham Playhouse stage and the stage of literary figures.

Gob Squad are an amazing company of performance artists and offer up such an engaging vision of their work. Very often there are personal disclosures from the company members and one cannot feel but drawn into matters of life and death and the survival of humankind in a world that isn't always kind. Reality and fiction blur in this War & Peace. One comes away from the event with a celebratory feeling that we are alive today and involved in something bigger than the world's largest page turner. Strangely enough we have links as human beings to the novel even if we haven't read it. War & Peace by Gob Squad is an intriguing and fun work of Live Art that is perfect for the this year's NEAT16.

*Phil Lowe*

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