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.

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.

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.

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.
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.
**Gob Squad: The unruly Anglo-German theatre collective still evolving after 25 years**

The Anglo-German theatre collective considers itself “a bit like a blob” – ‘morphing’ to meet its members’ needs. Founder member Sarah Thom tells Matt Trueman how the company has grown together over 25 years.

The Japanese art of flower arranging, ikebana, features heavily in Gob Squad’s latest show. Throughout *Creation (Pictures for Dorian)*, flowers are serenely slotted into place under a heat lamp. As an art form, ikebana elevates the act of arranging over the final arrangement, and it celebrates the plant’s life cycle – growth and decay – over the pristine beauty of blooms at their peak. As the performance plays out, petals wrinkle and wilt.

Gob Squad’s seven members have grown up together, over 25 years, but age has hardly withered them. The iconoclastic Anglo-German collective has built up a body of rambunctious performances unlike anyone else’s – and is still going strong.

Creation, a careful meditation on ageing, art and visibility, which premiered at Brighton Festival, felt like Gob Squad’s most mature work to date, but it still showed the silly side that has set the collective apart. En route, it has sent signals into outer space with *Calling Laika*, incited insurrection from the Institute of Contemporary Arts in *Revolution Now* and taken to the streets with camcorders and superhero capes to capture every single thing in existence for *Saving the World*.

Gob Squad has always felt similar to a gang – and watching it, you want to sign up and join in. But behind the buccaneering playfulness, there’s always insight and purpose. From its early site-specific shows to its own brand of real-time films, splicing the best bits of theatre and live TV, Gob Squad’s work has consistently pushed performance. Its shows stretch their limits and expand horizons, whether riffing off classics, such as *War and Peace* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or teaching robots to talk, such as in *My Square Lady*. But, for founder member Sarah Thom, it all adds up to something bigger: “Just being Gob Squad, that’s our greatest work. Some have come, some have gone, but we’ve managed 25 years. It’s a piece in itself.”

Like ikebana, Gob Squad is an ongoing act: unfolding, evolving, undergoing growth and decay. It’s more than its shows – more, even, than its members. Gob Squad is a process – perhaps a way of life. It functions as a collective, completely and utterly. It doesn’t just create work collaboratively, the team members run their lives and their company in the same way. Touring dates, pay packets, funding applications – all of it comes from communal decisions.

“There really is no boss,” Thom stresses. “It’s a struggle, but we believe in the politics of that. You’re constantly in process, negotiating things, working everything out so it’s completely fair and egalitarian. We’re all one – a bit like a blob. We can’t exist without each other, but each of us is absolutely replaceable. Gob Squad would go on without any one of us.”

It’s not easy being Gob Squad. In fact, Thom reckons theirs is “the most inefficient way of working ever”, but the benefits outweigh the hassle. “Everything takes longer, but it does mean that, at the end, everybody owns it.” And nobody gets left behind, either – the company “morphs” to meet its members’ needs and fit their lives. It has shifted to accommodate relationships, babies and illnesses – people always come first. “There’s no institution to defer or submit to. Everything’s open to debate, everything’s up for grabs. It’s what has held us together all this time,” she says.

Gob Squad grew out of Nottingham Trent University. Its founder members – four of which remain – met on its Creative Arts course, an inter-disciplinary programme rooted in collaborative practice that criss-crossed from video to visual arts. An exchange scheme with Giessen University gave the company its Anglo-German core: Berit Stumpf and Johanna Freiburg clicked with Thom and Sean Patten. They still do: “There was a kindred spirit. We just got on – that’s the most important thing.”

For the last 20 years, Gob Squad has been based in Berlin – the funding’s much better, commissions matched by the state – but it has retained relationships with theatres in the UK. “The UK is so important to us, way more than people realise,” says Thom. They still “feel very at home here”, but homecomings are getting harder. “Funding’s less available given the size we are now. Our shows practically have to fit into suitcases to tour.”

Having begun making site-specific work, taking over houses, offices and a furniture shop floor to subvert everyday spaces, Gob Squad began taking “baby steps” towards theatres at the end of the 1990s. For its first foray on to the stage, *Close Enough to Kiss*, it built a mirrored box to block the audience out. “Theatre’s about the act of looking,” Thom explains, “not just telling stories. We wanted to ask questions about the stage as a space.”

Effectively, it treated theatres the same as any other site, toying with their configurations and conventions. The show *Safe* likened theatre going to travel: ticket checks, stewardess ushers, a pilot MC. *Creation (Pictures for Dorian)* is all about “frames within frames”. Similar to Wilde’s...
novel, it examines the triangular relationship of art, artists and audience.

On stage, however, Gob Squad found itself constrained by the need to stick to the script. Since *Safe*, it has created structures, then improvised as it goes. “Rules, risk, reality, rhythm” – that’s the Gob Squad playbook. “Without them, something’s missing: the element of not quite knowing where you are. We create a space where we’re able to be alive and to be ourselves – and that is fun. It’s always at risk of being dropped and that makes it so much more exciting.”

If Gob Squad shows are alive, they’re also electric – literally as well as figuratively. Video is often at the heart of its work, the camera adding to and emphasising the quality of being live. *Room Service* plonks four lonely souls in separate hotel rooms for a night with only a camera for company. *Super Night Shot*, which it is doing for the National Theatre of Scotland this summer, sends four performers on to the streets to shoot a blockbuster film. One’s the hero, another the villain; one casts extras, another scouts locations. Their four feeds are mixed live.

This, perhaps, has been Gob Squad’s most pioneering front – not just in terms of performance, but in relation to society. Since the members of Gob Squad first picked up their VHS camcorders, cameras have become ubiquitous. Anyone can be a social media star. “When we first started using it, lots of people had home video cameras, so it felt quite universal, quite a DIY aesthetic,” Thom says. It proved liberating, freeing Gob Squad from ‘stageyness’ and participants from inhibition. “As soon as you’ve got a camera, you’re not crazy. You can ask people quite full-on questions in the street and they’ll answer.” In today’s camera-centric world, it can go one of two ways: either people are cautious, wary of protecting their image online, or they’re comfortable – too comfortable.

That might explain Gob Squad’s retreat to the stage of late, and to those classic texts. Practically, it’s useful. Thom says: “Source material brings us all back to one point, as we go off on our seven different tangents.” But there’s politics too: about looking back, about remaking, engaging with the past. “You’re always standing on the shoulders of giants,” adds Thom. History, like Gob Squad, art and ikebana, is a process.

Matt Trueman

**Five Facts about Gob Squad**


2. Gob Squad has toured every continent but Antarctica.

3. Among the unusual spaces Gob Squad has performed in are the Steffi Graf tennis stadium in Berlin and a bingo hall in West Bromwich, UK.

4. Gob Squad’s smallest production was To@ster, which involved two performers, 10 toasters and 1,000 slices of bread. The biggest, *My Square Lady*, involved a 40-piece orchestra, a choir of 35 children, 30 technicians, seven opera singers, seven scientists and a robot called Myon.

5. Performing *Super Night Shot* in Rio, Gob Squad faced arrest. The show ends with performers running through the streets in pants – illegal in Brazil. They bought bikinis and swimsuits, which are fine.
ON GOB SQUAD:
Gob Squad has always felt similar to a gang – and watching it, you want to sign up and join in.

THE STAGE
This feels like one of the most impossible, beautiful, courageous and epic theatrical experiences you can imagine.

THE GUARDIAN
Gob Squad virgins, please stop reading now, and go get your tickets!

TIME OUT NEW YORK (on WESTERN SOCIETY)

ON WAR AND PEACE
Gob Squad … teases out ideas, characters and situations from Tolstoy's mammoth, 1869 novel … and makes them their own”

The Herald Sun, Melbourne

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

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

Daft yet delightfully deep... 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 and 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.

Eastmidlandstheatre.com
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.

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**A Salon With Strangers in a Freewheeling ‘War and Peace’**

A show of hands, please, the audience at Gob Squad’s “War and Peace” was asked: How many people here have read Tolstoy’s mammoth novel? On Thursday night at the N.Y.U. Skirball Center, a smattering of hands went up, drastically reduced a moment later in response to the follow-up: How many have read the book to the end? Fear not: Familiarity with the novel is no prerequisite for enjoying this antic show, a madcap mash-up of live performance, prominent video and much audience participation. But, as the members of this experimental company are happy to tell you, their 105-minute devised performance is no substitute for the 1,200-page literary experience. You may have left Dave Malloy’s wild and wonderful Broadway musical “Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812” knowing more about Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” than when you walked in. Gob Squad (“Western Society”) has other goals in mind.

Though Natasha and especially Pierre do make appearances (so does Tolstoy, in a comically awful long brown beard), here the book is more a device, a means of contemplating enmity, blood-soaked history and the possibility of civil discourse — albeit in silly costumes (by Ingken Benesch), and with occasional fog (the lighting designers are Andreas Rehfeld and Chris Umney) so thick that you can’t see past it. The performance is a kind of salon hosted by a personable cast (Sean Patten, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost and Simon Will), with a few onstage guests selected from the audience. As they eat and drink around a table (the set is by Romy Kiessling), the actors engage the civilians in conversation that goes well or less well, depending. It’s the sort of guided randomness that Gob Squad loves: potentially uncomfortable engagement with one’s fellow human beings.

The show turned 2 this month, and it’s mind-boggling to consider how much has happened since its premiere: the Brexit vote, the election of Donald J. Trump (obliquely mentioned in the performance as “you know who”), the escalation of the culture wars to their current fever pitch. Alliances that have largely kept the peace in the West since World War II look shakier now. So Gob Squad’s topic could hardly be timelier, but the show struggles to find urgency and resonance. It’s a changeable piece, yet it often feels a shade stale and abstract — which is strange when this Berlin-based British-German company’s own members are straddling the Brexit divide. One of the most affecting moments directly acknowledges Europe’s ugly, not-so-distant history, briefly wondering what Mr. Patten’s British grandfather — a World War II veteran who hated Germans — would think of his grandson’s German wife and German passport.

But the most viscerally intense moment arrives with a very recent addition to the roster of characters, making a cameo in a parade of historically significant leaders, each one’s name projected huge on the upstage screen. (Video design is by Miles Chalcraft and Anna Zett.) Out strides Emma González (Ms. Thom), a charismatic figure who holds the stage with her silence. It’s a tribute, not a sendup, and a forceful reminder that sometimes people start fighting because they’re desperate to stop the slaughter.

*Laura Collins-Hughes*
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
Gob Squad’s “War and Peace” is bizarre, political, relevant

What do a reunited One Direction, a historical fashion show and Leo Tolstoy kissing Vladimir Lenin have in common? They were all a part of Gob Squad’s performance of “War and Peace” this past weekend at the Moore Theater. Gob Squad is an arts collective comprised of seven British and German artists. Together, they create performances that ponder major philosophical questions by using humor and audience participation. “War and Peace,” their latest project, seeks to discuss a major question people may have after reading Tolstoy’s novel about Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812: Why do people go to war, and should they?

Before the show even began, it was clear that this rendition of “War and Peace” would not take itself as seriously as the epic novel does. Upon walking into the Hopkins Center for the Arts to attend the performance on Friday night, I was immediately greeted by four members of Gob Squad in costume: nude tights, flowy shirts and long sheaths. One member wore platform shoes that made him about six inches taller.

Once audience members began flooding the theater, members of Gob Squad simulated the atmosphere of a French salon by bringing show-goers onto the stage and introducing them. Every now and then, an audience member would be invited to “sit at the table.” The literal table was set up at the front of the theater, complete with bottles of wine, small baked goods and a rotatable camera four Gob Squad members used to project their live conversations with those selected from the crowd.

Gob Squad's rendition of “War and Peace” did not assign roles to each performer like in a traditional play. Instead, performers were assigned a “pathway,” a more relaxed version of a role that allows for more creative freedom and improvisation. Each member of the squad embodied one of four “pathways”: Tolstoy, War, Peace or “And.” Sharon Smith, who played Tolstoy, was at once a fantastically funny host and a prolific philosopher. At the table, she discussed the current political divide in America with her guest. This rather serious discussion was often cut by camera shots of Gob Squad member Simon Will, who portrayed the pathway “And,” miming playing a harp to “Imagine” by John Lennon and scarfing down any remaining pastries at the table.

After establishing the guests of the table, Gob Squad launched into a fashion show comprised of characters from the novel, staples of war and important political figures. The participants ranged from protagonist of “War and Peace” Pierre Bezukhov to a war horse to Parkland survivor Emma González.

Tatiana Saphir, who portrayed the pathway War and the character Napoleon, then entered into a battle of wits and humor with Sarah Thom, who portrayed Peace and impersonated Tsar Alexander I. This battle eventually morphed into Will singing Coldplay’s “Viva la Vida” and Thom acquiring a Tolstoy-like beard.

Despite the fact that this rendition of “War and Peace” incorporated “pathways,” much of its material was comprised of the personal experiences of the performers. One of the more compelling moments of “War and Peace” was when Thom discussed the death that accompanies war in relation to her father’s recent passing. Another emotionally charged moment came towards the end when Smith, a mother and wife, wondered aloud how she would be able to explain violence to her young child.

The very last moment of “War and Peace” was based on a quote from the novel discussing an ageing oak tree. As Will mused about what that oak tree would have to say about all the life and violence it had seen, his cast mates took the stage dressed as trees with their table guests. As they stared off at a projected overcast sky, the lights faded out. So, what exactly was Gob Squad’s “War and Peace” all about? Ever since leaving the theater, I’ve found it difficult to answer this question. At the surface, it seems easy to explain “War and Peace” as a humorous conversation about Tolstoy’s novel. Certainly, Gob Squad discusses enough of the plot of the novel for someone who has not read the book to understand its premise and historical background. They offer one possible explanation for why the book remains so beloved: readers of “War and Peace” can sympathize with the novel’s protagonist regardless of the times. By having three people portray Pierre Bezukhov from the novel, Gob Squad highlights the particular characteristics that make him relatable.

Another possible answer is that Gob Squad wanted to show how scarably relevant “War and Peace” is today. During the performance, Gob Squad discussed political disagreements with the people at the table. In one part of the piece, they warn the audience that they will be showing “images of war” on large screens before — thankfully — showing a montage of kittens and dogs playing with their owners. By bringing the 19th century novel into modern times, Gob Squad shows that war and violence is often caused by people’s inability to reach across political lines and common ground.

Savannah Miller
WAR AND PEACE