

<b>Institution:</b> Bath Spa University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> <b>The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak: Challenging Perceptions of Non-Normative Bodies and Deconstructing the Medical Gaze</b>		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Laura Purcell-Gates	Reader in Drama	1/9/2011 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2013 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p><i>The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak</i> is a practice-based research project, presented as a puppet chamber opera exploring the true story of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French medical anomaly Tarrare who had polyphagia (excessive appetite), which challenged perceptions of non-normative bodies and deconstructed the medical gaze (which pathologises physical difference). This project addressed negative perceptions of non-normative bodies that affect public attitudes towards such bodies as well as treatment of patients in medical and arts-based support and therapeutic contexts.</p> <p>The project changed perceptions of non-normative and othered bodies by audience members through the show's portrayal of Tarrare and his story. The main outcome, an original puppet chamber opera funded by the Wellcome Trust and Arts Council England, influenced audience perceptions using puppetry, music and narrative to generate empathy for Tarrare. It also changed perceptions of and approaches to patients by medical and arts-based support and therapeutic professionals, through experiential work with puppets that allow for new ways of understanding how unique and non-normative bodies move in the world. The supporting public engagement event and puppetry workshops facilitated new understandings for arts-based support and therapeutic professionals and medical professionals, by asking them to build and manipulate non-normative bodies in a way that is led by the body itself and not by their expectations of it.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Purcell-Gates' research has developed a model of puppetry as a practice-based analytic to deepen understanding of ethical and historical issues within the medical humanities. Public attitudes towards anomalous bodies are shaped by negative perceptions of such bodies that circulate in the media and within popular discourses. Additionally, disability rights advocates campaign for a change in perceptions of disabled, injured or ill patients by the medical establishment, which frames their bodies as collections of symptoms (Foucault's medical or clinical gaze) and stands in the way of the patient narrative; instead advocates encourage a system in which the patient's voice is listened to as part of treatment and healing. This medical/clinical gaze is traced back to the advent of modern medicine in Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the time frame in which Tarrare's story is set. The case study of Tarrare was a relatively unknown but deeply significant example of the shift from the holistic medical approach (focused on the patient narrative) to the medical/clinical gaze approach (framing patients' bodies as collections of body parts); it is significant that Tarrare's doctor, the famous surgeon Baron Percy, referred to Tarrare as a 'monster'. Tarrare's real-life medical treatment and autopsy is portrayed in the show to explore this significant shift in medical ideology and the doctor-patient relationship.</p> <p>In the <i>Tarrare</i> project, Purcell-Gates investigated the use of puppets to both portray and critique the medical gaze. The research focused primarily on determining the unique properties of puppetry that allow for interrogation of anomalous bodies. These were found to include the ability to construct puppet bodies to literally enact embodied experience (eg an absence of the lower torso of Tarrare made literal the perpetual sense of emptiness in his stomach) and the ability to use non-realist modes of embodiment to signify non-normative embodied experience</p>		

(eg a hand reaching out of Tarrare's mouth to grasp food signified Tarrare's extreme appetite). The research was conducted through research and development of the original puppet chamber opera *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* through development sessions and rehearsals of the show (R1, R4).

Through the research and development and rehearsal stages of the project, the research also considered how puppetry can be deployed to interrogate ethical issues around representing the historical other on stage (R1, R4). This included the issue of the absence of Tarrare's voice in the archive, interrogated through the construction of Tarrare as a 'corpse-like' puppet in the autopsy room, re-animated by live performers (R1). It also included historiographic displacement of conventional historical narratives of the 'progress' of modern medicine, interrogated through enacting Tarrare's medical treatment as the literal manipulation of an object - the puppet (R1, R2).

Furthermore, the research examined how puppetry can deepen understandings of the doctor-patient relationship and modern medicine's shift to the medical gaze (R1, R2, R4). This was accomplished through using puppetry to materialise the medical gaze: playing on the simultaneous subject/object ontology of puppets to frame the puppets as both dead corpses in an autopsy room and apparently living figures within a living story (R1, R3). This approach was instigated through collaborative consultations with medical students on the University of Bristol's Intercalated BA in Medical Humanities (iBAMH) course, who conducted research on the emergence of the medical gaze at the time of Tarrare's life, led by Purcell-Gates as Creative Director of Puppetry for the show (R1, R4). The actions, struggles and failures of the doctor Baron Percy as he attempts to diagnose and cure Tarrare, and the autopsy he performs on Tarrare's dead body which begins and ends the show, were developed in consultation with pathologist Dr Alan Bates (University College London) who was brought on as Co-Investigator when the Wellcome Trust funded the project, with Purcell-Gates as Primary Investigator (R1, R4). Consultations with disability scholar Professor David Turner on the holistic model of patient treatment informed both the show and the related puppetry workshops on the differences between the social and medical models of disability, which developed the uses of puppetry as an applied theatre practice (R1, R2, R4, R5, R6).

This additionally resulted in a Research Programme (R4) co-authored by Purcell-Gates, Bates, Turner and Dr John Lee, director of the iBAMH course at University of Bristol and medical students on the course, which explained to audience members the research behind the show, how this informed the show's puppet design and libretto, and several of the show's key themes. This included Bates's reflections on how participating in the project allowed him to understand the discipline of pathology in a new light and how telling the story of Tarrare casts new light on the medical profession ('Looking for the Golden Fork').

### 3. References to the research

**R1** Purcell-Gates, L. (2020) [The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak: Puppet as a practice-based analytic within the medical humanities \(2014-2017\) \[research portfolio\]](#) Includes: research overview, link to full show, and links to collaboration process blog, research programme, public engagement event summary, and related publications.

**R2** Purcell-Gates, L and Fisher, E (2017) ['Puppetry as reinforcement or rupture of cultural perceptions of the disabled body.'](#) *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 22 (3). pp. 363-372

**R3** Purcell-Gates, L (2019) ['The monster and the corpse: puppetry and the uncanniness of gender performance.'](#) In: Astles, C, Mello, A and Orenstein, C, eds. *Women and puppetry: critical and historical investigations*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 19-34

**R4** Purcell-Gates, L, Poster, T, Bates, A, Lee, J, Turner, D (2012-2015) [The Tarrare Project](#). Research blog.

**R5** Purcell-Gates, L and Smith, M (2020) ['Applied puppetry: communities, identities, transgressions.'](#) *Applied Theatre Research*, 8 (1). pp. 3-11

**R6** Astles, C., Fisher, E., Purcell-Gates, L. and Sextou, P. (2020) ['Editorial - applied puppetry in health.'](#) *Journal of Applied Arts and Health*, 11 (1 & 2). pp. 3-13

**Funding**

- Purcell-Gates (PI), *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2014-2017), Wellcome Trust, GBP70,000
- Purcell-Gates (PI), *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2012-2016), Arts Council England, GBP39,604 (independent funding)

**4. Details of the impact**

Purcell-Gates' research, and the resulting performance, help to deconstruct the medical gaze in relation to perceptions of and behaviour towards people with anomalous bodies. The project changed audience members' perceptions of non-normative bodies and influenced perceptions of and approaches towards patients by medical, arts-based support and therapeutic professionals. By using puppetry to both investigate and portray the Tarrare story, the treatment of puppets was able to be used as an analytic to enact and more clearly understand the act of performing the medical gaze. Puppets can be viewed as literal collections of body parts, dead objects that take on life through human manipulation, much as patient bodies are manipulated by doctors.

**Influencing audience perceptions of non-normative bodies**

The show prompted audience members and reviewers to think about and question the historical and medical context of Tarrare's life and prompted them in particular to think differently about non-normative bodies including Tarrare's, performers in freak shows, and medical patients. The show provoked empathy for Tarrare in the form of deeper and more nuanced understanding his condition. Audience members articulated this in their perspective on Tarrare: "He's in the grip of something he can't control" and "he is stuck in this image of himself where all he has is hunger and no one can help him as it's such a strong urge". Another audience member stated: "It also made me wonder whether Tarrare's emptiness was related to his mental health and loneliness as well as a physical cause for his appetite" (E1), demonstrating empathy.

The show provoked both disgust and sympathy for Tarrare, prompting audience members to feel positively towards a person even as they perceive them as disgusting:

It's very physical, disgusting and it's uncomfortable to watch. But I feel the despair in his emotional and physical state (E1)

Other responses highlighted this dual response: "[I feel] Slight revulsion and sympathy for his vomiting so much" and "I feel disgusted...But I also feel sorry for him because he cannot help the fact that he has this condition" (E1). Tarrare's relationship with Celeste, another main character, also provoked new ways of understanding him as a whole person:

She sees through the 'freak' side of him as she is also seen as one and can instead see the real human behind the stigma (E1)

She does not see him as a freak, but as a beautiful and unique being who deserves a life without torment, mockery and shame (E1)

Through the relationship with Celeste, audiences were moved to share: "He is unique so special"; "He is a special individual like herself"; "a beauty beneath the horror" (E1).

The portrayal of Baron Percy and the medical establishment in the show changed audience perceptions of how non-normative bodies can be treated within the medical establishment: "The methods are not suited to him but are the only things the doctors knew so they were trying, he then just sort of became an experiment to any procedure and his welfare did not get thought about" (E1). One audience member shared: "I believe that [the doctor] truly wanted to help him, but perhaps it was for his own benefit and gain, so that he could be seen as the one who cured the freak?" (E1). The show's final image of the head in the jar provoked deeper reflection on how we perceive non-normative bodies: "we saw the body but not the insides, seeing this shows how his body worked to some extent and shows what was underneath him, no freak, just organs, genetically different but still human" and "Tarrare was treated like a "specimen" and not like a human by most around him" (E1).

The live show reached 5,083 audience members, and the online video of the show had over 10,000 views between March and December 2020. The show received 23 reviews from publications including *The Times* and *The Stage* and interviews with the creative team were

featured 3 times (including in *The Guardian* and on BBC1 and BBC3; E2). The reviews reference the show's creation of empathy for the non-normative figure of Tarrare as well as the foregrounding of how non-normative bodies are presented and displayed in freak shows and problematising audience relationship to this form of spectacle:

It might well be that this is where the genius of the production lies, that the cast and creative team have really cleverly co-opted the audience into being exactly who they said they would never be: the people who enjoy freak shows. (E2)

This was echoed by audience members who saw their own complicity in the positioning of 'freaks' in society in new ways: "The audience could be seen as the audience that are just watching the freaks, in a way it's like we let that happen" (E1).

### **Changing perceptions of medical professionals by deconstructing the medical gaze**

Purcell-Gates' research led to medical and nursing students shifting their perceptions of patients and developing new ways of thinking about the relationship between medical staff and patients, including a more holistic approach to patients. This was achieved by the creative team working with medical and nursing students in the development of the show, through workshops on the differences between medical and social models of disability. This was shared as part of the *Performing the Freak* public engagement event which toured to several HEIs and arts venues (E7).

One of the project's core partners was the intercalated BA in Medical Humanities programme at Bristol University. Approximately 24 medical students in 2 year groups (2013-14 and 2014-15) worked closely on the project with Purcell-Gates, engaging in independent research around key questions of the show, then met with Purcell-Gates for in-depth discussions based on their findings (E6). 3 students in the 2013-14 cohort participated in the 2013 public engagement event 'Performing the Freak' at Tobacco Factory Theatres (Bristol) in which they discussed ways in which working on the show helped them think in new ways about their future vocation as doctors (E3, E6). Medical students involved in the project reported a transformative effect on their approach to medicine and their future vocation as doctors, including questioning the 'monstrosity' of doctors, realising the ways in which the medical establishment dehumanises patients, and powerful and new understandings of the history of medicine, the medical gaze and the holistic approach to the patient (E3).

Purcell-Gates ran a puppetry workshop on differences between the medical versus social models of disability for 17 nursing students at Ulster University on 27 June 2019. The workshop facilitated a change in perception of nursing students' relationships to their patients, with a shift towards a more holistic understanding of patient experience. From watching puppets in the workshop, the nursing students understood the importance of reading a patient's body language: "It made me think more about the patients I care for, their body language and what I can read from them" and "Focus and attention on the puppet made me think of the importance of observing patients, paying attention and observing patients from their body movement to identify their needs" (E4). Focusing on the patient extended beyond observation and students made connections between interactions with puppets in the workshop and the importance of patient-focused care: "Focusing on the individual and not what's around you"; "Letting the patient be in control of their care and following/supporting their journey"; "Focusing on puppet is like focusing on 'patient' within hospital setting" (E4). The nursing students felt that engaging with puppets in the workshop reminded them of the importance of holistic care, not forcing bodies to do things, letting patients be in charge of their care, and allowing them to empathise with individuals in their care: "The workshop on Puppetry is very beneficial to Nurse training as it allows us to Engage, show sympathetic presence, [and] Empathise" (E4). This was specifically connected to an intervention in the medical gaze: "Looking at the individual as a person and not the patient"; "Shift in seeing patient as individual (not as patient)" (E4).

### **Changing perceptions and practice of arts-based support and therapeutic professionals**

The research into medical versus social models of disability also led to practice-based workshops. A puppetry workshop run by Purcell-Gates for 29 applied theatre professionals at the Broken Puppet 3 Symposium on 17 April 2019 led to a change in applied theatre professionals' perceptions around non-normative bodies and a change in their approaches to

their work with people with non-normative bodies. The applied theatre professionals were from the UK and Europe and included arts psychotherapists, dramatherapists, puppetry therapists, child psychotherapists, puppetry practitioners with hospitalised children, puppetry therapists with refugees and children, and professional puppeteers working in applied settings.

Participants gained new understandings of the ways in which puppetry is a useful tool for discussing disability and reframing disability in positive terms, stating: “Take your body/puppet as it is and let it work. Puppet makes disability into more-ability = mobility = new unknown movements. This seldom works in reality. But the idea of turning something ‘bad’ into something ‘good’ is wonderful and hopeful” and “Not seeing movement limitations of the puppet as a flaw - their individual movement can create character” (E5). The use of puppets helped participants to feel empathetic and some thought this was a useful tool to spark empathy and understanding in others. Participants stated this approach was “Ideal for team building activity to allow others to understand struggles others may face” and that they “enjoyed the idea that the newspaper puppet can represent ‘how I feel in the world’ not just physical disability” (E5).

The workshop sparked ideas surrounding diverse identities, acceptance and how self-identity and identity formation can be explored and expressed using puppetry: “Acceptance of ‘spontaneous’ diversity; anybody has his/her own abilities/challenges; much more interesting than starting by brain concepts. The readymade puppet creates his/her own identity”. One participant shared that “The paper puppet works well for identification with my ‘disabled’ body” (E5). Participants also expressed a new or expanded understanding of what puppetry is able to achieve both as an art form and in applied/ therapeutic settings, stating that “This workshop gave me a lovely insight into how collaborative improvisation, movement, intention, gesture and imagination bring the puppet and story to life more than ‘correct’, ‘normal’ form” (E5). Another participant highlighted the importance of the workshop:

Very relevant as I work through metaphor and I use puppets/handmade puppets to allow clients to find their ‘authentic self’ (E5)

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**E1** Audience feedback, demonstrating shift in perception of non-normative bodies through increased empathy for Tarrare and a deeper understanding of Tarrare’s humanity

**E2** Press reviews, including from [Exeunt Magazine](#), demonstrating audience member shift of thought around non-normative bodies resulting from the piece’s framing of the ‘freak show’

**E3** Testimonial from Co-Artistic Director, Wattle & Daub, discussing the shift in perceptions of patients and new ways of thinking about the relationship between medical staff and patients of medical students

**E4** Feedback from nursing students demonstrating shift in perceptions of medical professionals from medical gaze to holistic patient-centred approach, focusing on empathy, non-verbal communication and patient-centred care including reading the patient’s body language and seeing the patient as a human being. [Note: Purcell-Gates was unable to follow up with these nursing students as planned in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that medical professionals could no longer be contacted due to their increased workloads]

**E5** Feedback from applied theatre professionals, demonstrating shift in perceptions about non-normative bodies and shift in approaches to their work with people with non-normative bodies. These include new or expanded understanding of puppetry as a useful tool for reframing disability in positive terms and its potential uses in applied/therapeutic settings, increased feeling of empathy through using puppetry, and new ideas around how diverse identities, self-identity and identity formation can be explored and expressed using puppetry

**E6** [Statement from Director of intercalated BA in Medical Humanities programme at Bristol University](#), on the iBAMH’s medical students’ perspectives. [Note: Purcell-Gates was unable to contact these former medical students - now doctors - to collect impact data as planned in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic which meant that medical professionals could no longer be contacted due to their increased workloads]

**E7** *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (Wattle & Daub): performance documentation, touring dates, audience numbers. Event information of *Performing the Freak*