

The Tarrare Project

History of Medicine and
The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak



Wattle & Daub

wellcome^{trust}

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The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak details the story of real-life 18th-century French medical anomaly Tarrare. The show explores the rise of the autopsy and its influence on the medical model of the doctor-patient relationship, through the case study of a medical 'monster' and the doctor who treated him.

To explore the biomedical history that underpins the show, Wattle & Daub, supported by The Wellcome Trust, collaborated with pathologist Dr Alan Bates, Bath Spa University, Bristol University's intercalated BA in Medical Humanities course, and an academic advisory panel including Professor Havi Carel (Bristol University), Dr John Lee (Bristol University, Programme Director of iBAMH), and Professor David Turner (Swansea University).

This pamphlet describes some of the ways in which the collaboration between the show's artists and Dr Bates informed the development of the story, libretto, and design. It also includes contributions from Dr Bates on the rise of the autopsy and the changing doctor-patient relationship in late 18th-century medicine, from Dr Lee on the experience of Wattle & Daub collaborating with medical humanities students, and from Professor Turner on the history of the freak show.

For more information about the show's development and the research that informed it, including artistic development sessions, meetings between project partners, research trips and tours, how research and artistic process worked together to develop the show, and contributions from other collaborators, please visit The Tarrare Project website:

wattleanddaub.co.uk/tarrareproject



Pathological specimens, almost colourless due to formaldehyde preservation and often with visible sutures, were viewed during Wattle & Daub's research trips to London with pathologist Alan Bates. Images from these trips informed puppet maker Emma Powell's design of puppet skins and bodies.

Puppet faces designed by Wattle & Daub.

Who was Tarrare?



Tarrare (c. 1772-1798) at a young age was turned out of his family home due to his insatiable hunger and travelled France with a band of thieves and prostitutes. He became a warm up act for a street charlatan, where he would impress French crowds with his ability to swallow corks and stones. In 1788, aged 16, Tarrare took his act to Paris and later joined the French Revolutionary Army.

Army rations could not staunch his hunger, and he was hospitalised at Soultz-Haut-Rhin where he met surgeon-in-chief Baron Percy. An attempt at becoming a military courier failed when Tarrare was sent across Prussian lines having swallowed a box containing military documents; he was captured almost immediately, subjected to a mock execution, and returned to the hospital where he begged Dr Percy to cure him. Percy tried several unsuccessful cures, but Tarrare's appetite was increasingly difficult to satiate - he would often be caught drinking the blood of bloodletting patients and sneaking into the morgue to eat the corpses.

On the disappearance of a 14 month old child, Tarrare was accused and was forced to flee the hospital. Several years later, Tarrare sought out Baron Percy again, believing he was being killed by a golden fork that was lodged inside him. Percy diagnosed Tarrare with advanced tuberculosis and Tarrare died shortly after. Percy conducted an autopsy on Tarrare, but the golden fork was never found.

Who was the doctor?

Born in 1754/7 (dates vary), Baron Percy was an acclaimed military surgeon, obtaining the first prize for the Academy of Surgery on multiple occasions, and named an associate of the Academy in 1790. During his time as an army surgeon Percy made several improvements to battlefield medicine, including creating a corps of mobile surgery, inventing the medical quiver (first version of the doctor's black bag), and creating a nursing army corps. In recognition of his work, Percy was awarded the title of Commander of the Legion of Honour and made a Baron. He was made a member of the Academy of Science and Academy of Medicine, and was named Chief Surgeon in the Grand Army. He died in Paris in 1825. His name can be found on the Arc de Triomphe, and his grave reads 'father of military surgeons'.



Text compiled by iBAMH student Samantha Carse from Baron Percy's "Mémoire sur la Polyphagie" (1804) and J. G. Millingen's Curiosities of Medical Experience (1839)

Image of Tarrare from work-in-progress performance at Bristol Ferment, Bristol Old Vic, July 2012. Photography by Farrows Creative. Image of Baron de Percy from Wellcome Library, London.

The Old Operating Theatre Museum



In March 2015 pathologist Alan Bates accompanied Wattle & Daub Co-Artistic Directors Laura Purcell-Gates and Tobi Poster on a bespoke tour of the Old Operating Theatre Museum in London.

Discussions with Dr Bates during this trip informed Tobi Poster's libretto and the show's narrative arc, and photos informed the show's set and costume design by Rebecca Wood and lighting design by Mark Parry.



Libretto lines inspired by medical writings on Tarrare

"The gullet is abnormally wide..."

Paraphrased from Baron Percy, "Mémoire sur la Polyphagie" (1804)

"The history of this monster is as curious as his habits disgusting."

J. G. Millingen, *Curiosities of Medical Experience* (1839)

The Autopsy

Looking for the Golden Fork

When Baron Percy opened the body of Tarrare, he was performing an autopsy, a procedure designed to reveal what the Italian anatomist Giovanni Morgagni had called, some thirty years earlier, 'the seats and causes of disease.' The search for post-mortem physical changes that could show what illnesses a patient had suffered during life was to develop into the new science of anatomical pathology, and Morgagni's phrase was incorporated into the motto of the London College of Pathologists almost two hundred years later.



We may take it for granted that a post-mortem examination can discover the cause of death, but in Percy's time, the idea that the appearance of particular organs and tissues could be used to diagnose disease was novel. There were no professional pathologists to make post-mortem examinations; surgeons had to do it for themselves, and it helped if, like Percy, they were skilled anatomists.

The study of disease in terms of the pathology of tissues and organs helped to dispel the time-honoured concept of four bodily humors that got out of balance when a person was ill. From a modern perspective, however, it is far from clear that Tarrare's depraved appetite was due to disease in a particular organ: an abnormal constitution, or mental illness, have just as well have been responsible, in which case Percy was seeking something that he could never have found.

Dr Alan Bates, University College London

*Image from work-in-progress performance at Bristol Ferment, Bristol Old Vic, July 2012.
Photography by Farrows Creative.*

Doctor/Patient Relationship

The shift in emphasis in late-eighteenth century medicine from the whole body to specific organs and tissues, sometimes studied at microscopic level, was not uniformly welcomed. While there were many enthusiasts for the modern, scientific medicine of the clinic and the laboratory, some patients bemoaned the disappearance of the 'holistic' doctor with a kindly bedside manner, who saw them as a whole person and not a collection of cells and tissues.

The two approaches are not incompatible, and it can be helpful to consider illness from these different perspectives. Our understanding of Tarrare's troubles comes partly from Percy's autopsy findings but also from reconstructions of his life through which we can imagine his experiences as a patient. Suffering, seeking a cure and feeling isolated or even freakish remain part of a patient's journey despite medicine's scientific advances.

Dr Alan Bates, University College London



'Other' Tarrares

Tarrare's case history is fascinating, but the real interest of the meetings [between Wattle & Daub and medical humanities students] lay in the way in which 'other' Tarrares quickly emerged as the case history was juxtaposed with dramatic staging which was in turn influenced by the musical and vocal scores. The different 'treatments', in other words, produced different

subjects, all of whom are versions of the historical person. Which might be most helpful to Tarrare? Which to us? And what if that 'us' is an audience of patients? or doctors? For the iBAMH, seeing the operetta take shape was to gain a richer sense of the possibilities of dialogue between medicine and the arts.

Dr John Lee, Programme Director, intercalated BA in Medical Humanities, Bristol University



Top image: Doctor visiting a sick woman, circa 1800. Wellcome Library, London.

Bottom image: iBAMH students join Wattle & Daub artists for Performing the Freak at Tobacco Factory Theatres in March 2014 to discuss issues of medicine and monstrosity in the show. Photo by John Lee.

Exhibiting the 'Freak'

The term 'freak show' evokes past attitudes to biological diversity very different to our own. The exhibition of human and animal anomalies has become synonymous with exploitation, cruelty and, given the increasing popularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of shows involving 'exotic' non-European human beings, racism. But human exhibition took a variety of forms in the past, and had a variety of motives.

The exhibition of 'monsters' and other human and animal curiosities became popular in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In popular culture 'monstrous births' were sometimes seen as portents of God's displeasure. However, the development of learned societies such as the Académie des Sciences in Paris and the Royal Society in London from the late seventeenth century fostered growing scientific interest in the wonders of nature and a desire to use them to understand better the natural processes of human development. The display of conjoined twins, people of restricted or exceptional growth and those born without limbs also became a popular form of entertainment, with performances at fairs or in taverns. These shows were often criticised for their disorderliness, but rarely for exploiting the performers.

Some performers sought fame and fortune by aiming their shows at wealthier audiences of 'ladies and gentlemen'. Although their experiences undoubtedly varied, in some cases people were able to make a good living from displaying themselves. Human exhibition may have been a preferred choice of work for some people with disabilities for whom other employment options were limited. Although 'freak shows' may be seen as relics of an unenlightened past, human exhibition was not just a matter of cruel exploitation of the 'unfortunate'. The taste for 'freaks' was part of a broader interest in the limits of the human, in classifying and explaining nature's variety. 'Freaks' like Tarrare crossed the boundaries between science and showmanship, between autonomy and exploitation, and between elite and popular culture.

*Professor David M. Turner,
Swansea University*



Performing the Freak

Performing the Freak is Wattle & Daub's public engagement event that accompanies *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak*. The show's artists perform extracts from the piece, and are joined onstage by project partners and invited speakers to discuss issues around medicine and monstrosity that inform the show.



For more information about the event including upcoming performance dates please visit wattleanddaub.co.uk/performingthefreak.

To enquire about booking the event please contact
Ellie Harris at ellie@wattleanddaub.co.uk.

Images from March 2014 performance of Performing the Freak at Tobacco Factory Theatres. Left image, left to right: Chek Best (Singer, development process), Laura Purcell-Gates (Director, development process); Tom Poster (Composer), Professor Judith Hawley (visiting lecturer from Royal Holloway). Right image: Michael Longden (Singer/Puppeteer). Photographs by John Lee.

The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak is supported by The Wellcome Trust, Arts Council England, Tobacco Factory Theatres, Bath Spa University, New Diorama Theatre, Puppet Place, Bristol Ferment at Bristol Old Vic, Theatre Bristol, and Weston College.

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