The Moore Theater
Dartmouth College
presents

War and Peace
Gob Squad Arts Collective

Post-performance discussion with the artists

Funded in part by the Robert Grinnell Fund for the Hopkins Center, the Bentley Fellows and a gift from Jane and Peter McLaughlin.

Fri • April 6, 2018 • 8 pm
Sat • April 7, 2018 • 8 pm
The Moore Theater • Dartmouth College
Credits

Concept ................................................................. Gob Squad
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

Tonight’s performers ........................................ Tatiana Saphir, Sharon Smith, Sarah Thom and Simon Will

Sound Design ...................................................................... Jeff McGrory
Video Design ........................................................................... Miles Chalcraft, Anna Zett
Set Design ................................................................................ Romy Kießling
Costume Design ......................................................................... Ingken Benesch
Lighting Design ......................................................................... Andreas Rehfeld, Chris Umney
Dramaturgy ............................................................................... Johanna Höhmann, Christina Runge
Production Management .......................................................... Christina Runge
Technical Management ............................................................. Chris Umney, Max Wegner
Artistic Assistant ....................................................................... Mat Hand, Lena Mody
Assistants from Münchner Kammerspiele .................. Thorben Meißner, Aleksandra Pavlovic, Yana Thönnes
Interns ................................................................................ Katharina Joy Book, Lisa Käppler, Nora Strömer,
                                                          Aleksandra Jakubczak, Tom Healey, Teresa Heiß, Hannah Wolf

Gob Squad Management .................................................. Eva Hartmann
Gob Squad Management UK ................................................... Ayla Suveren
Tour Management ..................................................................... Mat Hand

War and Peace is a production of Gob Squad and Münchner Kammerspiele, with coproduction
by 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. Gob Squad is
War and Peace premiered on March 23, 2016, at Münchner Kammerspiele.
Program Notes

“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 1,256 pages (depending on the edition and language you are reading in), originally written in four volumes, there’s more than 500 characters. Have you actually read it? I’m only halfway through.”

Not so far from the shifting borders of conflict and violence, in a place ravaged by peace, Gob Squad members attempt to hold a salon, a gathering similar to those held in High Society Russia at the beginning of the 19th century. Their starting point is to contemplate War and Peace, a book written over almost a century and a half ago which has become part of history.

Guest Faculty Essay

He just couldn’t get it right. Tolstoy went through sixteen drafts of the opening scene of War and Peace. And what he had to describe was … a cocktail party. Who hasn’t felt “random” at a cocktail party? But if a great writer has determined the guest list, we keep on reading just to guess the logic behind the list. War and Peace begins with a party in an aristocratic Saint Petersburg home. War with France darkens the 1805 landscape and the earthquake of Napoleon’s conquests has begun, a shock that will reshape Europe’s thinking about nearly everything for a century to come. Party life will survive Napoleon’s invasion of Russia—the novel’s chief theme—but war will render it irrelevant and most of the guests will see their lives transformed. Before the end of War and Peace, several present at the party will be killed off by the author.

Tolstoy’s narrator is a mind reader, and he deftly alternates between overheard chatter and the partygoers’ inner thoughts: “She says ..., but what she’s really thinking is ....” Tolstoy is drawn to the gulf between our social self, determined by convention, and the life of our hidden emotions. The bigger the gap, the greater the potential for hypocrisy, which Tolstoy detests above all things. On the other hand, to trample unconsciously on etiquette at a party like this, as the male hero does, is to receive Tolstoy’s silent endorsement. In the opening scene, Tolstoy teaches us how to read him.

His universe is eminently moral. Never subtle in his judgments, his narrator makes it very clear at the party who the good people are and whom we should avoid. But in Tolstoy’s world good people may meet a bullet and venal ones see their political and social fortunes rise. Looked at from Tolstoy’s eagle-eyed perspective, history carries us all on a blind wave. When we compare the first and final scenes of War and Peace we discover that nothing talked about at the party turned out to matter. It’s what you are, not what you talk about, and in the novel’s concluding meditation on history, salon chatter is displaced by philosophy. Seen through Tolstoy’s telescope, in fact, individuals themselves don’t matter much. And yet we’re told this by a 1,300-page novel that etches in our minds for a
lifetime the personalities of a half dozen characters. This is the paradox not just of War and Peace, but of the nineteenth-century novel. In the sweep of events, our private lives don’t count for anything at all—but they are everything to us.

At Tolstoy’s party we also notice that the people with a rich interior life are mostly men. It’s a fundamental Tolstoyan rule: women are sympathetic and can be wise, but they are non-intellectual and usually long-suffering—often due to the sexual or financial irresponsibility of men. If there were a laptop in the ladies’ powder room, there are ample female characters in War and Peace who would instantly register for the #MeToo movement.

Our cliché about Russian literature is that it asks the “big questions.” It does, but most novels, including War and Peace, pose the biggest: “How are we to live?” It would be more precise to say that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky know how to ask about uncomfortable things. How do we maintain integrity in a careless world? What do we commit to? Above all, how much of ourselves do we owe others?

We can think of Gob Squad as writing the seventeenth draft of the opening of War and Peace. Tolstoy never understood the stage, probably because he hated the person he imagined he was when he sat in the audience. But he was a thoroughgoing iconoclast. He talked truth to the tsar. He talked truth to the church. A man of contradictions, he endorsed the class system but hated all political hierarchies and despised totalitarian thinking. He was a pacifist whose battle scenes in War and Peace are the most remarkable since Homer. Admiring humility but unable to practice it, he rewrote the New Testament to his own liking.

So Tolstoy would applaud Gob Squad’s undaunted revisionism and be pleased that he had inspired the freethinking troupe here today—though he would mask his delight with a patriarchal glare.

John Kopper, Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature, Dartmouth College

About the Artists

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. The members of Gob Squad have been devising, directing and performing together since 1994, working where theater meets art, media and real life.

For over 20 years, Gob Squad has 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 the company’s work, with the result that alienated forms of intimacy have become a central theme. The members 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 theaters 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.
About the Artists continued

Motivated by a desire to elevate the everyday and empower audience members to step beyond their traditional role as passive spectators, Gob Squad sets 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 an 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 organized chaos unfolding on stage before them.

Gob Squad was founded in 1994, while 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 Preis at the Impulse Festival), Before Your Very Eyes (2011, selected for Germany’s Theatertreffen), Western Society (2013) and most recently War and Peace (2016) have received wide acclaim. This is Gob Squad’s first engagement at the Hopkins Center.

Connecting Artists to the Community

While at Dartmouth, Gob Squad Collective visited classes in the Department of Theater; shared dinner with students at Foley House; and will participate in post-performance discussions. For more information on Hop Outreach & Arts Education, call 603.646.2010 or visit hop.dartmouth.edu/online/outreach.

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