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A Grotesque Act of Ventriloquism: Raising and Objectifying the Dead on Stage

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Figure 1: *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak*. Puppeteer Tobi Poster-Su. (Photo: Barney Witts)

"What you are doing is unethical. How can you stand there and say that this human being ate a baby?"

It was one of the more urgent critiques of a work-in-progress that I have encountered throughout a career built on robust and frequent interactions between audience and artistic process. An audience member was taking me to task for what he saw as a flagrant disregard for the legacy of an othered, medically non-typical historical figure. A historical figure for whom, in a partly-documentary work exploring his dehumanisation, objectification and monstering, we had taken the decision to portray as a somewhat monstrous-looking puppet who was indeed presented eating a toddler. Throughout the remainder of the life of the

project in question, I have probably returned to this person's comment more than any other critique of the work.

The project in question was the puppet chamber opera *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2015-2017), for which I co-wrote the libretto and originated the title role as puppeteer. If the above critique had not already indicated this, the title alone should make clear that this is a show which treads some disquieting ethical territory. This article, through reflection on the relationship of the work to the historical record, unpacks some of the ethical issues around presenting the stories of historical Others and explores how puppetry might function as a tool with which to make visible the various ethical and artistic tensions within fact-based theatre.

My company, Wattle and Daub, has a particular interest in little-told stories from the margins of history. Inevitably those margins are inhabited by those who are somehow othered. That I am drawn to these stories is perhaps unsurprising: as an artist and academic of colour, I have navigated both artistic and academic spaces with a frequent awareness of my own marginal status. As a mixed-race artist, I've often wondered how my own experience of liminal spaces has contributed to a desire to explore the murky territory of half-forgotten stories of those stuck between history and hearsay. It goes without saying, however, that one person's otherness is not analogous to another person's, and I am not convinced my own experiences of marginalisation particularly qualify me to tell the stories of other marginalised individuals.

While the puppet opera is certainly a form which demands a degree of artistic license, there are elements of *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* which can be considered as documentary theatre, though it must be said we did not think of the show in these terms as we created it. Tarrare was a real-life historical figure, an 18th-century polyphagist: someone who has an excessive or pathological desire to eat. Tarrare was also a soldier, spy and sideshow freak, who exhibited himself on the streets of Paris where he would perform grotesque feats, such as swallowing corks and stones and eating cats whole before regurgitating the skin and fur. Towards the end of his life Tarrare was ejected from a hospital wherein he was being treated on suspicion of having eaten a toddler. After his death he became the subject of one of the world's first pathological autopsies. The entire archival record of Tarrare's life consists of his medical record and autopsy notes, recorded by Baron Percy, a military surgeon who

treated Tarrare, and published as *Mémoire Sur la Polyphagie* in the *Journal de medecine, chirurgie, pharmacie &c* (1805). No record whatsoever exists of Tarrare in his own words.

With this in mind, as both a librettist and a puppeteer on the project, I was aware that in the creation of the show I was in more ways than one engaging in an act of ventriloquism. If the image that that conjures, of me putting my own words into the mouth of a person who is now dead and unable to speak for themselves, is rather grotesque, I don't think it is wholly inaccurate. I would not be the first person to use ventriloquism for such macabre ends; Steven Connor (2000), in his comprehensive study of ventriloquism, relates the case of noted 19th-century ventriloquist Alexandre Vattemare, who caused panic by appearing to make the dead bodies in a Paris morgue cry out for help. Connor points to the close historical ties between ventriloquism and spiritualism, both of which may appear to give voice to dead bodies. As a company we have always been quite troubled by the ethics of our manipulations of both the bodies and words of the dead; I don't think that this ethical discomfort has been resolved in the life of this show, nor would we expect it to be.

Ventriloquism as metaphor

A number of scholars have recognised the potential of ventriloquism as a metaphor for the insidious manipulations inherent in collaborative autobiography or ethnographic study of the other. Thomas Couser (1998) refers to the inherently ventriloquistic nature of collaborative biography, suggesting that collaboratively produced biographic works on both celebrities and ethnographic subjects are likely to owe as much to their writers as the subjects, and that the imagined balance of power (that the writer is at the behest of the subject) may in fact be reversed. Jackie Huggins and Kay Saunders (1993) refer to the ethnographic ventriloquism of non-Aboriginal researchers working in the field of Aboriginal studies, suggesting that their cultural assumptions will always shape the form of the recorded narratives. Michael Jacklin (2005) draws on Couser, Huggins and others in tracing the repeated deployment of ventriloquism as a metaphor for collaborative life writing, particularly with reference to the ethical issues inherent in the textualization and publication of anthropological life histories of Indigenous peoples. Jacklin acknowledges the value of the metaphor and the many instances or exploitative, imperialistic and appropriative collaboration with marginalised subjects, but ultimately concludes that to apply such a metaphor to all collaborative life writing

oversimplifies the inherently relational nature of testimony and reifies the subordination of Indigenous voices.

Of course, the texts which Couser, Huggins and Jacklin discuss are not entirely analogous to the libretto of the show. In these texts, collaborative writing refers to writing produced in collaboration with an actual living subject, not an author's imaginary resurrection of one. Perhaps a more analogous process exists within historical fiction. Helen Davies (2012) explores the frequent deployment of ventriloquism as a metaphor in critical discussion of the works of contemporary writers of neo-Victorian literature such as A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, as they channel and resurrect the voices of the past. To Davies, such metaphors are marked by a '*lack of engagement* with what ventriloquism might actually mean' (2012: 6), again suggesting that as a metaphor which contains multiple fuzzy meanings, it risks oversimplification. As a puppeteer, it occurs to me that such oversimplifications and elisions are perhaps inevitable; how many scholars of ethnographic biography or historical literature have themselves performed the complex and layered processes required to bring voice and life to an inanimate object?

I would suggest that *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* exists somewhere in the space between historical fiction and collaborative biography in its interweaving of first person narrative with historical account. What is notable in this instance is that within the artefact of the show, the metaphor of ventriloquism is realised in stark physical terms: the audience witness me laying hands on a simulacrum of the body of Tarrare, inserting my hand into an incision at the base of his skull, and invisibly manipulating his mouth, in order that he appears to speak my words.

From the mouths of puppets: the libretto

Tarrare is a particularly voiceless historical figure, both mute within the archives and someone who within his own lifetime was objectified and dehumanized by sideshow audiences, the medical profession and the Prussian soldiers who captured and tortured him. What then, to make of our attempt to find a voice for him through song and puppetry?
In a songwriting process marked by extensive historical, archival and medical research, funded by the Wellcome Trust and in collaboration with a pathologist, a historian of disability and medical students, Tarrare is necessarily the character whose voice is least

directly influenced by any of this research – the least documentary element of the work. Baron Percy's libretto for example, includes not only detailed information but also turns of phrase from my shaky, google-aided translations of Percy's original paper and from the earliest English language account of Percy's writings in *The London Medical and Physical Journal* (1819).

As a counterpoint to these claims to diligent research I must confess that the opening line of the opera was taken almost verbatim from the Wikipedia article on Tarrare, which states 'Tarrare's gullet was found to be abnormally wide' (2020). I suspect this phasing is drawing on Jan Bondeson's (2004) account of Tarrare's life and condition, in which he declares that 'the gullet was uncommonly wide'. While I tended to try to work from Percy's own words or contemporaneous accounts which drew heavily on them, in this instance Percy's words had been 'the buccal cavity and the oesophagus formed a rectilinear canal; so that a cylinder of 20 and even 30 centimetres could be introduced there without touching the palate' (1805: 98). This didn't seem punchy enough to open the show, and the almost onomatopoeic, retching quality of the word 'gullet' – one of those words which seems entirely sonically suited to its meaning – proved impossible to resist.

What follows are three extracts from the libretto of the opening number *The Gullet is Abnormally Wide*, which Percy sings as he conducts a robust autopsy on the body of Tarrare, alongside the source material which prompted them.

The gullet is abnormally wide The body is filled with pus A fact which accounts for the rapidness of decomposition	His body, as soon as he was dead, became a prey to a horrible corruption. The entrails were putrefied, confounded together, and immersed in pus.' (Bradley et al. 1819: 204)
The putrefaction soars A stench that could cut through flesh Unsurprising that the resident doctors have refused to dissect him	His body was so corrupt that they hesitated to open it… It was impossible for M. Tessier [the resident surgeon], as well as for his pupils, to resist the stench of this corpse long enough to carry out the inspection' (Percy 1805: 97)

There's an unprecedented width to his jaws
His molars are worn away
The cheeks so distended that at least a dozen eggs could be kept in

His cheeks were sallow, and furrowed by long and deep wrinkles: on distending them, he could hold in them as many as a dozen eggs. His mouth was very large; the molares [sic] were much worn away (Bradley et al. 1819: 205)

The text, then, is based on Percy's findings at a series of greater and lesser removes from his original voice. Percy writes, in French. I translate, but my translations are filtered through my 21st-century-brain. Perhaps I get closer to Percy's original sense with Bradley's (1819) English account of Percy's findings written only 14 years later? Bondeson and the nameless contributors to Wikipedia write in an entirely different register to Percy, but arguably their text connects me more directly with his findings. What slippages and manipulations of the historical record are taking place even before I begin to take artistic licence? These multiple layers of transformation bring to mind Couser's (1989, cited in Jacklin, 2005) account of the writing of *Black Elk Speaks*, a collaborative autobiography produced by Lakota Elder Black Elk and John G. Neihardt, an American writer. Jacklin, in his discussion of ventriloquism in collaborative life writing, in which he summarises the process thusly:

> Black Elk spoke in Lakota; his words were translated into 'Indian English' by his son; these were then rendered into Standard English by Neihardt dictating to his daughter, who recorded the translation stenographically, producing a transcript which Neihardt later edited.
>
> (2005: 6-7)

For Couser, there is something insidiously and problematically ventriloquistic in the process, conflating as it does 'two consciousnesses (and in this case languages and cultures) in one undifferentiated voice' (1989, cited in Jacklin, 2005: 7). Couser is concerned in this instance about white American cultural imperialism; I would suggest that the stakes are considerably lower in our attempts to produce text in a sort of posthumous collaboration with the arguably relatively unmarginalized figure of Baron Percy. Nevertheless, given our attempts to find some kind of authentic voice for Percy involved similar processes, I find it instructive to view the text that we ultimately produced through this lens.

Alongside his actual historical self, the character of Baron Percy was also directly influenced by encounters and conversations we had with living members of the medical establishment. Percy's final soliloquy in particular was partly stolen from a medical student's out-loud grappling with the ethics of their profession; his strikingly self-lacerating question 'isn't there something inherently monstrous in all medics - to be able to see human beings as a collection of parts and symptoms?' became a core thread in the character and overall narrative. Throughout the play, there are numerous points where words from the archive, be it Percy's writings, contemporaneous medical texts or interviews with modern medics, creep verbatim into the libretto, and enter the world through the mouths of singer and puppet, separate on stage but bound together by invisible cords of lip-synch.

Tarrare, unlike the dawning of pathological medicine or the doctors working at the vanguard of this newly codified science, was such an unknown quantity there was a sense in which it felt important to preserve a sense of mystery about him, even as we eviscerated and laid bare the historical archive surrounding him. In that respect his text was more impressionistic - we were concerned with symbols and metaphors that this endless hunger or emptiness offered. While it seems almost redundant to point out the parallels between Tarrare's experience of the world and what 21st-century late capitalism demands of its subjects, these parallels undoubtedly played a part in the meaning we began to excavate and construct through the text. At the same time, conversations with our collaborators threw open a number of vital and still-timely questions about agency and victimhood in people who exhibited themselves. As a result it felt hugely important that we did not reduce his status purely to that of a victim, even though the historical record reads more or less as a litany of awful things which happened to Tarrare from birth to death. It was this impulse which led to us writing the song *Bring me the Hog*, an alternately angular and lush ode to his own hunger, which deals with the transcendent and ecstatic elements of his existence:

> There's a fire in my belly
> And the teeth in my mouth are as num'rous as stars
> There are scars
> And my body will devour
> My mind within the hour
> The furnace will be fed
> Though the food turns to ashes in my mouth

> Give me tripe for my belly
> Every corpse of each beast in every abattoir in France
> Has no chance
> To satisfy my hunger
> All that flesh to tear asunder
>
> Bring me the hog! I'll split its skull and drink the brains
> A dog! I will tear its flesh till none remains

While this was partly inspired by Percy's claims that 'The dogs and cats fled at his appearance, as if they had guessed the fate he was preparing for them' (1805: 92-93) and that 'he went to the abattoirs and remote places, to dispute with dogs and wolves their vile scraps […] he was surprised in the hospital mortuary, satisfying his abominable hunger' (1805: 96), some of the imagery here also recalls Ovid's account of Erysichthon:

> A desperate desire to eat possesses his famished jaws and burning belly… What would feed a city, or satisfy a people, is not enough for one… as the devouring flames never refuse more fuel, burn endless timber, and look for more…
>
> (1960: 777-842)

This was an intentional allusion – however it was not until revisiting Percy's (1805) original paper on Tarrare for this article that I noticed that he also references Ovid in his introduction to the case. Clearly we were not the first people to see Tarrare's hunger in mythic, even heroic, terms. Tarrare's relationship to his hunger here is of course pure conjecture; for me there was a great artistic pleasure in having the freedom to present him as a sort of otherworldly figure, rendered almost holy but the purity of purpose of his hunger.

What does it mean, then, firstly to put a series of wholly constructed and often slightly abstracted words into the mouth of a real life historical figure, surrounded by characters and text that are far more grounded in research, and secondly for that mouth to be constructed of fabric and plastics? What might the impact be on how an audience read and engage with the performance? There is little in the show to signal either the veracity of the other characters' text or the mendacity of Tarrare's.

Storytelling and audience

Beyond simply the question of what Tarrare might have said, is the question of what Tarrare might have done. Returning to the plot point that I opened with: no-one knows if Tarrare actually did eat a toddler. Clearly if we wished to make Tarrare as sympathetic as possible the straightforward answer would be to proceed on the assumption that the hero of our show absolutely did not eat a toddler. However, it struck us that the more interesting possibility is that the hero of out show might somehow eat a toddler in a way that does not make him monstrous or indeed compromise our ability to see and to empathise with him (stay with me here; it makes slightly more sense on stage than it does on paper). What if there is a compelling and all too human reason that somebody with the bizarre pathology of our hero might, under a particular set of circumstances, consume a toddler without ever having intended any harm?

I will not divulge the specifics of how we answered these questions except to say that a) it was vital that Tarrare did not kill the toddler and b) it was also essential that however the effect of him eating the toddler was created, it had to be non-naturalistic. In all of the reviews and audience feedback that we have received, I do not think anyone has suggested that this plot point in any way interfered with the empathy that was felt for Tarrare. Had Tarrare, and for that matter the toddler, been portrayed by a human, I think it is almost impossible audiences would have felt the same.

This brings me to the crux of this reflection. On the one hand, representing a human being with a puppet is inherently dehumanising. Throughout the duration of the performance, we objectify and dehumanize Tarrare in the most literal sense. Indeed, the conceptual framing of the show is that Baron Percy and his medical assistants are telling the story in the aftermath of Tarrare's autopsy, using assorted cadavers to re-enact Tarrare's life story (this may compromise my claim that the other characters behave in a manner entirely dictated by historical record, but I am referring more to the dialogue than the framing). Throughout the show, the assistants manipulate and manhandle the bodies of the characters, occasionally with an intentional lack of care that arguably serves as a metaphor for our occasionally irresponsible handling of the lives of these historical figures.

On the other hand, as hinted at above, the overwhelming reviewer and audience consensus was that Tarrare was both a tragic and a relatable figure, that the show enabled audiences to empathize with and care for this deeply othered historical person. These responses to the performance suggest that many found that the use of puppets helped them engage with lives that might seem challengingly 'Other', with one review suggesting that the show made 'recognition of our shared humanity with those who are different from us […] remarkably easy' (A Younger Theatre 2017). I am both interested and troubled by the suggestion that otherness may somehow be more relatable when portrayed by an object (manipulated by a less-othered performer) than in the real world, and by my own complicity in this.

I also have questions about the nature of the empathy that Tarrare's 'tragic' story generates in the audience. Are audiences truly recognising a shared humanity, or are they simply projecting their own emotions onto the imagined suffering of an unknown Other? Writing on the privileging of descriptions of suffering by anti-slavery activists, Saidiya Hartman (1997: 20) argues that a focus on identification with suffering produces an empathetic response that privileges the self at the expense of the Other, an erasure which she calls the 'violence of identification'. This links to Elin Diamond's (2007: 403) notion of 'the violence of 'We'', which suggests that spectatorial identification with the Other may be both narcissistic and imperialistic in its insertion of the self into the experience of the Other. This chimes interestingly not only with Couser (1998) and others' concerns regarding ventriloquism in collaborative ethnographic autobiography, but also with a particular mistrust of the concept of ventriloquism which Connor traces to the late 18th century, wherein the word ventriloquism began to indicate 'a violence towards the one that is ventriloquised, or reduced to the condition of a dummy… [Ventriloquism] might involve reducing others to the condition of objects' (2000: 297). Again, I am struck by how literally these fears are realised in our treatment of the historical figure of Tarrare.

Ethics of representation

Julie Salverson, writing on the ethics of documentary theatre, identifies an 'aesthetic of injury' (2001: 122) in which loss and trauma are privileged and the complexities of the real-life Other are compressed into an intentionally tragic portrayal of victimhood, charges which could absolutely be levelled at our portrayal of Tarrare. However, I suspect that Tarrare's portrayal by a puppet complicates this at least somewhat. In an earlier essay on community-

based documentary theatre, Salverson (1996: 184) writes about the 'lie of the literal', suggesting that by privileging authenticity, often at the expense artistic or formal experimentation, theatre can create an illusory veracity in which malleable and complex stories may become a single, stable narrative and the Other may become fixed either as exotic and unknowable or 'just like us'. I suspect that puppets (alongside the distancing effect of the operatic form) may make visible the extent to which the theatrical presentation of the person is not in fact the person, and that of the story is not in fact the story.

Drawing on Levinas' ethics of the Other, which dictates both a responsibility to the Other along with a recognition of the absolute alterity of the Other, Salverson (2006) suggests that theatre should facilitate an encounter with the Other which acknowledges that the Other is essentially unknowable, rather than attempting to create sentimental empathy through identification. The latter approach, Salverson argues, produces only a superficial engagement with the Other in which the audience is able to self-righteously congratulate themselves on having been moved.

Paradoxically, I would suggest that the use of puppets may lend itself to either outcome, since while puppets are demonstrably not part of most people's understanding of a shared 'we', they offer a particularly effective canvas on which to project the self. Indeed, rereading the previously quoted review, perhaps one of the most problematic identifications concerning Tarrare might be that between Tarrare and his puppeteer "whose pained sympathetic face hovers behind his puppet throughout the show. [When he] gasps violently for breath as Tarrare tries to expunge himself of what he has consumed, the anguish is palpable' (A Younger Theatre 2017). Here I have to acknowledge that while the artistic and dramaturgical arguments for and against the (visible) puppeteers mirroring their puppets were discussed at length, the ethical implications of this mirroring were not considered. It is an uncomfortable realisation that this practice of mirroring the puppet's pain (which was partly a practical consideration – producing the required effects was often at least slightly physically uncomfortable) may have encouraged audiences towards the kind of narcissistic self-congratulatory identification with suffering I may myself have been experiencing as a puppeteer.

Rena Heinrich (2018) asserts that the mixed-race experience entails a kind of double-liminality, where the mixed-race subject exists in the liminal space around two cultures

simultaneously. This allows, or perhaps enforces, a constant slippage between multiple boundaries of race as the mixed-race subject navigates various consciousnesses and identities. If, as asserted by Laura Purcell-Gates (2019) in her examination of puppets and gender, the form of puppetry can be understood as inherently liminal in that puppets simultaneously occupy multiple states of being (dead/alive, human/object), perhaps the increasingly popular trope of the visible puppeteer offers an analogous double-liminality where, in addition to the multiple states inhabited by the puppet, the puppeteer occupies the middle ground between visible character and the invisible mechanics of the puppet. This slipperiness is compounded by the liminal status of the hybrid figure of the puppet/puppeteer in which it is unclear who is playing the character, who is operating or assisting the character, or if the separation exists at all.

Puppets and subjectivity

Perhaps, puppeteers aside, puppets can be understood to offer a kind of decentred subjectivity, whereby, stripped of the biographical and individual associations that a human performer will inevitably bring to the stage, they allow an audience greater freedom to project their own feelings and ideas onto a character. This connects with Dennis Silk's (1988) conception of Thing Theatre, in which he argues that things have the potential to wield more power as performers than human beings because their possibility has not been diluted by the accumulated baggage of a human life.

As an object rather than a subject, and possessing a uniquely dead/alive quality, puppets may be able to stand in for more than the individual character they present. Matthew Isaac Cohen (2007: 130) has written about instances of destruction and violence against the puppet body wherein the puppet may function both as a surrogate for actual victims of violence and in a more broadly metaphorical sense, asserting that puppets "can provide powerful lessons in how to deal humanely with other people" in part due to the symbolic possibilities presented by their repeated destruction and reanimation. Further to this, I suspect that puppets and the operatic form, when used to explore documentary or even verbatim text, offer a distance and a defamiliarisation that discourages audiences from literal readings of the text, perhaps even obscuring the documentary nature of the material. This is of course likely to be linked to the fact that the material properties of the puppets lead us as theatre makers to stage works in much less literal fashion than if we had been working with human performers.

If the audience perceives text differently from the mouth of the puppet, then what of the act of writing – are there specific considerations and possibilities when writing a libretto for a puppet? Of course, the question is arguably based on false pretences – In *Tarrare* the libretto is the one part of the performance not performed by the puppet or puppeteer but rather by a singer, also visible onstage. I was, however, writing for a character embodied by a puppet. Perhaps the most significant impact of the materiality of the character is not what we did write, but what we did not. It is hard to imagine that a human performer playing Tarrare would have been written as mostly worldless until the climax of the first act – if this had been the case, the muteness would read as a condition or at very least a very pronounced character trait. Somehow, as a puppet, Tarrare's muteness is invisible until we first hear his disarmingly pure soprano. This in part allowed us to acknowledge the most significant gap in the archive concerning Tarrare – his earlier life. Beyond that, Tarrare's early silence seems to reinforce the idea that this is an object presenting a person, albeit a person who may have registered as little more than an unusual object to many of those around him.

Of course, the distance between presenting Tarrare as objectified, and objectifying Tarrare may be vanishingly small. Indeed, one extremely well-reasoned review suspected the show itself of being every bit as exploitative of Tarrare as the historical characters around him were:

> We, the educated and liberal 21st century Tobacco Factory audience, are not here to find it funny that a man once ate a cat. Only we do.
> […]
> 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. But it's hard to detect exactly what is deliberate and what is not.
>
> (Waugh 2015)

It is an entirely well-placed concern (though I should note, briefly, there is another entirely separate discussion to be had regarding the central assumption here of the exploitative nature of freak shows – this is beyond both the scope of this article). If there is a deliberate aspect to this casting of the audience, it certainly is not born out of a desire to implicate them in this manner without also implicating ourselves. Rather there is an attempt to make visible the

various tensions that exist between exploitation, ventriloquism, condescension and celebration in a sincere attempt to relate a life story. If the audience do find themselves enjoying the freak show, I hope at least that this is not an uncomplicated experience.

Expanding outwards then, what unique possibilities might puppetry offer to makers of documentary and historical theatre? How might puppets enable audiences to connect with real-life characters? What are the risks we take in using puppets in this manner?

Puppets occupy a uniquely liminal space not only between life and death, but also between representational and symbolic. It is hard to place a character played by a puppet – are they presenting an individual, an archetype, an idea? Any theatre which deals in facts and real people can both be enriched and undermined by a form which by its very nature destabilizes meaning. Perhaps, as we watch artists construct the life of a real human being, there is always a value in anything that reminds us that what we are witnessing is a construction, with as much artifice as the hidden hand which manipulates a puppet into apparent speech.

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