

GOB SQUAD: WAR AND PEACE

#PLAYS
#SMARTS
#WHACKEDOUT
US PREMIERE
MARCH 29–31
AT 7:30 PM

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

Tickets start at \$35



Gob Squad, Berlin's outlandish theater renegades, set their sights on Tolstoy's opus *War and Peace*, only to discover that neither war nor peace are coming without a fight. The setting is a literary salon, where audience members join the cast in a live theater/video performance in which art and daily life, history and the present, reality and fiction blur. In this American premiere, a never-ending parade of characters dance, dine and duel while performers prepare for scenes as if going into battle, all in order to reframe Tolstoy's central inquiry: Can we live a moral life in an imperfect world?

Gob Squad, Berlin's notorious and challenging arts collective, make live video performances that unsettle the lines between the prepared and the improvised, performer and bystander, fiction and life. Gob Squad has been devising, directing and performing together since 1994, motivated by a desire to elevate the everyday and empower audience members to step beyond their traditional role as passive spectators.

gobsquad.com

Running time: 100 minutes

Indefinite Article: Brandon Woolf

War and Peace is back in town. With its immersive salon staging, its playful interaction between performers and audience members, and its free-flowing vodka and blinis. Indeed, there is still an abundance of music, there are wildly audacious costumes, and there is a very large cast of characters. But unlike Dave Malloy's *Great Comet over Broadway*, Gob Squad's *War and Peace* does not attempt to adapt a slice of Leo Tolstoy's 1200-plus-page classic for the stage. No: they have taken on the whole epic book, copies of which are strewn about the theatre – with one shiny copy propped up on a pedestal. And yet Gob Squad is not all that interested in retelling Tolstoy's story; they are not much interested in narrative at all. Instead, they have chosen to playfully refract some of the book's central themes, ideas, and questions through our present moment: both our political realities and our contemporary aesthetic modes.

War and Peace marks Gob Squad's third trip to New York from their home base in Berlin. They are a collective of artists from Germany and the UK who have been co-conceiving, co-directing, and co-performing interdisciplinary "live events" since 1994. The group takes this notion of the co-lective very seriously and as fundamental to their creative process, which challenges the often hierarchical strictures of the theater. Each new piece is composed through an extensive process of assemblage, in which each group member contributes ideas, images, texts, scenarios, design elements, even styles of performance to the collective cauldron, and the group as a whole then participates in taking on that material, trying out new things, reflecting on what is there and what is needed, and restructuring constantly. In other words, all Gob Squad works come about through

collaborative processes of generation, experimentation, critique, revision, and much debate. While these extended processes of devising theater as a collaborative ensemble are slowly becoming more prominent in the U.S. mainstream, they are much more common in Berlin, where generous funding and other institutional structures enable alternative modes of making that eschew the play-script as the origin-point or end-goal of the theater.

These processes of collaboration extend beyond the group's interpersonal working relations and penetrate the very fabric of their performances. Indeed, all of Gob Squad's work is constituted by collaboration across genres, across media, and across the proscenium arch. Firmly based in traditions of the historical avant-garde, as well as postdramatic theatre and Live Art performance, Gob Squad's pieces generously embrace "real" people, places, and things of everyday life. Audience members inevitably find themselves onstage, and their participation is one of the show's central media. The members of Gob Squad take the stage too and never appear as anyone but themselves, working to find and forge meaningful connections with their co-players in real-time, some rehearsed, others improvised. At the same time, the intimacy that Gob Squad manages to create through their wonderfully-idiosyncratic performance scenarios is also challenged – even alienated – by the over-abundance of digital equipment onstage. In all Gob Squad shows, interpersonal interactions are always mediated by live video. While this layer of artificial media seems to critique the role that i-gadgets have come to play in our lives, Gob Squad makes productive use of the digital realm to open up new and unexpected possibilities for encountering and experiencing the world – and the world of the theatre.

Gob Squad does not shy away from the big themes or the penetrating questions. Nor do they shy away from playful bouts of parodic mimicry and pop-culture. Their last few shows have grappled in refreshing ways with the history of "revolutionary" fervor in the 1960s, with the nostalgia for youth that comes in mid-life, and even the whole of Western Society. This time the Gob Squaders have bitten off into perhaps one of their most primordial questions yet. A question that becomes only more timely with each passing day: "Is it possible to live a moral life in an ethically imperfect world?" What kinds of answers will they discover and what kinds of new questions will they pose through their signature style of associative assembly? We will have to wait and see. But one thing is certain: their intimate and thoughtful engagement will be coated in plenty of glitter.



Brandon Woolf, Ph.D. is a theater maker and the Director of the Program in Dramatic Literature at NYU's College of Arts and Science. He is currently at work on a book about contemporary performance and cultural policy in Berlin after the Cold War.

Readings

Matt Cornish, "Kinetic Texts: From Performance to Poetry" in *Modern Drama* 58.3: 302-323.

Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006)

Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, Steve Giles, eds., *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

Nina Tecklenburg and Benjamin Carter, "Reality Enchanted, Contact Mediated: A Story of Gob Squad" in *TDR: The Drama Review* 56.2: 8-33

Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013)

"IN WHICH ART AND DAILY LIFE, HISTORY AND THE PRESENT, REALITY AND FICTION BLUR."