

1984: BACK TO NO FUTURE

PRESS PACK



PHOTO: DOROTHEA TUCH

DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT AND HIGH-RES PHOTOS AT gobsquad.com/press-packs

About the show

"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

George Orwell: "Nineteen Eighty-Four"

Gob Squad travel back to 1984, back to the good old analogue days when life was simple and there were only three channels on TV. It's a perilous journey: they might get lost in music, lost in nostalgia or both. But once they arrive, they discover their younger selves: caught up in the Cold War, fearful of nuclear catastrophe, trying to shape who they might become. As they sift through the fragments of their teenage bedrooms, they reconstruct their own personal past, and the music drags them into a psychedelic virtual world of disembodied avatars. Under surveillance and under pressure, they fight, dance, build a nuclear shelter and try to dismantle what may have been written into their programming codes. Were these teenagers in control of their bodies, their fate and their ability to change things? Or were they following ready-made templates, part of a larger plan? Can they re-programme their own story, and influence the currents of history? Or at least see it through different eyes? As Gob Squad warp time and go back to a past which saw 'No Future', are they able to shed light on the present, and gain a perspective on what lies ahead?

The new production follows in the tradition of other works by Gob Squad, which reimagine and recast YouTube videos, Hollywood films and Andy Warhol art movies. The project brings to a head the company's ongoing examination of the mechanisms of power inherent in our image-saturated world and the relationship of personal experience to political reality. In Gob Squad's work, everyday life and magic, banality and utopia, reality and entertainment are all set on a collision course. The audience is invited into a world of light and shadow to bear witness to an experiment in performative science-fiction and imaginary time-travel. Nothing less than the future itself is at stake...

1984: BACK TO NO FUTURE

Credits

Concept and Direction: Gob Squad

Performance: Johanna Freiburg, Sean Patten, Sharon Smith, Berit Stumpf, Sarah Thom, Bastian Trost, Simon Will, Damian Rebgetz and Tatiana Saphir

Sound Design: Sebastian Bark, Catalina Fernandez

Sound Operator: Isabel Gonzalez Toro

Video Design: Miles Chalcroft, Noam Gorbat

Costume Design: Ingken Benesch

Set Design: Amina Nouns

Lighting Design and Technical Management: Chris Umney

Dramaturgy and Production Management: Christina Runge

VR Consultancy, Development and Design: Joris Weijdom

Artistic Collaboration: Mat Hand

Directing Assistant: Valeria Germain

Costume Assistant: Simon Kernen

Set Design Assistant: Stella Nikisch

VR assistance: Diede Tap

Directing Intern: Rodrigo Zorzanelli Cavalcanti

Gob Squad Management: Eva Hartmann

PR/Communications: Alexandra Lauck

UK Producer: Ayla Suveren

World premiere on April 13th 2021 am HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin

A production by Gob Squad. In co-production with HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, The Public Theater NY (USA), Schauspiel Leipzig, Anuja Ghosalkar / Drama Queen (India) & Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai, HELLERAU – European Center for the Arts Dresden, Sort / Hvid Copenhagen and Teater Momentum Odense (Denmark).

Funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.



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 2012), SAVING THE WORLD (2008, winner of the Goethe-Institut Preis at the Impulse Festival), BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES (2011, selected for Germany's Theatertreffen), WESTERN SOCIETY (2013), CREATION (PICTURES FOR DORIAN) (2018) and I LOVE YOU, GOODBYE (THE BREXIT EDITION) have received wide acclaim. In 2020, the group were awarded the Tabori Prize, Germany's highest honour for the independent theatre sector. In 2021, Gob Squad received the Friedrich Luft Prize for SHOW ME A GOOD TIME. Their latest work is 1984: BACK TO NO FUTURE (2021).



DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT AND HIGH-RES PHOTOS AT gobsquad.com/press-packs

PHOTO: GARRETT DAVIS/CAPTURE IMAGING

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

THE STAGE
Jul 3, 2018

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 theatregoing 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

1. *Gob Squad started in 1994. Its members wanted a way to get into Glastonbury for free.*
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.*



PHOTO: GARRETT DAVIS/CAPTURE IMAGING