

Review: War and Peace, devised by Gob Squad, Melbourne Festival and Malthouse Theatre



DON'T expect grim imagery or an intensive or academic scrutiny of Leo Tolstoy from Gob Squad's adaptation of *War and Peace*, because this production is playful and eccentric rather than confronting or impenetrable. Gob Squad, a company of English and German theatre artists based in Berlin, teases out ideas, characters and situations from Tolstoy's mammoth, 1869 novel about the Napoleonic Wars and the 1812 French invasion of Russia, and makes them their own.

The show starts gently with the four actors (Tatiana Saphir, Sharon Smith, Bastian Trost, Simon Will), dressed in rose-beige, silken 'gowns' (costumes by Ingken Benesch) that ridiculously expose their lower bodies.

They formally introduce audience members and invite them to join the actors onstage in a French-style salon that echoes Anna Pavlovna Sherer's salon in Volume One of *War and Peace*.

This production draws loosely on the structure of Tolstoy's novel, but the audience cannot be passive and the improvised style makes these salon guests an intrinsic part of the show as the actor-hosts ply them with strawberries, vodka and brandy while encouraging them to reveal personal stories or discuss global issues.

The performers are all charming, quirky, funny and skilful as they weave fiction and fact, improvisation and live video around Tolstoy's grand landscape of affluence and wartime horrors.

The performance is nonlinear, shambolic and irreverent, shifting from conversational dialogue at the salon table, to extracts of Tolstoy's novel read aloud from the page, to oddball arguments between actors playing characters such as Napoleon and Tsar Alexander.

The actors introduce a bevy of Tolstoy's Russian characters by portraying them in a parodic fashion parade in which the actors don jackets, robes and hats to give satirical snapshots of leading characters from the novel. The focus shifts, as does Tolstoy's writing, away from the fictional narrative and characters toward a more philosophical discussion of history and its impact on the present and future.

The set design (Romy Kiesling) incorporates a battlefield tent with sheer, gauze curtains as well as small and large screens onto which are projected live video of actors and salon members, evocative images of luxurious, Russian interiors or paintings of the Napoleonic battlefield.

This production defies description, not only because of its loose structure and improvised nature and its blend of comical and serious content, but also because its tone, content and participants will change with each audience.

This *War and Peace* treats the issues of war and peace with a light touch that may indicate an unwillingness to delve too deeply into the darker side, but it gently prods the audience to ponder not only Tolstoy's book but also his lessons about history.

WAR AND PEACE

Merlyn Theatre, Malthouse until Oct. 30

Rating: three and a half stars