



School: Music and Performing Arts

Researcher: Dr Laura Purcell-Gates

Project Title: The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak: Puppet as a practice-based analytic within the medical humanities

UOA: 33

300-Word Statement

The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak is an original puppet chamber opera, funded by the Wellcome Trust and Arts Council England, exploring the true story of 18th-century French medical anomaly Tarrare. Dr Laura Purcell-Gates is Primary Investigator and Creative Director of Puppetry on the project, which was produced by Purcell-Gates's company Wattle and Daub. It showcased at Bristol Festival of Puppetry and Suspense Festival, London in 2015, and toured the UK in 2017. The tour included a public engagement event 'Performing the Freak' that brought together the show's creators with medical and medical humanities professionals and disability and monstrosity scholars to explore key themes of the show.

Through this project Purcell-Gates developed a model of puppetry as a practice-based analytic to deepen understanding of ethical and historical issues within the medical humanities. Tarrare's medical treatment and autopsy, portrayed in the show, point to a shift in medical ideology and the doctor-patient relationship away from the more holistic 'patient narrative' and towards a medical model, marked by Foucault's (1963) concept of the medical gaze, that sees a diseased or disabled body as a collection of body parts and symptoms. Purcell-Gates investigated the use of puppets to both portray and critique the medical gaze, with three areas of intervention: ethical engagement with 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); 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); and materialising the medical gaze (interrogated through framing the puppets as both dead corpses in an autopsy room and living figures within a living story).

Research was additionally disseminated through publications and international conference presentations.