

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SPOKEN WORDS, EMBODIED WORDS: A
NEW APPROACH TO ANCIENT EGYPTIAN
THEATRE

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Dissertation directed by: Professor Franklin J. Hildy, School of Theatre,
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In this dissertation, the author advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of dramatic texts and theatrical performances in ancient Egypt. Two primary lines of inquiry run through this study. The first is an in-depth historiography of ancient Egyptian drama and performance in the American discipline of theatre history over the last one hundred years, to better understand the positioning (or lack thereof) of ancient Egypt in American narratives of early theatre history. An important aspect of this historiographical approach is the observation of missed connections between twentieth century Egyptological advances in the discovery and interpretation of dramatic texts, and contemporary conversations in the field of theatre history about the role of ancient Egypt in the formation of the art form. The second line of inquiry follows a Performance as Research (PAR) approach, to evaluate theatrical practice as a useful tool in further interpreting dramatic texts and understanding theatrical performances in ancient Egypt. The goal of this study overall

is to encourage collaboration between theatre practitioners, theatre historians, and Egyptologists for a more holistic understanding of the ancient Egyptian theatrical tradition, and to raise awareness of the potential for modern performance of ancient Egyptian dramatic texts.

SPOKEN WORDS, EMBODIED WORDS:
A NEW APPROACH TO ANCIENT EGYPTIAN THEATRE

by

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Dedication

To my mother, father, and brother, who started me on the path toward my PhD; and to my husband, who saw me to the finish line.

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List of Abbreviations

ARHU	The College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland, College Park
AUC	The American University in Cairo
BCE	Before the Common Era (descending time sequence)
BD	The Book of the Dead
ca. or c.	<i>circa</i> (around or approximately)
CE	Common Era (ascending time sequence)
CT	The Coffin Texts
Edfu Temple	The Temple of Horus at Edfu
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>The History</i> (or <i>Histories</i>) by Herodotus
<i>JEA</i>	The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
Lamentations	The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys
P. or Pap.	Papyrus
PAR	Performance as Research
PaR	Practice as Research
<i>Poet.</i>	Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i>
PT	The Pyramid Texts
RDP	The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus
Songs	The Songs of Isis and Nephthys
TDPS	The School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies
Triumph	The Triumph of Horus
UCLA	The University of California, Los Angeles

UCSB

The University of California, Santa Barbara

UMD

The University of Maryland, College Park

The Triumph of Horus (italicized) refers to H. W. Fairman's translation published in 1974. "The Triumph of Horus" (in quotes) refers to the UMD production or other adaptations in performance.

The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys (italicized) refers to the volume published in 2021 by Andrea Kucharek and Marc Coenen. "The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys" (in quotes) refers to R. O. Faulkner's translation as published in Miriam Lichtheim's *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, or to the performance of this piece at UMD.

Introduction

In contrast to the vast body of knowledge that exists about ancient Egyptian kingship, art, architecture, language and religion, the performing arts in ancient Egypt are a relative mystery. Archaeological digs have unearthed enough musical instruments to provide more substantial information about ancient Egyptian music, while festival iconography on tomb paintings and temple walls combined with a limited number of textual references have filled in a few gaps in knowledge about dance, songs, and musical performance.¹ But *drama* in ancient Egypt, especially the art of *theatre*, presents its own conundrum. Due to the ephemeral nature of performance, scant material evidence remains to provide definitive proof of the content, context, and intention behind ancient Egyptian dramatic texts and public performances. And unlike music or dance, theatre is harder to discern from the limited evidence available, in part because scholars have not yet come to a consensus on what truly defines it.

This is not an examination of the available evidence, although that evidence is essential to my arguments. Several intrepid scholars have already done that important work before me, and I will be discussing their findings in more detail. Rather, the present study is an examination of the *transmission* of that evidence: the process of translation, interpretation, and the subsequent conclusions that have surrounded this

¹ For more on music in ancient Egypt, see Heidi Köpp-Junk, "Textual, Iconographical, and Archaeological Evidence for the Performance of Ancient Egyptian Music," 93-119; and Lise Manniche, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt*. For more on dance and song performance, see Solange Ashby, "Dancing for Hathor: Nubian Women in Egyptian Cultic Life," 63-90; Heidi Köpp-Junk, "The Artists behind the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs," 35-59; and Ellen Morris, "Middle Kingdom Clappers, Dancers, Birth Magic, and the Reinvention of Ritual," 285-335.

evidence since its discovery, and that continue to define it in the twenty-first century.

This inquiry takes a two-pronged approach, as it makes two different interventions in the field of theatre and performance studies: one that is historiographical, and one that is practical. These interventions are distinct, yet inextricably linked. The dissertation culminates in a discussion of the performance of two ancient Egyptian dramas: “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” and “The Triumph of Horus” at the University of Maryland in December of 2019. By staging these dramas within the context of a full-scale theatrical production for the public, I have attempted to answer the following question. Can embodied practice teach us new ways of understanding and transmitting knowledge about ancient Egyptian theatre?

Let me begin by explaining my use of the word “theatre” in the context of ancient Egypt as opposed to the more commonly used “drama” or “performance” or “ritual.” The available evidence leaves little doubt that theatrical activity existed in ancient Egypt, and theatre historians and Egyptologists alike have qualified this activity as drama, performance, dramatic ritual, ritual drama, commemorative ritual, festival drama, ceremonial ritual reenactments and the like, as my dissertation will demonstrate. But only a select few have chosen to qualify this activity as *theatre*.² It is worth noting, perhaps, that the tragedy competitions at the Festival of Dionysus in fifth-century Athens *also* qualified as drama, performance, festival drama and

² Most notably, Étienne Drioton, George Kernodle, George Freedley and John Reeves. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the work of these scholars in more detail.

religious ritual, according to some theatre historians and classicists.³ Yet Greece, on the whole, remains the undisputed birthplace of theatre in the Western world as opposed to Egypt, even if some of the Egyptian evidence dates more than a thousand years before the first recorded date of a dramatic competition in Greece.

I am not attempting to argue the merits of Greek innovation in theatre, however; my point is that by denying ancient Egypt its *own* “theatre,” historians have actively excluded Egypt from any serious study within the discipline. Instead, the vast majority of theatre historians have relegated ancient Egyptian drama and performance to the obscure category of “origins”—one often synonymous with “primitive” practices—while declaring ancient Greek drama “*the* theatre,” or “the first” theatre.⁴ This is just one of the preconceived notions that I am seeking to combat with this dissertation. My use of the term “theatre” in reference to the ancient Egyptian dramatic tradition is a positive step toward breaking down these biases against the idea of ancient Egyptian theatre, which have persisted for more than a century.

On the other hand, some scholars might object to the use of the word “theatre” on the grounds that the word itself—stemming from the Greek *θέατρον* or *theatron* meaning “seeing place”—imposes a Western concept on ancient Egypt from the outset by insisting that Egyptian dramatic activity *was* theatre, in the Greek sense. My answer to their concern is, yes, that is true. The ancient Egyptians of the Pharaonic era would not have used the word *theatron* nor *drama* (from the Greek *δράω* meaning

³ Among these are Bruce McConachie et al., *Theatre Histories*, 53-57; Eric Csapo and Margaret Miller, introduction to *The Origins of Theater*, 5; Barbara Kowalzig, “‘And Now All the World Shall Dance!’,” 222.

⁴ Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, *The Living Stage*, 19-22; Thomas Wood Stevens, *The Theatre from Athens to Broadway*, 4-7.

“I do” or “I act”).⁵ In fact, according to some Egyptologists, there were no words at all in ancient Egyptian for terms like “theatre,” “play,” “actor” or even “drama.”⁶ That being said, I will point out that in the fourteenth century BCE, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten called the sacred lake on the grounds of his Temple to the Aten in Amarna the *maru*—the ancient Egyptian equivalent of “seeing place.”⁷ Why would he have used this word for a body of water beside the temple? The present inquiry will demonstrate that the sacred lakes on the grounds of both the Temple of Osiris in Abydos and the Temple of Horus in Edfu served as focal points for the dramatic ritual reenactments that took place there during major festivals. Therefore a sacred lake such as Akhenaten’s *maru* could very well have been a site of theatrical performance, just as the Greek *theatron* served that purpose in ancient Athens.

My use of the word “theatre,” however, is less for the benefit of understanding Egyptian history and more for the benefit of understanding how we, the modern living public, *conceptualize* that history. Whatever these words might have meant to ancient Egyptians is irrelevant in this case. They mean something to theatre scholars and ancient historians *today*. And as today’s scholars approach and interpret history, we inevitably do so through the filter of our current contexts.

⁵ The Pharaonic era refers to the period in Egyptian history that spanned the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, when Egypt was a unified nation under a native Egyptian pharaoh. Egyptologist Ian Shaw dates this period from approximately 3100 to 332 BCE, but I would argue that it began its slow decline in approximately 1069 BCE with the death of Pharaoh Ramesses XI and the stream of invading foreign powers that took hold in the following centuries. See Shaw, introduction to *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 1-15; John Taylor, “The Third Intermediate Period (1069-664 BC),” in Shaw, *Oxford History*, 324-63.

⁶ See François Gaudard, “The Demotic Drama of Horus and Seth,” 66; Leprohon, “Ritual Drama in Ancient Egypt,” 259.

⁷ Alison Daines, “Egyptian Gardens,” 24; I am grateful to Robyn Gillam for bringing this to my attention.

The extant material evidence for performance activity in ancient Egypt is invariably connected to performative rituals of worship or political ceremony (the latter usually wrapped up in the former), and attempting to identify a theatrical tradition among this evidence has proven to be problematic, if not provocative. As Egyptologist Paul O'Rourke asserts regarding the largely cultic dramatic materials, "their content is based on myth, and their purpose is to reenact, not to instruct or to reflect. In no way do they attempt to explain human behavior, good or bad."⁸ In response, I must agree with another Egyptologist, Ronald Leprohon, when he states, "the topic is complex enough that a categorical 'yes-no' position is perhaps not the best place to begin."⁹ The first part of my PhD dissertation examines some of the reasons why "the problem" of ancient Egyptian drama has been, as Egyptologist Herbert Walter Fairman put it, "notoriously difficult to solve and views for and against have been put forward and contested with equal vigour and dogmatism."¹⁰

But first, I want to be clear about how I am defining the word "dramatic" and the phrase "dramatic texts." If I asked three different people what the word "drama" means to them, I would probably get three very different answers in response. One or two undergraduate students of mine have suggested that drama, in their view, is a genre or medium of literature comprised of play scripts for the theatre. From their perspective, a dramatic text might be just that—a play—and they would consider a text "dramatic" only if it were a literary work written down in the format of a play. Approaching the ancient Egyptian literature from this standpoint, it would be hard to

⁸ O'Rourke, "Drama," 407.

⁹ Leprohon, "Ritual Drama in Ancient Egypt," 259.

¹⁰ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 1

see anything that remotely resembled a play, with good reason. Still others have argued that drama is *conflict*, in all its forms. I will discuss this definition in more detail in Chapter 1.

Another definition of “drama,” used far more frequently by theatre historians, performance scholars, anthropologists, theatre practitioners and, in this case, Egyptologists is as a performative and *mimetic* act; *mimetic* meaning that there is an element of “make-believe” in this act, an “imitation” in which the performer is pretending to be someone or something else.¹¹ This definition is broader and more complicated than the first, because it has less to do with the written word and more to do with the spoken or embodied word as well as content, context, and action. In other words, it is a less concrete answer, open to interpretation. From this perspective, the only requirement for a text to be called “dramatic” is that it represents, records, or informs the practice of this act.

In short, these contrasting definitions as outlined above represent drama of the *literary* tradition versus drama of the *oral* tradition. Although, using the term “oral” when defining “drama” can still be problematic, as many performance practices of this kind are non-verbal, such as dance and ceremonial rituals that employ gesture and movement without words. For ease of clarification, then, one might use a different term for this form of drama: “theatral.” This implies a connection to theatre without firmly identifying such an event or practice *as* theatre. In fact, Egyptologist Jorge

¹¹ Both Plato and Aristotle, ancient Greek philosophers and teachers, put forth theories of *mimesis* that have had a great deal of influence on theatre and performance studies. See Plato’s *The Republic* (Book 3) and Aristotle’s *Poetics*. I will be discussing the latter in Chapter 1.

Ogdon has used the word “theatral” to describe a specific utterance, or spell, from the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, a scene he calls “The Reception in the West.”¹²

Still another definition of “drama” refers to emotionality. If a story, poem or recitation, for instance, evokes an emotional response than it is often called “dramatic.” Once again, in this instance the text or the performance of that text does not necessarily constitute a play, but is considered dramatic all the same due to its experiential effect on the listener or observer. Some scholars might call these spoken or embodied words “lyrical” when they elicit strong emotions, especially in the context of poetry. The Egyptologist Louis B. Mikhail, for example, writes of the celebration of the mysteries of the god Osiris in ancient Egypt, “We cannot isolate the lyrical element of Egyptian dramatic performances from the deep influence of song, music and dance and it was this lyrical element which became one of the predominant characteristics of the festival performances.”¹³

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the term “dramatic text” in the same way that many Egyptologists have used (and continue to use) the phrase, to refer to texts that represent a theatral event of some sort, and that encompass at least one (if not all) of the above definitions of “dramatic.” Among these scholars, for instance, German archaeologist Jan Assmann characterizes an utterance or spell from the ancient Egyptian funerary texts as “dramatic” when “several speakers and/or hearers appear in the same spell.”¹⁴

¹² Ogdon, “Further Notes on ‘A New Dramatic Argument’,” 84. In Chapter 2, I will address Ogdon’s work in more detail.

¹³ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 38.

¹⁴ Assmann, “Egyptian Mortuary Liturgies,” 6. A deeper theoretical discussion of *drama* in the context of performance studies appears in the next chapter.

Another word I will use frequently throughout this study that requires further qualification is the term “Western.” Historically, “Western” or the phrase “Western world” pointed to Western Europe and Western European culture. In academia, it indicates an intellectual world-view and approach to scholarship inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans that privileges the written record and objective, material-based scientific inquiry.

When used today, however, the term “Western” does not refer to a specific geographic location *per se* but to traditions rooted in a power dynamic that has been globally in play for more than half a millennium and continues to prevail in economics, law, education, government, and other modes of society, even in parts of the world deemed “non-Western.” I am using these somewhat problematic terms in order to draw attention to the socially and politically constructed binary of “The West” and “Everyone Else,” and to underline the need for more appropriate alternative terms in our field.

Edward W. Said’s seminal work of postcolonial criticism, *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, challenged the Western intellectual tradition by holding a mirror up to the historical and pervasive cultural biases of the Eurocentric Western world. Said defines Orientalism in three distinct ways.¹⁵ First, he defines it as a fetishism—Europe’s fascination with the East, or the “Orient” (that is, not necessarily “East” but rather anything *outside* of the “West”)—which has promoted and supported for centuries the objective study of “Eastern peoples,” their history and culture. Second, he defines it as the concept of the “other” in direct opposition to the West—that is,

¹⁵ Said’s discussion of these three definitions appears in *Orientalism*, 2-3.

the creation of a cultural and intellectual binary that manifests in the East, or the “Orient,” and the West, or the “Occident.”¹⁶ Finally, it is a medium through which the “Occident” can control and wield authority over the “Orient.” Egyptology provides a perfect example of Orientalism in each of these forms. It is a field of study that carries a heavy colonial legacy, beginning with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent publication of the *Description de l’Egypte*.¹⁷ According to Edward Said:

Because Egypt [during the Napoleonic era] was saturated with meaning for the arts, sciences, and government, its role was to be the stage on which actions of a world-historical importance would take place. By taking Egypt, then, a modern power would naturally demonstrate its strength and justify history; Egypt’s own destiny was to be annexed, to Europe preferably.¹⁸

Another example of the heavy Orientalist impact on a relevant field of study appears in an essay by Erin B. Mee, theatre director and Assistant Arts Professor of Theatre Studies at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Published in 2010, the essay entitled “*But Is It Theater?* The Impact of Colonial Culture on Theatrical History in India,” outlines the history of historiography on theatre in India since the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ This time frame is of particular importance; it covers the period of British imperial rule, when “the spread of English drama was part of the colonization of Indian culture” (99), and the writers of modern Indian history became almost exclusively British. As a result, the modern history of theatre

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

¹⁷ Andrew Bednarski, “The Reception of Egypt in Europe,” 1088-89.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 84-85.

¹⁹ Mee, “*But Is It Theater?*” in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, 99-109.

in India became essentially the history of *British* theatre in India, rooted in and defined by its literary merit. That which was *written* became the preferred and privileged mode of theatrical expression, whereas the traditional Indian theatre—with the exception perhaps of Sanskrit drama—was not rooted in a prescribed text. It was a performance-based mode of expression, often improvised (100). The performers themselves, as opposed to the playwright, held power over the narrative structure and therefore the actors were not beholden to the text, but to the story and the characters they embodied on stage. Mee writes:

The new definition of modern theater as dramatic literature marginalized these genres, which came to be thought of as “theatrical” but not as “theater” per se and were therefore left out of the histories of theater. In this manner, histories of Indian theater not only erased indigenous theater forms from the record but actively participated in the construction of theater as a form of literary activity. (100)

As such, Mee explains, British historians were neglecting the rich, enduring tradition of indigenous Indian theatre that had been thriving there for more than a thousand years. “Consequently,” she writes, “it appeared that modern theater was a gift to India from the British, proving their cultural superiority” (102).

I am bringing Mee’s historiographical work into the conversation of my dissertation in order to illustrate my rationale for doing a similar study for ancient Egyptian theatre. The question in the title of Mee’s essay (*But Is It Theater?*) is italicized to imply that it is not necessarily *her* question, but one that is often imposed on historians who study theatrical traditions of what has lately been called the “global majority,” or cultural communities outside of the Western sphere, especially those belonging to BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). This question immediately struck a chord with me when I first read it. As a historian with

one foot in the study of theatre and the other in Egyptology, I am often asked—and find myself asking—the very question (with slight revisions) that Mee poses in her essay. But *is* ancient Egyptian drama *theatre*?

Since the modern discipline of Egyptology began—one deeply rooted in European imperialism and logocentric, positivist methodology—the standard scholarly answer to that question has been “No.” This research project began with an earnest attempt to understand *why* that answer continues to prevail in the twenty-first century, among Egyptologists and theatre historians alike. The core of this dissertation is a historiography of ancient Egyptian theatre, with particular emphasis on the dissemination of information in the field of theatre history in the United States over the last century.

Dramaturg and performance scholar Pil Hansen writes, “the performing arts scholar is likely to have a problem with the ways in which scientific methodology reduces complex artistic practices.”²⁰ Likewise, the Egyptologist might have a problem with the ways in which the performing arts scholar finds evidence in the intangible and meaning in the negative space. It is not uncommon in the field of theatre and performance studies to hear references to scientific inquiry as “positivist” along with a healthy dose of skepticism. This is because scientific inquiry, while staunchly fact-based and objective, is rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. The performing arts scholar is all too aware of the Eurocentric biases that have dictated “fact” within that tradition for centuries. It makes little sense for a scholar to insist on searching for written records from a culture that did not keep written records in the

²⁰ Pil Hansen, “Research-based Practice,” 39.

same way that European cultures have done. Chances are, their stories have survived through very different means; they may have carried and shared their history through dance, song, storytelling, even cooking. Nor can a scholar, from the scientific perspective, create something from nothing when it comes to ascertaining historical fact. If a written record or some other material form of evidence does not exist to establish that a certain event took place, historians cannot necessarily assume that it did. Herein lies the greatest challenge of my research. It is not easy to bridge the methodological gap between two disciplines that follow such contradictory philosophies of scholarship. But this challenge also presents an opportunity to explore new, interdisciplinary modes of inquiry.

Most dramatic or theatrical performances that took place before the mid-fifteenth century (and the invention of the printing press) fall into a historical category coined by Diana Taylor as “the repertoire.”²¹ Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, Taylor sets “the repertoire” at odds with “the archive”—that which is material, tangible and, in most cases, written down. She defines the archive in terms of “memory as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change” (19). The repertoire, on the other hand, reflects the “intangible heritage” that is passed down from generation to generation, not on paper or in any other form of material culture, but in the oral tradition and embodied practice (4). Taylor writes that “performances function as vital Acts of transfer transmitting social

²¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (2-3).

Taylor’s nod to performance studies pioneer Richard Schechner comes from his book, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, where he describes the concept of transmitted and restored behavior that is never “actual behavior as it is being behaved” but “symbolic and reflexive.”²² Schechner explains that “symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theater of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational process” (36). Both theories speak to the power of embodied culture and symbolic behavior integral to the discussion of performativity in ancient Egyptian drama.

What does it mean when a text is *performative*? This term appears often in the literature on ancient Egyptian drama across both Egyptology and theatre history. But in my experience *performative* has been another one of those words, like *drama* and *dramatic*, that has more than one definition and various forms of usage surrounding it. In the theatre, *performativity* might indicate the capacity for performance or verbal expression in, for example, a piece of literature, a folktale, or a sacred rite. In Egyptology and related disciplines the word implies something more. Egyptologist Robyn Gillam refers to performatives as “speech-acts” or, within an ancient Egyptian context, “magic or ‘effective’ utterance.”²³ An example of this is a spell, which can only work its magic when spoken aloud, otherwise it is rendered useless. In this instance, performativity implies that there is power in the words spoken or in the

²² Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 36.

²³ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 149.

rituals performed. By virtue of their performance, they are achieving an effect of some kind. Ritual scholar Ronald Grimes, however, defines performativity in a broader way, not restricting the idea of performativity to that which can be spoken, but that which can be formally expressed. “Every religion depends on performativity generally, perhaps even on what we in the West call ‘the performing arts’ ... wherever ritual leaders gather, there is talk about matters of form and effectiveness.”²⁴

Discussions of dramatic performance or ritual drama in ancient Egypt inevitably give way to a debate that sets the Egyptian tradition (a “repertoire”) against the ancient Greek tradition (an “archive”). Wherever there is a lack of record or a lack of media through which a performance might be captured and added to the archive, the performance itself, and the liveness of that performance, becomes more precious and powerful. How can we glean tangible information from the pre-modern past from what was, and remains, intangible?

Chapter 1 of the dissertation examines the ritual-theatre divide in scholarship across the fields of performance studies, anthropology, and classical studies, taking a closer look at the legacy of ancient Greece, and how classical Greek literature, philosophy, and politics set the groundwork for modern Western intellectual notions of theatre. Chapter 2 provides a foundation for understanding the nature of ancient Egyptian drama and the content of the extant dramatic texts, presenting a brief historiography of drama and performance in the field of Egyptology. Chapter 3 closely examines the historiography of ancient Egypt within the discipline of theatre history, particularly in the United States. Chapter 4 investigates alternative sites and

²⁴ Grimes, “Performance,” 379.

methodologies for theatre historiography, and presents the work of four historians in today's field who have moved beyond the positivist mode of examining only what is tangible, and embraced innovative ways to gather new information from that which is intangible.

As historians grapple with definitions of theatre in the past, scholars in performance studies are redefining it for the next generation. This is most evident in the subject area of ancient non-Western theatre, where textual and other material evidence are few and far between. Certainly many genres of theatre that have emerged over the last century would not have qualified as theatre by nineteenth century Western standards. "Dada" eschews dramatic structure, "site-specific" eschews the traditional performance space, and postmodern theatre in general is always stretching the boundaries between reality and representation. The more profoundly that twenty-first century theatre practitioners and scholars blur these lines, the more postmodern theatre lines up with the ancient ritual performances of indigenous cultures that thrived thousands of years ago, as well as some that continue to thrive today. The growing subdiscipline of performance as research (PAR), also called practice as research (PaR) in other branches of the creative arts, provides a unique opportunity to test these new boundaries by doing more than speaking words from the ancient world—by embodying those words as ancient practitioners might have done. Chapter 5 details my own process of mounting a stage production of two ancient Egyptian dramatic texts at the University of Maryland School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies. Finally, the conclusion discusses the value of PAR

(or PaR) methodology within the context of Egyptology, and attempts to formulate a working definition of ancient Egyptian theatre.

Chapter 1: The Ritual/Theatre Divide

Ritual Theory

As a subdiscipline of performance studies, ritual theory is an avenue through which to analyze and understand the nature and practice of theatre. The use of ritual theory allows the theorist, historian, and practitioner to break down the restrictive walls of traditional thinking, find new perspectives on, and embrace new approaches to, the art of theatre and its relationship to culture and community. However, the conversation surrounding ritual and theatre inevitably raises a few difficult questions: are ritual and theatre interchangeable, or are they mutually exclusive? And if we can answer these questions definitively, what is at stake? Before addressing these questions, I will begin by discussing two theorists who have made major contributions to the development of modern ritual theory in performance studies. In so doing, I will attempt to define the relevant terms as specifically as possible, beginning with one fundamental connection between ritual and theatre: *drama*.

Deconstructing *Drama*: Victor Turner

Many theatre scholars, practitioners, and educators are of the opinion that the essence of drama can be summed up in one word: *conflict*. According to drama educator Jonothan Neelands, drama is a process-based “construction of imagined experience...a social (interactive) way of creating and interpreting human meanings through imagined action and language that simulates and corresponds to real-life

actions and language.”¹ This definition implies that there is a make-believe scenario inherent in all drama: the imitation of life by means of creating conflict. If this is true then the opposite might also be true: the creation of conflict by means of imitating life.

This idea corresponds with anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory of *social* drama—the drama of everyday life and “the ‘theatrical’ potential of social life.”² In his book, *From Ritual to Theatre*, published in 1982, Turner explained that “the primordial and perennial agonistic mode is the social drama” (11). He continued, “the social drama, then, I regard as the experiential matrix from which the many genres of cultural performance...including oral and literary narrative, have been generated” (78).

In his book, *From Ritual to Theatre*, published in 1982, Turner created the paradigm of *social* drama versus *stage* drama. Social drama is generated by a process, while stage drama is generated by a final product or outcome—a performance before an audience. Stage drama must undergo a process of preparation before becoming a product, and therefore is not separate from social drama but an extension of it. According to ritual scholar Ronald Grimes, “during the rehearsal process the only audience is the group [of performers] itself; functionally, the audience is really a congregation or tribe. In this respect the rehearsal process constitutes a temporary

¹ Neelands, *Making Sense of Drama*, 6.

² Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 9.

community undergoing a rite of passage.”³ Turner stated that “rites of passage, like social dramas, involve temporal processes and agonistic relations.”⁴ He explained:

By means of such genres as theatre, including puppetry and shadow theatre, dance drama, and professional story-telling, performances are presented which probe a community’s weaknesses...portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known ‘world.’

Thus the roots of theatre are in social drama, and social drama accords well with Aristotle’s abstraction of dramatic form from the works of the Greek playwrights. (11-12)

In *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner described a workshop he was invited to take part in with Richard Schechner—an ethnographic dramatic experiment. Anthropologists (in this case Turner and his wife Edie) who had studied the Ndembu culture of central Africa, and theatre practitioners (Schechner and his students) collaborated to devise a drama that would authentically capture and recreate the experiences of the Ndembu people that Turner had interacted with and studied. The hypothesis of this experiment was that only through drama—ritual reenactment and “living” experience as opposed to the written word—could we truly understand and appreciate another culture. Turner and his colleagues believed that a written ethnography could not be nearly as effective as a performed ethnography, especially when studying a living culture that expresses itself through performative acts and not through text as Western cultures do. The experiment essentially proved this hypothesis, but highlighted other problematic inauthenticities.⁵

³ Grimes, “Performance,” 389.

⁴ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 78.

⁵ For Turner’s detailed discussion of this experiment, see “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology,” in *From Ritual to Theatre*, 89-101.

The main theory or argument in the example of this study as described by Turner is that anthropologists and theatre practitioners have a great deal to offer one another in the full realization of their research and craft. Ritual and drama are intimately connected, as are anthropology and performance.

Deconstructing *Ritual*: Richard Schechner

Experimental theatre director and performance theorist Richard Schechner sums up the essence of drama with another word: *transformation*.⁶ In his book, *Performance Theory*, he divides drama into two main categories: social and aesthetic. Social drama “works in the world” while aesthetic drama “works on consciousness.”⁷ Aesthetic drama corresponds more specifically with the art of performance—or as Victor Turner calls it, *stage drama*⁸—which suggests “role-playing and the awareness of being watched” according to Ronald Grimes.⁹ Furthermore, Schechner points out that “the specific principles of both aesthetic and social drama will vary from culture to culture.”¹⁰

According to ritual theorist Catherine Bell, “ritual is an event, a set of activities that does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts but actually effects changes in people’s perceptions and interpretations.”¹¹ A ritual does

⁶ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 191.

⁷ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 215, fig. 6.2. Schechner’s theory of social drama is largely influenced by Victor Turner.

⁸ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 73.

⁹ Grimes, “Performance,” 386-87.

¹⁰ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 215.

¹¹ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 74.

not mean to entertain or instruct, but to *accomplish* something, to achieve an effect. In other words, ritual effects *transformation* which, as theorized by Schechner, is the essence of *drama*. The difference, however, is that ritual does not necessarily imitate life, but is grounded very much in reality. The effect that ritual facilitates for the performer is *real* and lasting. “Ritual is one of several activities related to theater. The others are play, games, sports, dance, and music... Together [with ritual and theater] these seven comprise the public performance activities of humans.”¹²

If one follows the idea that drama is essentially *conflict*, then all seven of the above activities qualify as drama, whether social or staged. Ritual can in fact be both. When it is a worship ritual that is first and foremost social but is ultimately staged for the community, it becomes *religious drama*. For example, Christians annually recall and honor the life, death, and resurrection of Christ during the Holy Week that leads up to Easter. This dramatic ritual usually includes the reenactment of key events at the end of Jesus’ life, with actors (priests or lay people of the congregation) portraying the roles of Jesus, his disciples, and other important figures in the story. In this way, the ritual becomes a religious drama, the “passion play.” It is a theatrical performance with an established script that is rehearsed and presented before an audience every year. It is religious because of its context, subject matter, and invocation of the divine.

According to Victor Turner, “religion, like art, *lives* in so far as it is performed, i.e., in so far as its rituals are ‘going concerns’.”¹³ Christians do not

¹² Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 7.

¹³ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 86.

celebrate this ritual to be entertained by the performance, but to retrace the steps of the first Christians and to reconnect with the divine. It is a transformation through remembrance. According to Bell, “The most clear-cut examples of ritual, those depicting various genres of ritual, tend to be a matter of communal ceremonies closely connected to formally institutionalized religions or clearly invoking divine beings.”¹⁴

Deconstructing *Performance* and *Theatre*

Ronald Grimes explains that the word *performance* derives from the Latin *per forma*, “through form.”¹⁵ If we take the term literally as an expression “through form,” a performance implies the existence of a precedent—a set of standards that generally must be followed in order to achieve a certain goal, and which are ultimately evaluated by a set of witnesses.¹⁶

If ritual and drama are not mutually exclusive, what about ritual and theatre? According to Grimes, “Because the Euro-American West tends to segregate the religious from the artistic, it also is prone to separate ritual from performance.”¹⁷ Drama is the umbrella under which stands ritual and theatre. They are two sides of the same coin, as Schechner explains: “one is about transformation, and the other transportation.”¹⁸ This is also the difference between “process” and “product.”

¹⁴ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 164.

¹⁵ Grimes, “Performance,” 381.

¹⁶ Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 149.

¹⁷ Grimes, “Performance,” 381

¹⁸ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 117-50; Grimes, “Performance,” 388.

Naturally, the “transportation” that theatre offers us is entertainment. Grimes explains:

Euro-American actors are *transported*, carried away by, and into, their roles, but they are always returned to themselves. Their performances do not effect a change of status in the way a rite of passage does. Western stage actors re-enter ordinary life at the same point they left it. But the “transformation” has a far more profound and lasting effect.¹⁹

And according to Schechner:

Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life—greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on—through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude.²⁰

In the chapter of his book entitled “Social Dramas and Stories about Them,”

Turner addressed the pitfalls of traditional Western anthropological thought when approaching the study of a foreign culture.²¹ The use of “numerical data” analysis, for instance, as practiced by the “British school of structuralist-functionalist anthropology in which [Turner] was nurtured” (62). He pointed out that there are merits in such an approach but that it is inherently incomplete, fraught with academic prejudice and preconceived notions that ultimately affect the integrity of the research. He wrote that “the general theory you take into the field leads you to select certain data for attention, but blinds you to others perhaps more important for the understanding of the people studied” (63). Instead, he proposes a more “contextualist” approach and urges anthropologists “toprehend experiential structures in the actual processes of social life” (64). This is informed by the oral narrative tradition of the culture and its

¹⁹ Grimes, “Performance,” 388.

²⁰ Schechner, introduction to *Performance Theory*, xvii.

²¹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 61-88.

“social drama.” He refers to Richard Schechner’s figure-eight diagram that demonstrates the intimate link between social drama and stage drama: where they differ, and where they intersect. His lesson is that the social drama of a culture—their oral traditions, tribal rituals, judiciary processes—are equally important to learning and understanding the lives and experiences of its people, if not more so, than the history of a culture.

The Advent of “Dramatic” Theatre

When Hans-Thies Lehmann wrote *Postdramatic Theatre*, first published in German in 1999, he effectively declared postmodern theatre—the theatre of the late twentieth century—free from the restrictions of dramatic text.²² “In the theatre of modern times,” he writes, “the staging largely consisted of the declamation and illustration of written drama” (21). Lehmann contrasts this with the postmodern era, marked by “the theatre of deconstruction, multimedia theatre, restoratively traditionalist theatre, theatre of gestures and movement” (25). But to declare that a genre of theatre is “postdramatic” implies a ruling precedent of “dramatic” theatre, “subordinated to the primacy of the text,” as Lehmann states (21). In doing so, he also implies a certain progressive development: where theatre was once dramatic, it has now evolved into something more abstract, more sophisticated, perhaps, in *postdramatic* theatre. He explains:

What we perceive in the theatre can be referred to a “world,” i.e. to a totality. Wholeness, illusion, and world representation are inherent in the model ‘drama’; conversely, through its very form, dramatic theatre proclaims wholeness as the *model* of the real. Dramatic theatre ends when these

²² Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, 25.

elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art. (22)

I propose that this is not necessarily progress; that is, it is not a line of evolution that links one genre to the next as time advances. Rather, it is a cycle—a circular motion that propels theatre forward in time, stirring progression by returning to the source, time and time again. In other words, as Lehmann proclaims a postdramatic form, he not only acknowledges the dramatic precedent, but also a *predramatic* theatrical source. Lehmann discusses this possibility in an earlier publication entitled *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, where he also stresses the modern Western bias that has consistently overlooked signs of “predramatic” theatre. He writes that “prejudice has obstructed proper understanding of ancient tragedy, especially the degree to which the emotion [*Bewegtheit*] on display, which was structured by music, rhythm, and dance, differed from the modern idea of spoken drama.”²³

At its core, however, Lehmann’s *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* is about the dramatic nature of Greek tragedy, and how this dramatic nature set the stage, as it were, for the Western tradition of theatre that is bound to dramatic literature—the words of the playwright, or in the case of ancient Greece, the tragic poet. In *Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece*, published in 1998, Jennifer Wise discusses this and other distinctly “nonreligious” aspects of “theatrical activities” that have contributed to the evolution—indeed, the “invention,” as she points out—of theatre.²⁴ She writes, “my intention here is to recover, for theatre history and dramatic

²³ Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler, 193. Brackets are Butler’s.

²⁴ Wise, *Dionysus Writes*, 3

theory alike, some of the evidence for the emergence of theatre which has been neglected as a result of a century-long enchantment with ritual” (3).

I will return to what Wise calls the “century-long enchantment with ritual” shortly. For the moment, I want to address the thesis that Wise is presenting in *Dionysus Writes*. It is the culmination of a long lineage of Western theatrical theory originated by classical Greek philosopher and teacher, Aristotle. In the mid-fourth century BCE, Aristotle outlined what he believed were the fundamental components of Greek tragedy. He used the classical dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles to illustrate these components, and to serve as benchmarks for composing the literary and artistic qualifications that now make up Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the current fields of theatre history and performance studies, the theoretical framework for identifying and evaluating theatre remains deeply rooted in the theories of Aristotle, as outlined in the *Poetics*. As theatre theorist Marvin Carlson writes:

The primacy of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in theatrical theory as well as in literary theory is unchallenged. Not only is the *Poetics* the first significant work in the tradition, but its major concepts and lines of argument have continually influenced the development of theory throughout the centuries.²⁵

Aristotle believed that tragedy was a poetic art, and that *mimesis*, or imitation, was at the heart of all poetry, as demonstrated by the following passage:²⁶

Epic composition, then; the writing of tragedy, and of comedy also; the composing of dithyrambs; and the greater part of the making of music with flute and lyre: these are all in point of fact, taken collectively, imitative processes. (*Poet.* 1447a14-15)

²⁵ Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 15.

²⁶ Passages from Aristotle’s *Poetics* come from the translation by Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).

Furthermore, Aristotle believed that tragedy was distinct from other forms by its magnitude (in size and scope), liveness, and *pathos*—the ability to induce pity and fear in the audience. To that end, a successful imitation possessed verisimilitude—the semblance of truth.

Tragedy...is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive...enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics. (*Poet.* 1449b23-30)

Beyond the basic principles of mimesis and verisimilitude, Aristotle proposed six essential components of tragedy, to which the vast majority of theatre practitioners and scholars alike hold true today. Plot, character, and thought comprise the objects of imitation; verbal expression and song composition are the means by which the imitation is conveyed; and visual adornment is “the manner in which they imitate” (*Poet.* 1450a11-14). The components of thought (sometimes translated as “dialogue” or “argument”) and verbal expression (sometimes translated as “speech” or “diction”)²⁷ became inextricably linked to tragedy, comedy, and eventually all Western genres of theatre—perhaps due to the symbiosis of language and poetry. Over time, with the rise of Greek tragedies and comedies as a new genre of literature called “drama,” a symbiotic relationship evolved between “drama” and “theatre,” with dialogue as the defining feature of dramatic literature.

Patti Peete Gillespie and Kenneth Cameron illustrated this point in their 1984 theatre history entitled *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival*. They argued that the essential beginnings of what we now know as theatre were rooted not in dance,

²⁷ Compare Else’s translation to that of Ingram Bywater in Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920).

music, and ritual worship, but *language*. They defined theatre as “performances by living actors that take place in the presence of living audiences.”²⁸ But when Gillespie and Cameron talked about theatre in this book, they were focusing on the *institution* of theatre—for as long as that institution had been self-aware, that is (6). “Theatre, of all the arts,” they claimed, “is the most people-centered. Its subject is the ‘actions of men’” (6). The earliest Greek playwrights, however, might have disagreed. Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, for example, one of the earliest Greek tragedies, dealt with the actions of the gods. And as Aristotle claimed, “tragedy is an imitation of persons who are better than average” (*Poet.* 3754b8-9).

Gillespie and Cameron suggested, however, that the *Poetics* was not meant to be a record of history, but a philosophical treatise on the nature and integrity of tragedy as a form of poetry, and poetry as an art form. One can only assume that because of the proximity of time (a century or two), between Aristotle’s lifetime and the height of classical Greek theatre, that his descriptions were accurate. At the very least, his descriptions must have been more accurate than any subsequent attempt to reconstruct the elements of classical Greek theatre.²⁹

Aristotle said that tragedy began with improvisation (*Poet.* 1449a9-16). Those improvisations took the form of choral hymns called dithyrambs, performed in honor of the god Dionysus at the City Dionysia, or the Great Festival of Dionysus, in Athens. The dithyramb was comprised of an ode, which was sung by the choral leader, followed by a traditional refrain sung by the chorus. These choral hymns were

²⁸ Gillespie and Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival*, 4.

²⁹ Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, 54.

theatrical in nature, involving music, poetry, masks, costumes, and dancing. But they were not yet *theatre*, not in the eyes of theatre history scholarship. It was not until an intrepid member of the chorus stepped out to engage in a dialogue with the choral leader that *acting* was born in ancient Greece. “The genius who accomplished the transition from dithyramb to drama was Thespis of Icaria,” wrote A. M. Nagler in *A Source Book in Theatrical History*.³⁰ “He is said to have connected the chorus with a plot; he seems to have evolved the protagonist...destined to face a tragic dilemma and forced to answer the ever-questioning chorus” (3).

New theories of the religious origins of theatre began cropping up in the nineteenth century. The most relevant of these to the present study of ancient Egyptian theatre were the founders and proponents of ritual theory. To understand the position that Jennifer Wise takes on the invention of theatre in *Dionysus Writes*, it is essential to understand ritual theory and how it troubled the classical Greek paradigm. The catalyst for the ritualist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the 1872 publication of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche asserted that Greek tragedy was at its core a religious ritual celebrated in worship of the god Dionysus. The tragedy was personified by the dithyrambic chorus, “a chorus of transformed beings” and “the symbol of the collectively excited Dionysian mass.”³¹ According to Nietzsche, “the tradition is undisputed that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus and that for a long time the only stage hero was Dionysus himself” (347).

³⁰ Nagler, *A Source Book*, 3.

³¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman, 345-46.

Nietzsche opened the door for the next generation of anthropologists and classicists to further examine the relationship between myth, ritual, and the origins of theatre—namely ancient Greek drama. One group—the Cambridge Ritualists, as they came to be known—included James Frazer, Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford, and Jane Harrison.³² Perhaps the best known is James Frazer, whose 1912 publication, *The Golden Bough*, was an immensely popular and influential study of comparative religions. According to Gillespie and Cameron, “certainly in the field of drama, Frazer’s massive work exerted untold influence, both by promoting new theories of the origins of drama and by offering new interpretations of familiar plays.”³³

The Cambridge Ritualists posited that all Greek tragedy represented the same myth based on the seasonal pattern of birth, death, and rebirth, as personified by the god Dionysus himself. Drawing inspiration from Nietzsche, they went one step further and suggested that Dionysus was just one of several such year gods, or vegetation gods, who embodied the cycle of life, death, and rebirth for a number of different cultures; among them, Osiris in Egypt, Tammuz in Mesopotamia, and Jesus in Christianity. Classicist Gilbert Murray, in particular, correlated the mysteries of Osiris and the celebration of the god’s festival in Abydos with the rites of Dionysus at the Great Dionysia in Athens. “While the content has strayed far from Dionysus,” he wrote, “the forms of tragedy retain clear traces of the original drama of the Death and

³² Some of their relevant works, aside from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, is Cornford’s *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, first published in 1914, and Harrison’s edited volume, *Themis*, published in 1912, which contained Murray’s chapter, “An Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy” (341-63).

³³ Gillespie and Cameron, *Western Theatre*, 43.

Rebirth of the Year Spirit.”³⁴ Murray gave the following example from Aeschylus’

The Oresteia:

Orestes is traditionally a figure of strong marked type—the beloved hero who is reported dead and then returns in triumph. I strongly suspect that his reported death, lamentation and re-appearance alive were in origin exactly parallel to the reported death, lamentation and re-appearance alive of the Daimon, Dionysus, Osiris, etc. (356)

The Cambridge School’s thesis that Greek tragedy and comedy descended directly from the “Primal Ritual,” as interpreted by Richard Schechner,³⁵ had a significant impact on the way theatre historians of the twentieth century approached the question of the origins of theatre. Schechner discusses the Cambridge anthropologists at length in the first chapter of his book *Performance Theory*. He expounds the important foundation they laid for the field of performance studies, but he also explains why their theories were, and continue to be, problematic. According to Schechner, “The rub is: the assumptions of the Cambridge group have never been proven. A tremendous amount of archaeological digging has gone on in Greece over the past seventy-five years, but nothing has turned up expressing all the elements of either drama or the Primal Ritual” (3). He adds that “the connection between Greek drama and dithyramb depends largely upon Aristotle’s comments” in the *Poetics*, where Aristotle asserted his belief that tragedy and comedy emerged naturally from improvisations during dithyrambic performances.³⁶

The Cambridge Ritualists received an academic backlash from classicists who did not appreciate the connotation. Theatre historian Thomas Postlewait discusses this

³⁴ Murray, “An Excursus on the Ritual Forms,” 342.

³⁵ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 4, fig. 1.1.

³⁶ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 5; *Poet.* 1449a9-16.

conundrum in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. “Countering the myth and ritual critics,” he writes, “they placed the plays and productions within theatrical and literary traditions, apart from religious culture. They also insisted that the plays need to be understood in terms of the artistic heritage and mythic narratives, distinct from the religious, social, or political conditions.”³⁷ I propose that this was one of the reasons the ritualist theories were relegated to obscure discussion of historical “origins” instead of paving the way for Egypt to take its place among the earliest generators of serious dramatic literature and theatrical practice.

In the twenty-first century, there is still a great deal of contention surrounding ritual theory when it comes to theatre history. Strong feelings abound regarding the influence of ritual on the development of theatre. Many scholars feel that theatre is fundamentally a Western art form, invented by the ancient Greeks, and should be celebrated and taught as such. This may be true, at least in part. Theatre in the Western, or European, tradition is certainly its own art form—from ancient Greek theories of *mimesis* to rhetoric to dramatic literature, purpose-built playhouses to proscenium arches to “method” acting. Richard Schechner writes that “anthropologists, with good reason, argue otherwise, suggesting that theater—understood as the enactment of stories by players—exists in every known culture at all times, as do the other genres.”³⁸ I agree with Schechner’s point here. Theatre, like visual art, encompasses all of human experience. It stands to reason that all of human experience, as filtered through every society, every culture around the world—would

³⁷ Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, 152.

³⁸ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 7.

express themselves in as many different ways through the *medium* of theatre. Theatre professor Eli Rozik, when discussing the Egyptian Coronation Drama in his book,

The Roots of Theatre, states that:

The existence of a “ritual drama” at such an early stage in the development of human culture does not pose any theoretical problem. The use of the medium of theatre for ritual purposes does not prove origin in ritual either but, rather, the use of an available medium. Furthermore, it would hardly be surprising if ritual, being such a dominant phenomenon in ancient culture, is seen to employ all possible media. The apparent dramatic quality of such an articulated text at such an early period, however, poses a fascinating question.³⁹

Schechner also claims, however, that “origin theories are irrelevant to understanding theater,”⁴⁰ and this point I do not agree with. Of course, Schechner first published these arguments more than thirty years ago, in a very different political climate for American academia. Today, I believe origin theories *are* essential, and ritual theory in particular. In the classroom, it is an excellent opportunity to teach undergraduate students critical thinking and diverse perspectives, and to provide more inclusive content. In the context of theatre history, ritual theory falls under the category of origin theories, of which there are quite a few. In my research, I have found that ritual theory is the most comprehensive of these origin theories, and I will explain why. At least three other commonly known theories of origin—Aristotle’s theory of mimesis and dithyrambic improvisations; William Ridgeway’s theory of hero worship and funerary cult; Gerald Else’s straightforward theory of Attic origins

³⁹ Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre*, 316-17.

⁴⁰ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 7.

in Greece—remain rooted in *ritual forms*.⁴¹ Even the theory of origin in rhetoric and in poetry can be traced to Aristotle’s and Else’s theories. Furthermore, the one thing that historians know for certain is that tragedy competitions in ancient Greece took place at festivals celebrating the god Dionysus. In order to understand the history of these festivals, and the Festival of Dionysus in Athens in particular, students must first understand the rituals that accompanied the god’s worship—and recognize that similar rituals and divine worship were taking place in other cultures at the same time, paving the way for other genres of performance in cultures less rooted in dramatic texts and the written archive.

Ritual Studies in Anthropology and Sociology

One of the founding fathers of sociological thought was Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim’s groundbreaking sociological theories laid an important foundation for the next century of ritual studies, including Victor Turner’s theory of social drama. He proposed that sociology could be studied scientifically like biology or physics. To prove his hypothesis, he set out to identify certain “social facts”—socially or culturally constructed principles that reflect the beliefs and actions of an entire community.⁴² More to the point, the social facts of a community dictate its “ways of existing,” which in turn impose certain “ways of acting” on the individuals within that community.⁴³ According to Durkheim:

⁴¹ These four theories appear in most theatre history textbooks, but Gillespie and Cameron provide one of the clearest outlines and effective comparisons in *Western Theatre*, 35-61. A more detailed discussion of William Ridgeway’s perspective follows in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁴² See Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 1-13.

⁴³ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 11-12.

A social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals, and the presence of this power may be recognized in its turn either by the existence of some specific sanction or by the resistance offered against every individual effort that tends to violate it. (10)

By today's anthropological or sociological standards (and those of the discipline of performance studies), Durkheim's "social fact" would fall under the category of an embodied "truth" or practice, for instance, something that is learned and passed on to the next generation, such as the oral tradition. These social facts generate the culture of a community, manifested in what Durkheim called "collective habits." He explained:

Collective habits are inherent not only in the successive acts which they determine but, by a privilege of which we find no example in the biological realm, they are given permanent expression in a formula which is repeated from mouth to mouth, transmitted by education, and fixed even in writing. Such is the origin and nature of legal and moral rules, popular aphorisms and proverbs, articles of faith wherein religious or political groups condense their beliefs, standards of taste established by literary schools, etc. (7)

The same "standards of taste established by literary schools" might also apply to a society's collective attitude toward entertainment and art—*how* it consumes and produces either one. Eventually, the social facts of a society become evidence of a collective memory. In other words, a community's social facts and collective habits are an embodied archive of its history.

The next point I want to make on the subject of Durkheim is his theory of "social currents" (4) and "collective consciousness" (8). The modern term for this might be the "crowd mentality." Durkheim wrote, "the great movements of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity in a crowd do not originate in any one of the particular individual consciousnesses. They come to each one of us from without and

can carry us away in spite of ourselves” (4). Here Durkheim’s theory of “social currents,” or collective consciousness, directly applies to the theatre and the collective experience of an audience witnessing a performance. The rituals of a society confirm and celebrate the group’s social order, or social organization.

Of course, the notion of ritual—or any subscribed set of activities, as Catherine Bell suggests—does not always carry with it a sense of duty, societal compulsion, or involuntary conformity. Ritual can also provide freedom from constraints, and an outlet for creative expression and “play.” Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) took Durkheim’s theories even further into the realm of the collective consciousness and explored “play as a cultural phenomenon.”⁴⁴ Huizinga addressed “play” as a social concept, an instinctive action or activity (as *all* animals play), a ritual (individual and/or communal), an outlet for “fun,” and the manifestation of “freedom.” His research explored the connection between play and ritual, game and ritual, and how a game or “play” can become a tradition as a function of memory. According to Huizinga, “Once played, [the game] endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time, whether it be ‘child’s play’ or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery” (10).

Play is as ephemeral as a live performance—*is*, in fact, a performance (connecting it fundamentally to ritual). When it becomes a tradition that serves to memorialize an event or reaffirm what Durkheim termed a “social fact,” the play—the ritual—is *recorded* in what Diana Taylor calls “the repertoire,” that is, an archive

⁴⁴ Huizinga, “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon,” 1-27.

embodied by the ritual performance and/or tradition of “play” that follows a certain precedent.⁴⁵ In this way, play encompasses theatre and theatre *is* play.

Huizinga also talked about the make-believe aspects of play; the imagined circumstances that the player chooses and respects with the utmost seriousness, all in service of “fun.” He referred to this as the “disinterestedness” of play (9). Huizinga discussed what Durkheim would have called the “social current” generated through collective play, such as competitive sports (experienced by both players *and* spectators) and this, to my mind, equates to theatre.

Yet even play, and its inherent sense of freedom and fun, is regulated by a set of rules and standards, previously set down, that must be acknowledged and followed or the “game” is rendered ineffective. Reminiscent of Durkheim’s “power of external coercion,” the rules are enforced by an unspoken threat of ostracism from the group if not recognized and upheld. Huizinga wrote that in play, the cheater or “false player” is more acceptable and more popular than the “spoil-sport” who refuses to play at all.⁴⁶ This is because the cheater, at the very least, agrees to take part in the game. He enters the fray, throws his hat in the ring and says “I’ll play” (even if he means to bend the rules). The spoil-sport’s behavior is far worse, according to Huizinga. He ruins the game by denying it, and “shatters the play-world itself...therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the play-community” (11). In many societies, it is the “apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors” who represent the

⁴⁵ See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

⁴⁶ Huizinga, “Nature and Significance of Play,” 11.

spoil-sport (12). Huizinga asserted that “the contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid” (8). He wrote:

Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player’s prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers—his ‘fairness’; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must still stick to the rules of the game. (11)

But I would like to return for a moment to the idea of the innovator as “spoil-sport.” After all, the heretic will occasionally come up with his own game. Here is yet another connection between play, ritual, and theatre. Take, for instance, the classical theatre, a benchmark for the standard Western tradition. Then there is the avant-garde and the “postdramatic,” as Hans-Thies Lehmann discussed in *Postdramatic Theatre*. In the context of theatre history as well as theatre practice, these genres have created a whole new game, and set a new precedent with a revised set of rules.

Huizinga also addressed the rituals and tradition of Carnival, the same “Saturnalian license” that Max Gluckman would discuss in detail five years later. Gluckman (1911-1975) discussed the “license in ritual” in *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, first published in 1956.⁴⁷ He was referring to the kind of license given to celebrants of festivals like the medieval “Feast of Fools” and the Carnival in Rio. It is the release from class order, rules and conventions that govern a society every other day of the year.

According to Huizinga, “play is older than culture...animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human

⁴⁷ Gluckman, “The License in Ritual,” 109-36.

civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play.”⁴⁸ Huizinga’s initial argument was that play is not, in fact, a product of culture. Play is an essential component in the life of almost every animal on the planet with a complex brain. It is not a product of human civilization, and since culture “presupposes human society,” “play” does not apply to it (1). It *is*, however, a phenomenon, and it is a *foundation* for civilization. In other words, culture, to a certain extent, is a product of play: “genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (5).

Huizinga believed that “fun,” while being an English word that had no true equivalent in any other modern language that he knew (3), is an essential and unique element of play. It defies logic and analysis. He said that play is without matter; it transcends the physical. Furthermore, he shed light on the fact that all play is voluntary; there is no such thing as involuntary play, according to Huizinga. Therefore, play presupposes a certain amount of freedom, no matter what the circumstances of the player. “Play cannot be denied,” he wrote (3). “You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (3). He explained, however, that this level of freedom doesn’t necessarily extend to children and animals, however, whose playful nature is instinctive, and necessary for growth.

Huizinga went on to address play as a “special form of activity, social function,” and took the discussion into the realm of religion and ritual. He broke down the differences between “make-believe” in our modern conception of “play” and “belief,” an essential component of ritual. What does this mean for the elements

⁴⁸ Huizinga, “Nature and Significance of Play,” 1.

of play that inhabit ritual? If ritual is built on belief and reality, and is compulsory, can it still be considered ‘play’?

Coming from the perspective of human psychology, Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) took a more scientific approach to the analysis of play in “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” published in 1954.⁴⁹ His focus was on the evolution of communication, and its connection to the evolution of play. He discussed “meta-linguistic” and “meta-communicative” messages as implicit, “the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs” (43).

Theoretically, according to Bateson, human beings ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and now we can recognize and interpret not only signs, but *signals*. In other words, we are capable of recognizing that our signs *are* signals, whereas non-human mammals cannot. Their signs and recognition of others’ signs are rooted in animal instinct only...or so Bateson thought. During a research trip to the zoo where he observed monkeys interacting with one another, he recognized that they were in fact *playing*. “Now this phenomenon, play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of meta-communication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message, ‘this is play.’...The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (41).

According to Bateson, animal communication is comprised of involuntary signs (one’s natural body odor, for instance, rooted in physiology for attracting the opposite sex), while humans might choose to wear perfume or cologne, which is a voluntary *signal*. He addressed three types of messages in animal behavior: mood-signs; simulation of mood-signs; messages “which enable the receiver to discriminate

⁴⁹ Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” 39-51.

between mood-signs and those other signs which resemble them,” like “This is play” (48).

Bateson explained that a “frame” is meta-communicative (44). “Threat” and “histrionics” are also intimately linked to the evolution of communication and the evolution of play (42). He talked about paradox, particularly evident in many ritual forms of communicative play, such as peacemaking rituals which might denote war in the process of achieving its effect of peace. “But this leads us to recognition of a more complex form of play,” Bateson wrote, “the game which is constructed not upon the premise of ‘this is play’ but rather around the question, ‘is this play?’ And this type of interaction also has its ritual forms” (43).

Durkheim, Huizinga, Bateson, and Gluckman each took different approaches to their research and developed different theories about ritual and performance in society. However, what they all shared was an approach that put themselves and their own culture, their own society, at a distance from the subject of their research. Gluckman observed the “license in ritual” as it pertained to African tribal society; Bateson developed his theory of play while observing animal behavior; Huizinga observed both animals and children. This goes to show that in the first half of the twentieth century, the need to associate ritual studies with the “primitive” or with the “other” was quite prevalent among Western scholars. And in so doing, they set a benchmark for keeping ritual and theatre at arms length from one another. In other words, the “social fact” passed on to the next generation of anthropologists was that an advanced society practices the high art of theatre, while a primitive society

practices ritual. Breaking down this binary was a task reserved for later scholars, especially scholars with more direct knowledge and experience of theatre practice.

Catherine Bell took a few of these earlier theorists to task in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), including Max Gluckman, Gregory Bateson, and even Victor Turner.⁵⁰ “In its own way,” she writes, “performance theory signals a strong dissatisfaction with the traditional categories brought to the study of ritual” (38).

Ritual Theory in the Theatre History Classroom

Scholars and educators in the humanities are at a critical juncture. We must decide if we will continue to learn and to teach in the same way that we have done for decades, even centuries; or, will we break new ground? Will we learn and teach new cultural perspectives? Will we give equal importance to the history and experience and knowledge of scholars who are not European or Euro-American? If so, we need to let go of our Eurocentric bias when it comes to theatre, and acknowledge alternative genres, forms, modes of expression, and alternative theatre histories. Ritual theory allows us to do this because it takes away the imperative of rhetoric, the imperative of dramatic literature, and the imperative of the written record.

I do not mean to say that these things are not equally important, however. Rhetoric remains essential to the development of Western theatre and to our global understanding of modern theatre, as does dramatic literature. And to borrow terms from Diana Taylor, the “archive” is equally important to the “repertoire.” What I mean is that we as scholars and educators need to be looking at *both* with equal rigor

⁵⁰ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 35.

and respect, especially when analyzing a civilization like ancient Egypt, whose history has come down to us by means of both.

Anthropologist Dwight Conquergood offers compelling evidence for the case against “textocentric” analysis of any culture *not* European, and especially one that has historically and systematically been denied written literacy education. In “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” he uses the historical enslavement of African people in the Americas as an example, and discusses some of the ways in which African-Americans were forced by society to find new ways of expression and communication that did not rely on texts, and to carry on African traditions of literacy that European communities were not versed in and could not understand. He writes, “The textual paradigm is not a sensitive register for the nonverbal dimensions and embodied dynamics that constitute meaningful human interaction.”⁵¹ As such, Conquergood’s argument urges anthropologists and performance studies scholars to be careful of preconceived Western notions of drama, which are rooted in textual analysis. There is great diversity in the ways that drama and performance traditions are created and expressed around the world—even within our own countries.

In *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (2003), social anthropologist Karin Barber chronicles the three years she spent following, living, working, and performing with the Oyin Adejobi theatre troupe in Nigeria. The plays of the Yoruba theatre repertoire are rooted in folklore and text—the Yoruba language is central to this genre of theatre—and yet the text is largely improvised. Barber set out to investigate how the Yoruba culture “generates” these plays. She found that the

⁵¹ Conquergood, “Beyond the Text,” 47-63.

text was informed by the personal lives and experiences of the actors themselves, as well as inspiration from the audience during performance. Whenever a new performer joined the troupe, a new story was added to the repertoire of plays. Barber calls it “the generation of text out of lives.”⁵² The myths and folklore that inspired the stories these Yoruba plays told—as well as the ritual elements of dance and song, poetry, and use of masks—all came together to create a structured yet improvisational and celebratory theatre. And it was theatre performed not only for the benefit of the audience but for the benefit of the performers, and their spiritual connection with one another and their collective history.

In 1976, Nigerian playwright, scholar, and political activist Wole Soyinka published *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. In this pivotal contribution to postcolonial literature on African theatre, Soyinka offers an alternative perspective on the intimate connection between ritual and drama that comprises and defines traditional Yoruba theatre. He writes:

The difference which we are seeking to define between European and African drama as one of man’s formal representation of experience is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential differences between two world-views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics.⁵³

For example, one of the subjects of Soyinka’s study is that of space. While the European concept of space in traditional Western theatre is defined by the proscenium stage, Soyinka suggests that African theatre has no use for four walls. He writes that

⁵² Barber, *The Generation of Plays*, 15.

⁵³ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 38.

ritual theatre “establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man—no matter how deeply buried such a consciousness has latterly become—fearfully exists” (41). Soyinka makes no mention of ancient Egypt in this book, nor does Barber in *The Generation of Plays*, but the religious themes and tropes that pervade Yoruba theatre—such as the blurred line between the living and the dead and the invocation of the gods through dance, song, and speech—are very similar to those that appeared in the ritual performances of ancient Egypt.

In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner makes the following point:

Many people these days fear a disruption of historical cultural variety brought about by world monoculture. Just as physical well-being depends on a varied gene pool, so social well-being depends on a varied “culture pool.” Restored behavior is one way of preserving a varied culture pool. It is a strategy that fits into, and yet opposes, world monoculture.⁵⁴

This same concept can, and should, be applied to the theatre history classroom, particularly that of early theatre history from antiquity to the mid-fifteenth century CE. Teaching ritual theory and a “repertoire” of restored behavior, or embodied knowledge, will ensure the “varied culture pool” in our school curriculums.

Conclusion

Performance in the context of ritual, religious or secular, and performance in the context of theatre, are one and the same. They are still *performance*. They are still *drama*, and they are still *theatre*. It is not culture that makes the difference. Classical

⁵⁴ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 114.

theatre presented on a professional British or European stage is still a communal *ritual*. It is informed by social facts, created from play, generated from collective habits and driven by social currents. It is the *intention* behind the performance, its very purpose within a given community, that creates the difference. One culture might practice theatre for religious purposes, and for all the members of that community, theatre and religion are intimately tied; *that* is a social fact. Another culture practices theatre for the pure enjoyment of it, for the fulfillment of play and fantasy, or for personal enrichment. Still another culture might practice theatre for political power or financial gain. In other words, as ethnographer Katherine Hagedorn suggests in her 2001 book, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*: theatre for some is sacred, and for others, profane.⁵⁵ When theatre is sacred, it takes on a very different meaning for both performer and spectator. It is less about skill, and more about *efficacy*.

The following chapter will examine more closely the ritual aspects of ancient Egyptian drama and performance, acknowledging both the *archive* that carries the legacy of written documents—in this case, the dramatic texts—and the *repertoire* that carries the legacy of intangible heritage—in this case, the festival performance traditions.

⁵⁵ See Hagedorn, “Blurring the Boundaries: Merging Sacred and Profane,” in *Divine Utterances*, 107-35.

Chapter 2: Spoken Words

Understanding Egyptian Drama

Most textbooks used in American undergraduate theatre history survey courses take a chronological approach that begins with ancient Greece. That is not to say that ancient Greek theatre always comprises the first chapter, however; it often follows an introductory chapter devoted to the nebulous subject of *origins*. The term *origins* refers to a wide range of performance traditions, dating back to prehistory, which never took place in a building designated as a *theatre*, and which belonged (and in some cases, still belong) to ritual practices and cultural communities decidedly non-Western. Buried within this *origins* chapter, one is most likely to find a relatively brief section on ancient Egypt—usually a discussion of the “Abydos Passion Play.”

What *is* the “Abydos Passion Play”? I have only seen this reference in theatre history textbooks and other history and historiographical texts relating to the discipline of theatre and performance studies. It is not a phrase commonly used by Egyptologists. The title is deceptive on multiple levels. First, it suggests a *play* in the traditional Western sense of the word, a stand-alone dramatic work.¹ According to the archaeological record, there was no singular “Abydos Passion Play” in ancient Egypt. When Egyptologists address the subject of dramatic, or theatrical, performances at

¹ Theatre historian Alan Sikes published an essay in 2015 that addresses this very question. In it he analyzes the Stela of Ikhnofret and the “myth of the Abydos Passion Play” from a performance studies perspective that interrogates the presentational versus representational in Egyptian performative texts. See Sikes, “Theatre History, Theatrical Mimesis, and the Myth of the Abydos Passion Play,” 3-18.

Abydos, they typically refer to the “Mysteries of Osiris” as performed annually at temple sites consecrated to the god. Records from the Ptolemaic period (ca. 305-30 BCE) and later attest to the fact that by that point in Egyptian history, the festival in honor of Osiris was held during a specific month—the month of Khoiak (“soul upon soul” in English)—and for this reason some scholars refer to the annual event as the “Osirian Khoiak Festival.”² Over the course of ancient Egypt’s long history, however, Egyptian names for the festival went through many iterations, such as *Hebes Ta*, the “Hacking of the Earth.”³ As far back as the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055-1650 BCE), the festival took place most famously, though not exclusively, at the mythical burial place and Osirian cult center of Abydos, a royal necropolis just north of the Theban capital now known as Luxor in the south of Egypt.

Egyptological scholarship analyzing the mysteries of Osiris that inspired theatre history’s so-called “Abydos Passion Play” generally breaks it down into small dramatic sequences, or scenarios, enacted at different points during the festival. In some cases, these scenarios correlate to performative texts which have been discovered at various points in time on papyri, stelae, temple wall reliefs, tomb walls, or inscribed on coffins. Each relate a different part of the larger story of Osiris, ancient Egyptian god of the dead. This religious context has encouraged scholars to pigeonhole this ancient Egyptian theatral tradition as ritual drama, and theatre historians to correlate it to early liturgical dramas performed in the Medieval Catholic

² Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 57. See also Mikhail, “Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival: An Outline,” 29-54. For the translation of Khoiak (*k3 hr k3*) as “soul upon soul,” see James Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 108.

³ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 101.

Church, recalling a faint similarity to the pattern of life, death, and resurrection in the story of the Passion of Jesus.

Much of the dramatic or theatrical evidence in question correlates to the worship of Osiris and the mythology surrounding him, so an exposition of this major ancient Egyptian god is necessary to begin the discussion. The earliest mention of Osiris and his story appears in *The Pyramid Texts* of the Old Kingdom pharaohs, as far back as the twenty-fourth century BCE.⁴ In the early Roman period (ca. first century CE), Plutarch recorded what is now the most famous rendition of the Osiris myth in his *de Iside et Osiride*.⁵ Plutarch's version is extensively Hellenized, which is perhaps no surprise given the time and context in which he wrote it. From a modern point of view, however, it is hard to discern how much of our current knowledge of the myth is slanted by Greco-Roman interpretation. But Daniel Richter, a Classicist who specializes in Roman Egypt, assures us that "the *de Iside* has a fairly full discussion of the Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis and her consort Osiris as it existed in the Pharaonic period...so Egyptologists have often cited Plutarch's *de Iside* as a relatively accurate account of the cultic practices."⁶ Likewise, Egyptologist Robert Ritner, a specialist in ancient Egyptian religion, writes:

References to the actions of these gods abound in surviving Egyptian hymns, prayers and funerary literature, yet perhaps because their story was so familiar to a native audience, it is the Greek adaptation of Plutarch (*de Iside et Osiride*) that preserves the longest exposition of their myth, composed some 2,500 years after the formation of the cult.⁷

⁴ For translated excerpts, see Vincent A. Tobin, "Selections from the Pyramid Texts," in Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 247-62.

⁵ For full translation and commentary, see J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch's de Iside et Osiride*.

⁶ Richter, "Plutarch on Isis and Osiris," 192.

⁷ Ritner, "The Cult of the Dead," 134. Parentheses are Ritner's.

The following is based on multiple sources, most of which can in some way be traced back to Plutarch.⁸

The oldest son of Geb (Earth) and Nut (Sky), Osiris was the legendary first pharaoh of Egypt, a benevolent ruler who ushered in civilization and brought peace and prosperity to the land. His sister Isis was his beloved queen, and their brother Seth and sister Nephthys stood by their side. But all was not well with Seth. He coveted his brother's power, envied his popularity with the people, and desired Isis for himself. Osiris and Isis were childless, leaving Seth the uncontested heir to the throne. He plotted to deceive and murder Osiris with the gift of a royal coffin, more beautiful than any other, built exactly to Osiris' proportions.⁹ The king happily received this gift. Seth urged him to climb inside to make sure he would fit perfectly, but when Osiris obliged him and lay down in the coffin, Seth shut him up inside, locked the coffin and threw it into the Nile, drowning Osiris and sending his body off to sea.

Isis journeyed far and wide, searching for her husband. At last she found the coffin and brought the body of her husband home. Incensed, Seth confiscated the coffin and this time removed Osiris' body and dismembered him into fourteen pieces. Thirteen of those pieces he scattered to different parts of Egypt, but the fourteenth—the phallus—he threw back into the Nile for the fish to devour. Isis and her sister Nephthys went in search of the missing pieces, traveling all over Egypt. They

⁸ See J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Origins of Osiris," 1-40, for a detailed analysis of the original myth. In addition, Mark Smith gives a succinct account in "Osiris and the Deceased," 2.

⁹ In accordance with ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs and their exceedingly positive attitude toward life after death, a coffin such as this would have been perceived quite literally as "a gift fit for a king." See Ritner, "The Cult of the Dead," 132-33.

collected the thirteen members of Osiris, and carefully reassembled his body with linen bindings. Isis fashioned a new phallus for her husband, and the two goddesses brought him back to life. Taking the form of a bird of prey, Isis alighted on top of Osiris and with him conceived a son and heir, Horus, the falcon god of the sky. Horus would live to avenge his father by defeating Seth in battle, and taking his rightful place on the throne as eternal living pharaoh. Osiris became god of the dead and one with all the departed pharaohs of Egypt.¹⁰ Over time, he came to be associated with all the souls of the deceased.¹¹

Some versions of the story tell of an ages-long struggle between Horus and Seth, who still believed himself the true heir, and a divine tribunal led by Geb that would determine the outcome. Geb ended their battle by splitting the rule of Egypt in two, granting Horus the rule of Lower Egypt to the north, and Seth the rule of Upper Egypt to the south.¹² This provided an origin story for the two lands and the two crowns.¹³ Ultimately, the kingdom united was granted to Horus, son of Isis and Osiris.

The story of Osiris became the foundation of the ancient Egyptian view of the afterlife and the development of their funerary practices.¹⁴ In his essay, “Democratization of the Afterlife,” Egyptologist Mark Smith explains how the rite of

¹⁰ Robyn Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 55.

¹¹ Griffiths, *Plutarch's de Iside et Osiride*, 36; Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 55.

¹² The ancient Egyptians gauged “Upper” and “Lower” by the direction of the flow of the Nile River, which flowed from south to north. Hence the Delta region sits in the north near the Mediterranean Sea.

¹³ See William J. Murnane, “Three Kingdoms and Thirty-four Dynasties,” 22-23, for a discussion of “The Battles of Horus and Seth” and the formation of the nation-state in Egypt.

¹⁴ See Mark Smith, “Democratization of the Afterlife,” for an explanation of why the Osirian reward of eternal life was even at its earliest mention intended for all Egyptians, as opposed to the pharaoh alone.

mummification was rooted in the belief that as long as the deceased's body remained intact, thereby "acquir[ing] an Osirian aspect or form" (1), they could achieve everlasting life and "enjoy the benefits of integration into the hierarchy of the gods in the afterlife" (3).

The mysteries of Osiris as celebrated during the month of Khoiak (as recorded in the Ptolemaic, or Greco-Roman, period) included at least four different episodes throughout the month. The historical record is unclear as to exactly what ceremonies and episodes comprised the festival, mainly because the celebrations changed over time, from kingdom to kingdom and from region to region. There are many textual references to the mysteries and how they were celebrated, but they are rather scattered and inconsistent, with a few exceptions. These exceptions generally come from the Ptolemaic period, due to the later date and better state of preservation of the materials.

From these later pieces of evidence, it has been possible to gauge at least four episodes that took place during the festival as celebrated during the Ptolemaic Period, and they each focused on a different portion of the story of Osiris. So if one were to imagine the Osirian Khoiak Festival as a drama series, for example, four episodes in that series might be titled:¹⁵

- 1) The Protection of the God's Bark;
- 2) The Hours' Watches;
- 3) The Songs of Isis and Nephthys;
- 4) The Raising of the Djed Pillar.

The first two episodes concern the fight against Seth to protect the body of Osiris from his retaliation. The third episode concerns the burial and resurrection of the

¹⁵ See Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 101-108; Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 51-75.

body of Osiris. The fourth episode concerns the victorious return of the living pharaoh, Horus, and the rejuvenation of the crown. The theatrical sequences and related dramatic texts that I am focusing on in this study represent the final two episodes.

The Concept of Effective Utterance

The Stela of Neferhotep I is a thirteenth dynasty royal record of a performance that took place during the Festival of Osiris at Abydos in the mid-eighteenth century BCE. It is well known to Egyptologists but lesser known among theatre historians, who are more familiar with the Stela of Ikhnofret, currently housed in the Berlin Museum.¹⁶ Neferhotep I ruled in the latter part of the Middle Kingdom, ca. 1740-1729 BCE, a marked period of growth for the cult of Osiris, god of the dead, and the expansion of Abydos as home to the “Great God of all necropolises.”¹⁷

The stela’s current whereabouts are unknown,¹⁸ although it was well documented before its disappearance by Egyptologists Auguste Mariette in 1880,¹⁹ and James Henry Breasted in 1906.²⁰ The stela was inscribed at Abydos to document the pharaoh’s direct participation in the ritual renewal of the cult statue of Osiris by taking on the role of Horus, Osiris’ son and rightful heir.²¹

¹⁶ Reference no. 1204.

¹⁷ Gae Callender, “The Middle Kingdom Renaissance (c. 2055-1650 BC),” 168.

¹⁸ Helen Neale, “The Neferhotep Stela, Revisited,” 17.

¹⁹ Mariette, *Catalogue général des monuments d’Abydos*, 231-34.

²⁰ Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 1: 332-36. Breasted tracked its last known movements to the Boulaq Museum in Cairo, and took note of the stela’s rather poor state of preservation at the time (Breasted, 1: 332n^a; Neale, “The Neferhotep Stela, Revisited,” 17).

²¹ Neale, “The Neferhotep Stela, Revisited,” 17.

I am his son, his protector. He gives me the inheritance of one upon the earth. I am a king, great of strength, effective of utterance. He who defiles me shall not live. My opponent shall not draw breath.²²

One phrase in this passage bears repeating: “effective of utterance.” What does this mean? Why is being “effective of utterance” significant for the pharaoh in this instance? William Kelly Simpson translated this passage from the Middle Egyptian, which reads: *mnḥ wḏ.t mdw*.²³ This could also translate to “efficacious of command” or “successful at giving orders” or even “an effective leader.”²⁴ Given the preceding phrase, “I am a king, great of strength,” certainly “efficacious of command” seems a straightforward enough translation for the next phrase.²⁵ So why did Simpson choose instead the English phrase, “effective of utterance”?

Unfortunately, I cannot ask Simpson himself why he chose this particular translation.²⁶ But I propose that one reason might have been the performative context in which these words were used. With his now standard translation, frequently used by Egyptologists, Simpson did more than relay the meaning of the Egyptian text; he relayed their purpose. The Stela of Neferhotep I, named the “Great Abydos Stela” by

²² Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 344.

²³ Antonio J. Morales, “Threats and warnings to future kings,” 72.

²⁴ James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 457-60; Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, 74, 109.

²⁵ Indeed, James Henry Breasted translated this phrase as “excellent in commandment” in his 1906 publication (*Ancient Records of Egypt* 1: 336). Helen Neale translates it as “effective of command” (“The Neferhotep Stela, Revisited,” 73).

²⁶ It is worth noting that Simpson was Yale University’s first recipient of the PhD in Egyptology, and went on to serve as Professor of Egyptology and Near Eastern Language, Literature, and Civilization at Yale for forty-seven years. He passed away in 2017. See Penelope Laurans, ed., “William Kelly Simpson,” Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Yale University, New Haven, accessed February 9, 2022, <https://fas.yale.edu/book/faculty-retirement-tributes-2004/william-kelly-simpson>.

Breasted,²⁷ stood *in situ* along the processional route leading to the Osiris Temple.²⁸ It marked a key performance space for the processional drama that took place during the Osirian Festival, or what theatre historians know as the “Abydos Passion Play.”²⁹ This series of dramatic performances reenacted key points in the physical and spiritual journey of Osiris as the ancient Egyptian god of the dead. Participants in the drama—both actors and audience—were, in effect, taking the same journey, sharing in the experience of transfiguration, thereby ensuring their eternal life with Osiris after death.³⁰

A number of scholars have published on the landscape of Abydos as a site of transfiguration.³¹ Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner maps the geographic area of the site as a metaphorical divine body, most likely that of the sky goddess, Nut, mother of Osiris.³² The “body” holds the coffin of Osiris as it makes its way along the processional route, a metaphor for the deceased’s journey through the afterlife, or the *Duat* (83). This approach might suggest to a theatre historian that Abydos was one of the largest and most complex purpose-built performance spaces ever conceived,

²⁷ Of the two stelae erected for Neferhotep I, this one was the largest. According to Breasted, it was “a sandstone stela, nearly [six] feet high and over [three] feet wide” (*Ancient Records of Egypt*, 1: 332n^a).

²⁸ Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 1: 332n^a.

²⁹ Theatre theorist Oliver Gerland even proposes that the stela itself was a participant in the drama as a posthumous manifestation of its owner. See Gerland, “I, My Stela: Command and Trance in the Procession of Osiris at Abydos,” 133-48.

³⁰ See Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner, “Reading Abydos as the Landscape of Postmortem Transformation,” 69-88.

³¹ See Pouls Wegner, “Reading Abydos,” as well as: Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*; Alan Sikes, “Theatre History, Theatrical Mimesis, and the Myth of the Abydos Passion Play,” 3-18; Oliver Gerland, “I, My Stela: Command and Trance in the Procession of Osiris at Abydos,” 133-48.

³² Pouls Wegner, “Reading Abydos,” 79-81.

granting its immortal audience front-row seats to, as Oliver Gerland calls it, “one of the longest continuously running shows in human history.”³³

The participants in this event consisted of at least three separate groups: the living, the dead, and the divine. The living actors, as priests and priestesses facilitated the transfiguration of Osiris, represented by a sculptured image, which in turn represented the souls of the dead, also present, preparing for the same transfiguration.³⁴ The living audience was not only witness to the performance but active participants seeking to secure their own transfiguration when the time came for them to join Osiris. According to Pouls Wegner:

As the human participants in the performative rituals that linked elements of the built and natural environment of Abydos together were, of necessity, bound to the earthly plane, terrestrial elements of the site were symbolically identified with elements of the Duat, through which the deceased passed during the postmortem voyage. (83)

Thus, there were two levels of dramatic activity occurring simultaneously: the “transformative” and the “transportative” according to Richard Schechner’s well-known theory.³⁵ Schechner assigned ritual performance the power of transformation, and theatrical performance the power of transportation. The difference lay in the outcome. Theatre transports its audience to a place, time, and experience that is not their own reality for a brief period, then returns them to their original state. Ritual transforms its audience into something new, a state from which they cannot return. I propose that the processional drama at Abydos served both purposes. For the dead it was indeed transformation, and for the living, transportation. This firmly places the

³³ Gerland, “I, My Stela,” 134.

³⁴ See Pouls Wegner, “Reading Abydos,” 72-77.

³⁵ See Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 117-50.

“Abydos Passion Play,” as it were, somewhere between the two, combining elements of both theatrical performance and ritual performativity.

This is where the “effective utterance” becomes essential. The phrase speaks to the need for physical volume of voice and clarity of speech, but also potency of the words spoken—the ability to wholly effect a spiritual transformation. The words must be heard and understood by all participants, but they must be *felt* by the dead. In other words, the transfiguration must be complete, whether the living can perceive the effect or not.

The Songs (and Lamentations) of Isis and Nephthys

To further explain this theory, I will discuss one dramatic text in particular that is associated with the mysteries of Osiris and the Khoiak Festival, “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys.” Egyptologists may know it as the first seventeen columns in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, currently housed by the British Museum.³⁶ The text dates to the Late Period in Egyptian history (664-332 BCE). Raymond Faulkner translated it into English and published it in 1936 as “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys,” but it has also been called the “Festival Songs of Isis and Nephthys” or the “Stanzas of the Festival of the Two Kites.”³⁷ The “Songs” were traditionally performed by two young women serving as priestesses who portrayed the goddesses Isis and Nephthys in an episode of the Khoiak Festival called “The Hacking of the Earth,” which focused on the burial of the body of Osiris—a form of the god called Sokar, represented by a diminutive mummy-like figure made from a grain mould that is built in advance of

³⁶ Museum no. EA10188, 1-5.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wickett, *For the Living and the Dead*, 150.

the festival—and the preparation of Osiris for resurrection.³⁸ Oftentimes in the literature, this particular episode of Khoiak is referred to as the Festival of Sokar.³⁹ According to Egyptologist Louis B. Mikhail, “After Isis has collected the members of Osiris, the body is laid down in the Sokarian [shrine] under the protection of the god of the dead, where Osiris is nourished and prepared for the moment of ascension, which begins by laying his body into the bark of Sokar” (100-101).

This scene represents a key moment in the process of what Pouls Wegner calls postmortem transformation. The sisters of Osiris in combined force are searching for him, calling him forth into his house (the Osiris temple enclosure) to make his body whole again and grant him power over his enemies. The text of the “Songs” lays out specific yet limited instructions for preparation and performance of the ritual drama, as follows:

The entire temple shall be sanctified and there shall be brought in [two] women, pure of body and virgin, with the hair of their bodies removed, their heads adorned with wigs, [...] tambourines in their hands, and their names inscribed on their arms, to wit Isis and Nephthys, and they shall sing from the stanzas of this book in the presence of this god.⁴⁰

The text also indicates that Isis as primary mourner initiates each lament, while Nephthys as secondary mourner echoes that lament, as in a liturgical “call and response” mode.⁴¹ They begin by singing in tandem:

O fair Stripling, come to thine house;
For a very long while we have not seen thee.
O fair Sistrum-player, come to thine house;

³⁸ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 98

³⁹ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 98-103.

⁴⁰ Trans. Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus,” 122. Brackets are Faulkner’s.

⁴¹ Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus,” 121-22; Wickett, *For the Living and the Dead*, 152, 154.

O thou who dwellest in—*lacuna*—after thou didst desert us.
O fair Stripling who didst depart untimely.⁴²

While doing field research for her 2010 book, *For the Living and the Dead*, Arabic language and literature scholar Elizabeth Wickett spent time with a group of Egyptian women who serve as professional lamenters in the southern region surrounding Abydos, Luxor, and Edfu. According to Wickett, the language and structure of the ancient songs and lamentations echo in the funerary laments she has witnessed in modern-day Egypt. She writes:

The lamenters proclaim their desire to be with the deceased and urge his return. This is a rhetorical strategy that creates pathos and provides an inkling of the relationship believed to exist between lamenter and deceased during the funerary ritual.

Other stylistic features of the ancient laments also are discernible: the creation of dialogue and the conventions of multiple voicing and shifting perspectives...Lament performance was rooted, then as now, in the oral tradition and these mere fragments serve to reveal the continuity of these ancient performance conventions.⁴³

Closely connected to the “Songs” is an abbreviated version called “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys.” Catalogued as Papyrus Berlin 3008, indicating its location in the papyri collection of the Berlin Museum, the “Lamentations” is a performative funerary text from the Ptolemaic period. This particular piece was not meant for the general public but for the gods, the deceased, and the priests.⁴⁴ While the “Songs” honored Osiris as representative of all souls of the deceased for the annual festival, the “Lamentations” was an invocation of Osiris for the funerary rite of one deceased individual, in this case a woman named Tentuty (116). Another

⁴² Trans. Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus” [stanza 1, lines 10-14], 123.

⁴³ Wickett, *For the Living and the Dead*, 166.

⁴⁴ Faulkner, “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys,” 120

more obvious difference is its title, which might indicate that the “Lamentations,” as opposed to the “Songs,” were not sung but more likely recited, and to great emotional effect.

The dramatic ritual took place in the inner sanctum of the temple before the image of Osiris. The brief instructions for preparation and performance laid out on this text are similar to those written on the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, with the following differences. The two women were not required to be virgins, but would have been women “with beautiful bodies” (120). They would have been seated on the ground, each holding a jar of water in her right hand, an offering loaf of bread in the other hand, with their heads bowed (120). Finally, the last two lines in the document read: “You shall not be slack in reciting this book in the hour of festival. It is finished” (120).

Until recently, Pap. Berlin 3008 was the only published copy of the “Lamentations.”⁴⁵ But in July of 2021, Egyptologists Andrea Kucharek of the University of Heidelberg in Germany and Marc Coenen of the University of Leuven in Belgium published a comprehensive volume dedicated to all the known extant papyri inscribed with “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys,” including Pap. Berlin 3008. They provide brand new translations of these papyri with extensive commentaries, descriptions, and transliterations of the ancient Egyptian language in which the “Lamentations” were written. Most of the papyri originate from the Late and Ptolemaic periods in Egyptian history when it was not uncommon to use a shorthand, cursive version of the hieroglyphs called “hieratic” for sacred texts such as

⁴⁵ Kucharek and Coenen, *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys*, 6.

these. Thanks to this latest contribution to the literature on these texts, far more details have come to light about the content, context, language, and even the nature, potentially, of performance. For instance, Pap. Berlin 3008 features “vignettes” at the bottom of some of the pages—drawings indicating the position, stance, and gestures that Isis and Nephthys might have taken in each sequence. For example, Kucharek and Coenen describe the scene in “Vignette 4” of Pap. Berlin 3008: “Two squatting females are depicted underneath column 5. Each holds a vase in the left hand and a loaf [of bread] in the right. The captions identify the woman to the right as ‘Isis’ ...the left one as ‘Nephthys’.”⁴⁶

The Myth (and Triumph) of Horus

The following is a passage from *The History* by Herodotus.⁴⁷ It describes an incident he witnessed on his visit to Egypt in approximately 440 BCE.

When the sun is getting low, a few only of the priests continue occupied about the image of the god, while the greater number, armed with wooden clubs, take their station at the portal of the temple. Opposite to them is drawn up a body of men, in number above a thousand, armed, like the others, with clubs, consisting of persons engaged in the performance of their vows. The image of the god, which is kept in a small wooden shrine covered with plates of gold, is conveyed from the temple into a second sacred building the day before the festival begins. The few priests still in attendance upon the image place it, together with the shrine containing it, on a four-wheeled car, and begin to drag it along; the others stationed at the gateway of the temple, oppose its admission. Then the votaries come forward to espouse the quarrel of the god, and set upon the opponents, who are sure to offer resistance. A sharp fight with clubs ensues, in which heads are commonly broken on both sides. Many, I am convinced, die of the wounds that they receive, though the Egyptians insist that no one is ever killed. (*Hist.* 2:63)

⁴⁶ Kucharek and Coenen, *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys*, 49.

⁴⁷ Herodotus, *The History*, trans. George Rawlinson, “The History of Herodotus, Book II,” Internet Classics Archive, accessed May 7, 2021, <http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.2.ii.html>.

What Herodotus witnessed, without fully understanding its meaning, was a ritual reenactment closely akin to those which took place annually during the Festival of the Victory of Horus at Edfu, the Victory of Khnum at Esna, and the Osirian Festival at Abydos.⁴⁸ In this case, the image of the god that Herodotus referred to would have been a statue or effigy of Osiris, meant to represent his body in preparation for burial. As the priests prepared to carry the god to his sacred burial place, the forces of his murderer, Seth, would have opposed the god's entrance, while the forces of Horus arrived to confront them. A ritual battle would have ensued, ending with Horus' victory.⁴⁹ A period description of one such reenactment appears in a notable stela from the twelfth dynasty: that of Ikhnofret, a high official of Pharaoh Senwosret III.⁵⁰

In 1935, Herbert Walter Fairman began publishing an extensive translation and analysis of a series of inscriptions from the western enclosure wall of the Temple of Horus at Edfu, in the south of Egypt. These inscriptions, dating to the second century BCE, correspond directly to a ritual reenactment of the battle between the forces of Horus and the forces of Seth, harkening back to the communal rite witnessed by Herodotus three hundred years earlier. The texts indicated references to specific characters, dialogue, and even stage directions. Observing these common elements of literary drama in what he initially called "The Myth of Horus," Fairman

⁴⁸ Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus*, 27; Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 114-22; Mikhail, "Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival: An Outline," 45.

⁴⁹ Mikhail, "Dramatic Aspects: An Outline," 45.

⁵⁰ Full translations of this stela into English may be found in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1: 123-25, and in Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 425-27. I will discuss this artifact in more detail in the next section.

concluded that “in form it is a play and falls easily and automatically into acts and scenes without any manipulation of the reliefs or their order.”⁵¹ Fairman and colleague Aylward Manley Blackman continued to publish translations and new findings from the inscriptions in *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* over the next ten years.⁵² Decades later, in 1974, Fairman became the only scholar to edit and publish these texts as a complete play in English, which he titled *The Triumph of Horus: An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. A review of the work appeared in the *Educational Theatre Journal* in October of 1975, calling it “the oldest play in the world” (alluding to a direct connection with the events recounted by both Ikhnofret and Herodotus) and “an unusual and much welcome addition to any drama collection.”⁵³ Fairman’s publication also provides a wealth of dramaturgical information, including notes for staging a performance and a detailed description of the first modern production of the play, which took place in June of 1971 at the Padgate College of Education near the town of Warrington, England.⁵⁴

Still, there were and remain questions surrounding the play’s link to an ancient theatrical tradition in Egypt, considering among other reasons the date of the inscriptions. Alexander the Great’s defeat of the Persian Empire and conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE was the beginning of what scholars refer to now as the Ptolemaic

⁵¹ Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus*, 19.

⁵² See Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu: I,” 26-36; Blackman and Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu: II” (in 3 parts) in *JEA* 28: 32-38; 29: 2-36; and 30: 5-22.

⁵³ Terry Theodore, “Reviewed Work(s): The Triumph of Horus, An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama by H. W. Fairman,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 27, no. 3 (1975): 434.

⁵⁴ Fairman, preface to *The Triumph of Horus*, vii; Newton and Poole, “The ‘Triumph of Horus’ Production,” in Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus*, 51.

or Hellenistic period in Egyptian history.⁵⁵ During this era, the rulers who comprised the Ptolemaic dynasty reigned from 305-30 BCE. They descended from the Macedonian general, Ptolemy, who claimed dominion over Egypt upon Alexander's untimely death and became Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter (in Greek, the "Savior"—an epithet given to him upon his assumption of the Egyptian throne). The influx of Greek language, religion, and customs that followed over time had an exceptionally strong influence on native Egyptian culture—an influence particularly evident in the religious worship and visual arts of the period.⁵⁶ However, this influence was not entirely organic. Ptolemy and his descendants publicly claimed the Egyptian way of life as their own and, to legitimize their rule in the eyes of the Egyptians, introduced new Greco-Egyptian practices in a deliberate attempt to unite the native Egyptian and Greek immigrant populations, the latter growing increasingly hegemonic.

During the Hellenistic period in Egypt the Greek influence found its way to many traditional Egyptian practices, including the arts and literature. It is possible that "The Triumph of Horus" as discovered on the walls of the Edfu Temple was no exception. However, this drama represents characters, dialogue, and a sequence of events that date much earlier than the Ptolemaic period, as evidenced in the archives left behind by Ikhnofret, Neferhotep I, and Herodotus. Furthermore, the "Triumph"

⁵⁵ For more detailed studies of this period, see: Alan B. Lloyd, "The Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BC)" in Shaw, *Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 388-413; Gunther Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (2001).

⁵⁶ This fusion of Greco-Egyptian religious themes and artistic styles, as well as the promotion of Ptolemaic royal cult, is exemplified in many terracotta figurines that have been found in Egyptian sites as well as other Mediterranean areas. For more on this topic, see Caitlin E. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos* (2011).

and the mysteries of Osiris contain what Aristotle deemed in the *Poetics* an essential element of the tragic plot: *pathos*.

David O'Connor, the Lila Acheson Wallace Professor Emeritus of Ancient Egyptian Art at New York University, has an opinion on the subject. O'Connor co-directed the expedition to Abydos comprised of teams from the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU for over thirty years. In 2009, he published detailed findings of the joint Penn-Yale-IFA excavations in *Abydos: Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris*. O'Connor is a distinguished archaeologist and art historian whose work is deeply rooted in material culture and scientific inquiry. Yet, he acknowledges in his book the dramatic potential, even *pathos*, in the myth of Osiris. "For the Egyptians," O'Connor writes, Osiris was "the focus of an extraordinary cluster of meanings and associations, but also, as many allusions make clear, he inspired strong emotional reactions."⁵⁷

O'Connor further discusses the emotional impact of the tale of Osiris, stating:

The components of his myth may relate to abstract issues such as the interpretation of death, the stability of the cosmos, and the avoidance of evil...[such] evocation in divine contexts of the human emotions, feelings, anxieties, and even the humour experienced by the Egyptians themselves is especially prominent in the case of Osiris and deities associated closely with him. (39-40)

It is the punishment of Seth that plays out in "The Triumph of Horus." The play was performed for the Festival of Victory, an annual celebration at the Temple of Horus in Edfu that commemorated the battles between Horus and Seth, with Horus' ultimate triumph by means of the hunt. The final showdown manifests in the form of a hippopotamus hunt and harpoon ritual, in which Seth is the doomed

⁵⁷ O'Connor, *Abydos*, 39-40.

hippopotamus. This harpooning ritual goes back nearly five thousand years to the early dynastic period in Egypt,⁵⁸ yet another indication that this play was most likely performed there long before the Hellenistic period. References to such a feast appeared on the Palermo Stone, one of the oldest extant records from ancient Egypt, as well as the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts.⁵⁹

A Brief Historiography of Theatre in Egyptology

In this section, I will elaborate on the major contributions in the field of Egyptology to current understanding of ancient Egyptian theatre, including the extant primary sources. This is by no means an exhaustive list of every publication on the subject. I also want to clarify that these materials comprise something of a “niche” area within Egyptological scholarship. Their findings continue to be debated in the field.⁶⁰

The oldest primary source from ancient Egypt that has given scholars information about theatrical elements in the festival of Osiris at Abydos is the Stela of Ikhernofret, currently housed by the Berlin Museum.⁶¹ The document, inscribed in limestone, dates to the reign of Senwosret III (also known by the Greek name Sesostris) between 1870-1831 BCE. The text itself is not a dramatic script but a testament. Ikhernofret, the pharaoh’s honored treasurer and sealbearer, recounts his

⁵⁸ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 34.

⁵⁹ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 34-35.

⁶⁰ See Gaudard, “The Demotic Drama,” 66; Leprohon, 259; O’Rourke, 1.

⁶¹ Reference no. 1204. According to Egyptologist and translator William Kelly Simpson, the Berlin Museum acquired the piece from the Drovetti Collection during the year 1837 or 1838 (*The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 425.)

role in the festival and describes in detail his responsibilities for the renewal of the cult statue of Osiris and the reenactment of the conflict between Horus and Seth. Heinrich Schäfer was the first to publish a translation and analysis of the piece in 1904 with *Die mysterien des Osiris in Abydos unter König Sesostri III* (The mysteries of Osiris in Abydos under King Sesostri III). To date, there is no full English translation of Schäfer's *Die mysterien des Osiris*, although the stela has been translated into English and published by numerous scholars.⁶² But it was Schäfer's name, and the Stela of Ikhnofret itself, that lodged foremost in the imagination of Western theatre scholars as they began to incorporate ancient Egypt into their histories in the early twentieth century.

The entire stela is comprised of twenty-four horizontal lines framed by vertical lines of royal names and titles.⁶³ A low-relief of Ikhnofret himself appears in the bottom register, where he is seated before an array of offerings from his family members.⁶⁴ In the first ten lines, the stela confirms Ikhnofret's high position and honorable status, and details the royal decree as set forth by Senwosret III with all related instructions and guidelines for his responsibility. In the next ten lines, Ikhnofret himself gives an account of every duty he fulfilled in accordance with those guidelines. It is on this portion of the stela that theatre historians have focused, starting at line 18 with "I conducted the procession of Wep-wawet when he proceeds to avenge his father" and ending at line 23 with "they saw the beauties of the

⁶² To name a few: Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1:123-125; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 425-427; Wilkinson, *Writings from Ancient Egypt*, 13-16.

⁶³ Lichtheim, 1:123.

⁶⁴ Lichtheim, 1:123; Simpson, 427.

neshmet-barque as it put to land at Abydos...”⁶⁵ Compared with this ancient testament to a special dramatic performance at Abydos, the wider canon of ancient Egyptian dramatic texts (which I will discuss next) remains largely unexplored in the field of theatre and performance studies.

The Search for Dialogue with “Speaking Words”

The earliest, most influential Egyptologist on the subject of Egyptian drama was German scholar Kurt Sethe. Sethe was the first to formally recognize the theatrical potential in two performative texts: the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus (so named by Sethe himself) and the Shabaka Stone. These texts are perhaps better known by theatre historians respectively as the “Egyptian Coronation Drama” and the “Memphite Drama” or “Mystery Play of the Succession.”⁶⁶ Thanks to Sethe’s publication and numerous subsequent studies by other authors, these two artifacts from the Pharaonic era are now the most widely recognized dramatic texts in the field of Egyptology.⁶⁷

The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus was named for the location in which it was discovered: the New Kingdom funerary temple complex belonging to Pharaoh

⁶⁵ Simpson, 427.

⁶⁶ Rozik, *Roots of Theatre*, 315-323; Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, 18. For “The Mystery Play of the Succession,” see Henri Frankfort’s *Kingship and the Gods* in which he devotes an entire chapter to this subject (123-139).

⁶⁷ The Pharaonic era in Egypt began in approximately 3000 BCE with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under one “centrally organized state ruled by a king believed to be endowed with qualified supernatural powers” (Jaromir Malek, “The Old Kingdom,” 85). It ended nearly two thousand years later with the Third Intermediate Period, when the rule of Egypt devolved for the last time into two factions of native Egyptian ruling classes. The significance of the Pharaonic era in this discussion is that these performative texts date before the Late and Ptolemaic periods (ca. 664-30 BCE) when Egypt fell under foreign control (most notably, Greek control).

Ramesses II.⁶⁸ The document is in fact much older, dating to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055-1650 BCE), and describes a coronation ritual for Pharaoh Senwosret I, who reigned from 1918 to 1873 BCE.⁶⁹ A number of Egyptologists who examined the work after Sethe determined that it was a record of the king's *hꜥ sd* or Sed Festival.⁷⁰ Traditionally held in the thirtieth year of a pharaoh's reign, the Sed Festival was "dedicated to the eternal rejuvenation of the living king" and featured a ceremonial ritual in which the pharaoh made a show of strength and endurance by running a physically challenging course.⁷¹ Also known as the King's Jubilee, the grand celebration featured music and dance performances as well as extensive ritual reenactments.⁷²

The Shabaka Stone is a "theological treatise" that honors Ptah, the creator god of Memphis.⁷³ The dramatic portion of the text conflates Horus and Ptah as one and the same, and recounts the conflict between Horus and Seth for the throne of Egypt. The stone itself, made of black granite, dates to the reign of King Shabaka, one of the famed Nubian rulers of the twenty-fifth dynasty (ca. 710 BCE). Scholars believe, however, that it represents a much older text written on a deteriorated papyrus,

⁶⁸ Geisen, "The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus," 4-5. The original papyrus is currently housed by the British Museum (EA10610,1-5).

⁶⁹ Geisen, "Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus," 4; Lavrentieva, "On Some Specific Features of Ancient Egyptian Dramatic Texts," 254.

⁷⁰ Among them were German scholars W. Helck and H. Altenmüller in 1954 and 1967, respectively. Mikhail provides a detailed discussion of their separate findings compared with Sethe's in "The Egyptological Approach to Drama: Part I," 19-25. See also Lavrentieva, "On Some Specific Features of Ancient Egyptian Dramatic Texts," 254.

⁷¹ Brewer and Teeter, *Egypt and the Egyptians*, 89.

⁷² See Marc LeBlanc, "'In Accordance with the Documents of Ancient Times': The Origins, Development, and Significance of the Ancient Egyptian Sed Festival," 85ff.

⁷³ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Lit.*, 1:51.

possibly dating back as far as the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686-2160 BCE), owing to the archaic language.⁷⁴ This conclusion follows from an inscription that attests to an order from King Shabaka that the stone copy be made to preserve the ancient sacred words of the *Memphite Theology*.⁷⁵

In 1928, Sethe published his translations and findings in *Dramatische Texte zu altaegyptischen Mysterienspielen* (Dramatic texts on ancient Egyptian mysteries).⁷⁶ Sethe classified these texts as dramatic by identifying a command, or instruction, used in them: *dd mdw*—ancient Egyptian for “speaking words.”⁷⁷ Sethe was very specific about the usage of *dd mdw* in these texts: the infinitive *dd* (“to speak” or “speaking”) was usually followed by the preposition *hft*, meaning “to” or “opposite” the person addressed (i.e., *dd mdw hft*, “speaking words to” or “speaking words opposite” another), indicating the presence of dialogue. To cite an example from the Shabaka Stone, as transliterated by Sethe, the Middle Egyptian phrase “*Gbb dd mdw hft Stḥ*” means “Geb speaking words to Seth” (or “Geb says to Seth”), which introduces the

⁷⁴ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Lit.*, 1:51.

⁷⁵ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Lit.*, 1:51.

⁷⁶ A full English translation of Sethe’s work has yet to be published. As with the Stela of Ikhnofret, however, a number of scholars have translated and published the ancient Egyptian texts in English, most recently Christina Geisen. See her PhD dissertation, “The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus” (2012).

⁷⁷ Cf. Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 165. According to Allen, the hieroglyphs representing *dd mdw* often appear “at the head of each column as well as at the beginning of the text; in this case the heading serves as a kind of ‘quotation mark,’ and is not meant to be read” (165).

dialogue.⁷⁸ This phrase is followed by the dialogue itself, which in this line is: “*ỉ.z(ỉ)*
đr bw m ms.k im” meaning “Go to the place where you were born.”⁷⁹

Sethe was not the first to publish a translation of the Shabaka Stone, though his was certainly the most comprehensive. In 1901, British Egyptologist James Henry Breasted had published an essay entitled “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” analyzing the same text and providing an English translation. Breasted, however, did not recognize the performative or dramatic aspects in the text, and was inclined to call it a philosophical treatise instead. Still, he was reluctant to grant the ancient Egyptians the intellectual credit they deserved, offering the following disclaimer to his English-speaking readers: “In estimating the above exposition of the main ideas of this stela, it must be remembered that these ideas are in a language little suited to the conveyance of philosophical notions...also, that the thinker using this language was as little skilled in such thought as his language was ill-suited to its expression.”⁸⁰ Here is evidence that the Orientalist mode of thinking was already setting a negative precedent in early Egyptology for the analysis of ancient Egyptian material.

Kurt Sethe credited Adolf Erman, another German Egyptologist and lexicologist, with introducing the notion of an inherently dramatic tradition in the celebration of the Osirian mysteries. Erman published *Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum* in 1885 (in 1894, the English version was released under the title *Life in*

⁷⁸ Sethe, *Dramatische Texte*, 1: 27, Line 10a. I have translated Sethe’s German translations here into English.

⁷⁹ Sethe, *Dramatische Texte*, 1:27, Line 10a. Transliteration of the “dialogue” is my own from the Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs as they appear in Sethe’s text (see Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 87, 165, 186). Compare the translation of this line to Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Lit.*, 1:52.

⁸⁰ Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” 50.

Ancient Egypt, translated by Helen M. B. Tirard). In the section on religion, Erman described the ritual of the raising of the djed pillar—an aspect of the Khoiak Festival—and one other puzzling reenactment: “Four priests, with their fists raised, rush upon four others, who appear to give way, two others strike each other, one standing by says of them, ‘I seize Horus, shining in truth’.”⁸¹ This observation implies that there had been more than one drama occurring during this festival; two separate reenactments representing two different points in the larger story of Osiris and his son Horus.

As discussed in the previous section, this very conflict between Horus and Seth, and the reenactment of their battle for the rule of Egypt, appeared in the form of a dramatic text carved in relief on the walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu in the second century BCE. Edouard Naville first discovered the hieroglyphic inscriptions and published his findings as *Textes relatifs au Mythe d'Horus recueillis dans le Temple d'Edfou* (Texts related to the Myth of Horus collected in the Temple of Edfu) in 1870. Émile Chassinat subsequently studied them and published his preliminary translations in *Le Temple d'Edfou* (1918), which opened the door for the next generation to go several steps further. Fairman and Blackman gave the texts full treatment in their series of articles published between 1935 and 1944 on “The Myth of Horus at Edfu.”⁸² And in 1974, as previously established, Fairman became the first scholar to publish these texts as a complete play, in English verse, entitled *The*

⁸¹ Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, 278-79.

⁸² See Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu: I” (1935); Blackman and Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu: II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies” (1943); Blackman and Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu: II. C” (1944).

Triumph of Horus: An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama, with accompanying notes for staging a performance of the work.

Étienne Drioton published *Le théâtre égyptien* (Egyptian theatre) in 1942.

Drioton credited Sethe with the first serious and substantial discussion of the potential for ancient Egyptian theatre comparable to the early Greek tradition, and for opening the door for later scholars, like himself, to further examine the subject.⁸³ Earlier French scholars had suggested the possibility, such as Georges Bénédict in 1900,⁸⁴ and Gaston Maspero in 1894 with his earliest translations of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts from Saqqara.⁸⁵

But for every argument in support of ancient Egyptian theatre, there was an equally forceful opposing argument. According to Drioton, German scholar Alfred Wiedemann declared in 1905 that “l’Égypte n’avait jamais dépassé les prodromes religieux d’où le génie des Grecs seul devait faire sortir le théâtre.”⁸⁶ This same sentiment would appear in theatre history textbooks throughout the twentieth century again and again, as the following chapter will reveal. But Drioton believed that Sethe’s *Dramatisches Texte* tipped the scales in favor of the Egyptian dramatic tradition by presenting clear material evidence of dialogue in the Egyptian texts (2). He did, however, suggest that Sethe’s focus on dialogue and the *ḏd mdw* construction was limiting. However, Drioton found something even more striking in Sethe’s

⁸³ Drioton, *Le théâtre égyptien*, 2.

⁸⁴ Bénédict, *Égypte*, 99; Drioton, *Le théâtre égyptien*, 1.

⁸⁵ Maspero, *Les inscriptions des pyramides de Saqqarah*, 4.

⁸⁶ Drioton, *Le théâtre égyptien*, 2. “Egyptian theatre had never advanced beyond religious indications of drama, from which the genius of the Greeks alone were to bring forth the theatre.” Unless otherwise stated, all translations from French are my own. See also Wiedemann, *Die Anfänge dramatischer Poesie in alten Aegypten*, 561-577.

discovery than the *dd mdw* construction.⁸⁷ He insisted that, in reality, these were nothing but quotes.⁸⁸ There was more dramatic material to observe in these texts. Stage directions, for example, and the distribution of parts were even stronger evidence of something theatrical than the suggestion of quotations (97).

In *Le théâtre égyptien*, Drioton presented what he believed were the four qualities necessary for a performative text to be considered *dramatic*. The first three were, as previously mentioned: 1) the distribution of parts, or character announcements at the beginning of their respective speeches; 2) stage directions, or a description of the actions of each character and what appears in the scene; and 3) dialogue, as originally attested by Sethe. The fourth requirement was, according to Drioton, “le caractère des répliques [ou] caractère dramatique,”⁸⁹ a phrase that does not easily translate into English, and its meaning is difficult to pin down, even in French. I interpret this phrase as “dramatic cues, or dialogue between characters of an interactive or dramatic nature.” Egyptologist Maria Lavrentieva, who discussed Drioton’s theories in a 2003 essay, interprets this idea as “the general nature of the text, dialogue and non-narrative style, that is to say, the dramatic character of the text.”⁹⁰ However, Drioton’s phrase is more specific. The “dramatic character” is an illusion—the semblance of something real that is not real—within a deliberate context. In short, it is *make-believe*, or as both Plato and Aristotle called it, *mimesis*. Drioton gave this explanation:

⁸⁷ Drioton, “A la recherche du théâtre de l’ancienne Égypte,” 97.

⁸⁸ In Drioton’s words: “En réalité, ce ne sont là que des citations” (96).

⁸⁹ Drioton, *Le théâtre égyptien*, 44-48.

⁹⁰ Lavrentieva, “On Some Specific Features,” 253.

Le théâtre, lui, a pour loi spéciale de créer, en raccourci, l'illusion d'un entretien réel entre les personnages qu'il anime. Un détail qui, en histoire, dans un poème ou dans un roman, serait fatalement éliminé comme oiseux peut se trouver être précisément celui que tout dramaturge choisira à juste titre pour mettre un accent de réalité dans les paroles de ses personnages. L'expression d'un sentiment fugitif ou trop personnel, qui ne trouverait place nulle part ailleurs, peut être une trouvaille pour le théâtre. Ce sont là des particularités inhérentes au genre dramatique, parce que tenant à sa nature la plus profonde.⁹¹

It is telling, then, that Drioton chose to title his book *Le théâtre égyptien*, “Egyptian Theatre,” as opposed to “Egyptian Drama.” Drioton recognized all four of his requirements in the ancient Egyptian materials, including the Shabaka Stone, which he called “an undisputed dramatic work” (47). He made no distinction between religious and secular drama, but he uniquely distinguished religious drama from *liturgy*, or ritual (35-36). This sparked a heated debate in subsequent scholarship over strict definitions of religious (or sacred) drama, cult ritual, and theatre or dramatic performance, and where the various degrees of dramatic activity found in the Egyptian sources categorically fell.

Louis B. Mikhail began discussing the need for a more nuanced perspective on ancient Egyptian drama in the early 1980s. In 1983, he published an in-depth examination of the dramatic forms and theatricality inherent in the Osirian Khoiak Festival, which he recognizes “could have been the starting point for the emergence of drama in Egypt.”⁹² Mikhail’s work provides a fairly thorough historiographical

⁹¹ Drioton, *Le théâtre égyptien*, 45. “The theatre itself has the particular privilege of creating, in short, the illusion of an actual conversation between the characters it brings to life. A superfluous detail, which in history, in a poem or in a novel, would inevitably be eliminated, can be found precisely where and how the playwright chooses, to give truth to the words of the characters. The expression of a lost sentiment, too personal to be found anywhere else, can be found in the theatre. These peculiarities are inherent within the very nature of the dramatic genre.”

⁹² Mikhail, “Dramatic Aspects: An Outline,” 29.

analysis of the key studies that had been published on drama in ancient Egypt up to that point. He also advocates for a non-literary (or at least a non-Western) approach to the subject that does not rely so heavily on classical Greek forms and paradigms as benchmarks.⁹³ For that reason, I will not retread the territory that he has already covered, but I will build upon the work he has done with my own observations and with commentary on the more recently published works on the subject (particularly those which address the relevant dramatic texts I have been working with).

The first half of Mikhail's investigation focuses on Sethe, Drioton, and Fairman as forerunners of the "dialogue approach."⁹⁴ When Egyptologists began talking about ancient Egyptian drama and performance in the early twentieth century, they were not searching for evidence of an ancient *Egyptian* form, but rather a *Greek* form in Egypt. In other words, according to Mikhail, "they concentrated their efforts on 'discovering' texts which embody dialogue."⁹⁵ Sethe claimed he had found such evidence in the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone. With Sethe's "spoken words," he established a new criteria in what Mikhail called the Egyptological approach to drama, where "dialogue became the essence of dramatic writing and the starting point for the admittance or denial of drama in Ancient Egypt" (19).

⁹³ Mikhail discusses theatrical practices in India, China, and Japan in contrast with ancient Greece. He does not, however, examine Middle-Eastern traditions, nor does he bring any of the ancient African traditions into the conversation. See *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 3-14. See also his 1984 article published in *Göttinger Miszellen*, "The Egyptological Approach to Drama in Ancient Egypt: Is it Time for a Revision? Part 4."

⁹⁴ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 15

⁹⁵ Mikhail, "The Egyptological Approach to Drama: Part I," 19.

Mikhail uses philological evidence to demonstrate that the ancient Egyptian language contained vocabulary that would have corresponded to modern theatrical terms, contrary to popular belief among Egyptologists. For instance, the verb *iri* is most commonly translated as “to make” or “to do.”⁹⁶ However, just like the verb *δράω* in Greek (from which “drama” derives), the Middle Egyptian *iri* is multilayered. Mikhail explains that aside from the usual translation, the verb had other meanings in different contexts, such as “to act in the capacity of someone else, ‘to recite,’ ‘celebrate,’ ‘play music,’ and ‘perform’.”⁹⁷ According to Mikhail, “even the corresponding verb in modern Egyptian Arabic means among other things to act the role of [someone].”⁹⁸

A similar argument is made by François Gaudard, an Egyptologist and Coptologist from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Gaudard explains that in one textual example from the ancient Egyptian Temple at Esna, “the word *irw*...which may derive from *iri* ‘to perform,’ is used to describe the sacred drama enacted in the temple and can, therefore, be translated as ‘performance’.”⁹⁹ Gaudard devoted some twenty-five years to deciphering and analyzing a unique group of Demotic texts, the largest identified as Papyrus Berlin 8278, so named for the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, where it sat in storage for many years.¹⁰⁰ It was a

⁹⁶ Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 454.

⁹⁷ Mikhail, “Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival: An Outline,” 41.

⁹⁸ Mikhail, “Dramatic Aspects: An Outline,” 41.

⁹⁹ Gaudard, “The Demotic Drama of Horus and Seth,” 69-70. Gaudard demonstrates the use of this verb in the Stela of Ikhnofret: “*iw ir.n.i sꜣ mr.f n Wsír hnty imntyw*” to declare “I acted as the ‘son whom he loves’ [Horus] for Osiris-Foremost-of-the-Westerners” (69).

¹⁰⁰ “Demotic,” from the Greek *demos* meaning “the people,” refers to the penultimate phase of the ancient Egyptian language commonly used in the Ptolemaic, or Hellenistic, era. Demotic used an

forgotten manuscript that turned out to be “The Demotic Drama of Horus and Seth,” as Gaudard titled it in 2005—another text from the Hellenistic period written for a performance of the classic conflict between the two gods for the right of succession. Gaudard published an updated study in 2012 entitled, “Pap. Berlin P. 8278 and Its Fragments: Testimony of the Osirian Khoiak Festival Celebration during the Ptolemaic Period.”¹⁰¹ His conclusion, as presented in this article, is that the “Demotic Drama” had in fact been written and performed for the Khoiak Festival, strengthening all previous arguments for such performances in earlier periods.

It is worth noting that both Mikhail and Gaudard consulted a few important theatre historians and performance scholars to supplement their research on the topic. While they are not many, the weight that these contributions bring to their arguments, in my view, is substantial. Mikhail cites Allardyce Nicoll, Oscar Brockett, and Bertolt Brecht as well as Theodor Gaster, Jane Harrison, and William Ridgeway. Gaudard cites theatre historians George Freedley, John Reeves, and playwright-Egyptologist Louis Laflin.¹⁰²

The “Festival Approach” to Drama

In Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival, Mikhail positioned the “dialogue approach” of his predecessors in contrast to his own “festival approach”

alphabet which had evolved from the classical hieroglyphs to an almost unrecognizable degree. The script is notoriously difficult to decipher even for the most seasoned Egyptologist, and requires specialized training in this particular linguistic phase. The final phase of the ancient Egyptian language (before it was ultimately replaced by Arabic) was Coptic, established in the late Roman, early Christian era and still heard today in the liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

¹⁰¹ See Gaudard, “Pap. Berlin P. 8278 and Its Fragments,” 269-86.

¹⁰² I will be discussing these theatre historians in more detail in Chapter 3.

which comprises the second half of his monograph, focused primarily on the Osirian Khoiak Festival as a case study. He explains:

The festival approach which is propagated in this work represents a wider scope and a more comprehensive outlook as it takes into consideration not only the essential ingredients of ancient drama, dance, song, and word in the frame of performance but also the multiplicity of form and content and the main difference between Greek and [Asian] drama.¹⁰³

Mikhail devotes an entire chapter of his monograph to the temple inscriptions and wall reliefs that have yielded the greatest amount of information about the festival calendar, preparations, sequence and content of events in areas outside of Abydos. Among these are the temple sites at Edfu, Philae, and Dendera, all of which date to the later Ptolemaic, or Hellenistic, period. I will linger for a bit on the Dendera texts and reliefs as these represent the most significant evidence for the ritual aspects of the Khoiak Festival.

The Temple of Hathor at Dendera is intimately connected to the Temple of Horus at Edfu. They were both built during the latter part of the Ptolemaic era: one to honor Hathor, goddess of love, beauty, queenship and royal motherhood; and the other to honor her consort, Horus. Dendera is roughly 150 kilometers (93 miles) north along the Nile from Edfu, just east of Abydos in an unusual east-west bend in the flow of the river.¹⁰⁴ At least once per year, the “Feast of the Beautiful Meeting” took place where a procession by boat carried the cult statue of Hathor to visit the house of Horus, where they were united in a marriage ceremony.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Mikhail, preface to *Dramatic Aspects*, vi.

¹⁰⁴ Baines and Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 71, 109; Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples*, 205; Baines and Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 113; Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 122.

The Dendera temple site has yielded both textual and iconographic evidence for many ritual aspects of the Osirian celebrations in the month of Khoiak.¹⁰⁶ Wall reliefs in the chapels of Osiris provide a guideline for how one particular episode of the Khoiak Festival—the Festival of Sokar—might have played out at Dendera and elsewhere.¹⁰⁷ Sokar was a funerary deity that represented the body of Osiris, and the celebration of Sokar involved the fashioning of a figure of Osiris from plant matter—a “corn mummy”—which was placed in a ceremonial coffin and carried in a procession to a designated place of burial.¹⁰⁸ The ritual was meant to represent the retrieval of Osiris’ body, his preparation for burial and his interment, and corresponds directly with the dramatic episode represented in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys.”¹⁰⁹

Egyptologist Robyn Gillam from York University in Toronto published *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt* in 2005. Gillam’s book was the first and only comprehensive treatment of the wider subject of ancient Egyptian drama from a modern historical and pedagogical perspective. It is a survey of all the available material evidence of dramatic activity in ancient Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Roman Period. Gillam is perhaps the foremost expert on the topic at present. She staged a version of Fairman’s *Triumph of Horus* with her students at York in 1999. Since then Gillam has led students in other reenactments of ritual ceremonies

¹⁰⁶ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 104; Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 98-101, 109-10.

¹⁰⁸ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 57, 109-10.

¹⁰⁹ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 110.

performed for Osiris during the month of Khoiak, such as the building of the Osiris figure, and the raising of the *djed* pillar. She based one of her classroom lessons on “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys,” and incorporated the guidelines provided by the Dendera texts into her students’ reenactments of the dramatic piece.¹¹⁰

In *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, Mikhail provides a detailed discussion of the myth-versus-ritual divide in Egyptology. His description of this intellectual conflict immediately brings to mind the ritual-versus-theatre divide in theatre history and performance studies. It occurs to me that a deep connection and misunderstanding might exist within and between these two arguments—a misunderstanding that explains a great deal of confusion in both arenas about the nature of dramatic performance in ancient Egypt. As *ritual* is to *theatre* in one field, so *ritual* is to *myth* in the other. In the study of religion, language and literature in Egyptology, myth and ritual apparently are not, and have rarely been, one and the same. Rather, they are two separate aspects of festival activities and other acts of communal worship and ceremony. Ritual belongs exclusively to the realm of the practical, to the performative; while myth belongs to the realm of the dramatic, to the performance. The distinction is made quite clear by both Louis Mikhail and Jan Assmann, who specializes in ancient Egyptian religion.¹¹¹ In other words, *myth* evokes the mimetic reenactment of a sacred story or (depending on one’s perspective) a past event in history that formed the basis for the festival celebration. “Rituals,” as Mikhail explains, “cover the different aspects of human life. They are based on an

¹¹⁰ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 142-43, 147, fig. 12. A more detailed discussion of these student reenactments appears in Chapter 6.

¹¹¹ See Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (2005), and “Egyptian Mortuary Liturgies” (1990).

action seeking the fulfillment of a certain aim, either the achievement of a good thing for the person or community concerned or protection against a certain evil” (42). That is not to say that these two concepts cannot be intimately connected and appear together in the same context. This appears to be especially true of ancient Egyptian festivals.¹¹² Traditionally, however, when Egyptologists have sought to identify drama or dramatic performance in ancient Egypt, they have sought on one hand evidence of dialogue, but on the other, evidence of a lyrical mythological component or dramatic reenactment.¹¹³

In addition, Mikhail deftly explains that both ritual *and* dramatic elements regularly took place in the course of the festival calendar, to achieve different aims at different points in the celebration. On the reenactments at Abydos of the “passion” of Osiris, Mikhail writes:

These mythical performed texts of the festival show that there was a necessity to go beyond narration and step forward to dramatization. The Osirian myth which is based mainly on the life and death of Osiris demanded a kind of ‘action’ for it to be convincing as there is a great difference between narrating a myth and acting it. The ancient Egyptians experienced the myth through acting it in their own way.¹¹⁴

This same fact, however, has led to some confusion on the part of Egyptologists (and theatre historians, I might add) as to which texts or wall reliefs point to which element. Hence, the debates continue on many of these artifacts.¹¹⁵ I have ascertained that over time, as a result, it became safer to dismiss the bulk of

¹¹² Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 44, 48-50.

¹¹³ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects*, 48-49.

¹¹⁴ Mikhail, “Dramatic Aspects: An Outline,” 30-31.

¹¹⁵ Christina Geisen’s new translation and reexamination of the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus is an excellent example. She has determined that the manuscript represents a ritual performance text as opposed to a dramatic performance text. See “The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus,” 35-36.

these texts as representing ritual practices that contain neither lyrical nor mythological nor theatrical aspects at all. And the same can likely be said of the construction of theatre history and ancient Egypt's position within it.

The Book of the Dead as a Dramatic Work

A number of astute philologists have observed dramatic potential in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts as well as the extensive compilation of New Kingdom funerary texts known as the Book of the Dead.¹¹⁶ A subset of these scholars have suggested that scenes from the Book of the Dead were reenacted within tombs and mortuary temples to ensure the safe passage of the deceased to the afterlife, implying that the spells that comprise the Book of the Dead may be works of dramatic literature, or *plays*, in their own right. Furthermore, they argue that key scenes painted on coffins and tomb walls or inscribed in relief on mortuary temple enclosures may in fact represent dramatic scenes as once performed in a sacred theatral setting—just as the wall reliefs in the Edfu Temple represent scenes from “The Triumph of Horus.”

Gaston Maspero was the first to make such a suggestion for the Pyramid Texts in *Les inscriptions des pyramides de Saqqarah*, published in 1894. In his translation and interpretation of the pyramid texts of King Unas of the Fifth Dynasty, he identified that “deux personnages surtout jouent un rôle dans le drame de la mise au tombeau”).¹¹⁷ Just the use of this word, *le drame* (drama), in the context of *le*

¹¹⁶ I am indebted to Professor Edmund Meltzer for bringing a number of these dramatic arguments for the Coffin Texts to my attention.

¹¹⁷ Maspero, *Les inscriptions des pyramides de Saqqarah*, 4. “Two characters above all play a role in the drama of the placement at the tomb.”

tombeau (tomb) appears to have been enough to encourage many scholars—Egyptologists, anthropologists, and theatre historians alike—to shift their perspective on these ancient funerary texts. As I will illustrate in the next chapter, Gaston Maspero’s name appeared in early dramatic histories written by William Ridgeway, George Freedley and John Reeves.

It is clear that renowned Dutch Egyptologist Adriaan de Buck regarded at least one portion of the Book of the Dead—Spell 78—as a dramatic text. In an article published in 1949, he presented his translation and analysis of what he believed was an earlier version of Spell 78, an older counterpart spell in the Coffin Texts. He pointedly used a number of dramatic phrases familiar to the theatre practitioner and scholar when he discussed, for instance, “the distribution of the speeches among the various *dramatis personae*,” (88) and when he attributed a particular line of dialogue “to some other character in the play” (89). He wrote of “the third personage [who] enters the stage to remain there till the end” (90) and cited at another point “the monologue by the Creator in [Papyrus] Bremner-Rhind” (93n19). It is unlikely that an Egyptologist such as de Buck would have had reason to use terms like *character*, *play*, *stage*, *monologue*, or *dramatis personae* if he did not believe the subject to be dramatic or theatrical in nature. His article, in fact, did not quite argue for that conclusion. On the contrary, it appears de Buck had regarded the conclusion as foregone, based perhaps on prior studies. This article is a very specific philological analysis—an argument for alternative interpretations of grammar and syntax, not of the genre or context of the piece overall. However, de Buck proposed that the study might “offer an explanation of many strange and irrational features in the tradition of

a later period”—in this case, a unique spell in the Book of the Dead as compared with an earlier version in the Coffin Texts (88). Here is an excerpt from the dramatic text itself, including stage directions, as translated and set down by de Buck:

[Speech of Osiris.]

O Horus, come to Busiris, and clear my ways for me, and go all over my house, that you may see my form, that you may extol my *ba*.... Let not him who has done me harm approach me, so that he sees me in the House of Darkness, and uncovers my weariness which is hidden from him.

[Interruption by the gods.]

‘Do thus’, say the gods, who hear the voice of those who go in the suite of Osiris.

[Speech of Horus.]

Be silent, O gods, Let a god speak with a god. Let him hear the true message which I shall say to him. Speak to me, Osiris, and grant that that which has come forth from your mouth concerning me turns round.¹¹⁸

In 1979, Egyptologist Jorge R. Ogdon published an article with his translation and analysis of Spells 30-37 from the Coffin Texts, lending further credence to the dramatic nature of the funerary corpus beyond de Buck’s original argument for Spell 148. In this article he proposes that Spells 30-37, which recount a mythological sequence of events where the deceased king (Osiris, or the recently deceased in place of Osiris) is greeted by the “Goddess of the West,” represent another scene in the dramatic Osirian cycle.¹¹⁹ Ogdon writes:

After a comparative analysis we were forced to conclude that we were facing an actual dramatic argument connected with the reception of the defunct in the Hereafter by the goddess and other gods. The *mise en scène* of this dramatic play we were able to reassure through some mural paintings from the New Kingdom, substantiating in this way our interpretation of the *Coffin Texts* spells as a dramatic play. (37)

¹¹⁸ Lines 68-70, trans. A. de Buck. I have retained de Buck’s formatting here, but eliminated his line notations, footnotes, and cross-references to the hieroglyphic text. For these details, see de Buck, “The Earliest Version of Book of the Dead 78,” 92-93.

¹¹⁹ Ogdon, “A New Dramatic Argument,” 37.

One point in Ogdon's argument is the introductory use of the phrase *ḏḏ mdw*: "the use of this formula to introduce a dramatic religious play is well-known," he points out, alluding to Sethe's original theory (38). The spells themselves are a series of speeches delivered by the Gods of the Horizon and the Goddess of the West, as well as speeches delivered by Osiris to the Goddess of the West, by the Goddess of the West to the dead, and by the "officiant priest" to Osiris and the dead (39).

It is perhaps worth noting that each one of these textual examples contains the phrase *ḏḏ mdw* as the introductory formula for dialogue, first identified by Sethe in the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone. This ancient Egyptian construction would have been equivalent to the modern dramatic formula containing the name of the character immediately followed by the character's corresponding speech. An example of this formula in English looks like the following excerpt from Act I, scene 4 of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

LEAR: What art thou?

KENT: A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king.

Ogdon presents more than just the *ḏḏ mdw* construction to support his dramatic argument for these particular spells. It is the suggestion of a reenactment in these texts that Ogdon finds equally compelling, the hint of something more than simply narrative or recitation that elevates these texts to a theatrical status: the presence of an officiant priest in the list of characters. Ogdon writes:

The appearance of the priest in the dialogue seems to be a very firm ground to affirm that we are facing a dramatic funerary play, because it sounds somewhat forced to suppose that a *living* priest may be present in the Underworld. To the best of our knowledge, this is not the case elsewhere, even if one may [argue] that the priest is here replacing the god Thoth. On the contrary, it is usual that a priest or priestess adopts the role of a divinity as, for

example...the priestesses impersonating Isis and Nephthys in other dramatic rituals. (41-42)

These “other dramatic rituals” of course included the “Songs” and the “Lamentations” of Isis and Nephthys as previously discussed. The main point, however, is that if there was a living priest speaking the words of his own part in this event, then there must have been other living actors speaking the words of the other important roles, such as the Goddess of the West and Osiris, essentially *imitating* these gods, either embodying the roles themselves or by means of carrying or speaking on behalf of a statue. According to Ogdon, a mural painting in the tomb of Nakt depicts three such statues—the Goddess of the West, Osiris, and Anubis, the recognizable canine god of mummification—each one housed within their own sacred enclosures where they receive offerings from the deceased and his wife (43).

Conclusions

This brief historiography of theatre in Egyptology has yielded the following conclusion. Within the corpus of ancient Egyptian performative literature, Egyptologists have attested for some time now to the existence of both ritual texts *and* dramatic texts, to both ritual performances *and* dramatic performances. Ergo, one might conclude that *ritual* and *drama* in Egyptology are not necessarily the same thing. Debates continue over the nature of many performative texts such as the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus (its name notwithstanding) and whether they represent *ritual* or *drama*. But most Egyptologists working on the subject today agree at least on the existence of a form of dramatic text and dramatic performance (what Ogdon

calls the “theatrical liturgy”¹²⁰) that is different from the ritual text and the ritual performance. This is an important distinction. If ancient Egyptian dramatic performance is *not* the same as ancient Egyptian ritual performance, then the ancient Egyptian *ritual drama* that theatre historians have been talking about for over a century never, technically, existed. It is simply ancient Egyptian *drama*, or more to the point, *theatre*.

In addition, based on the extant texts and archaeological records discovered and analyzed thus far in the field of Egyptology, I have come to the conclusion that there were two categories of ancient Egyptian theatre: the theatre of kingship, or *coronation theatre*, and the theatre of the dead, or *funerary theatre*. For the former, I have borrowed the word *coronation* from the description that a number of theatre historians and Egyptologists alike have attributed to the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus.¹²¹ As such, I am categorizing other ancient Egyptian dramas that establish or reaffirm and celebrate kingship—*The Triumph of Horus* among them—with the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone. Coronation theatre generally revolved around Horus as the main protagonist, and the living pharaoh as the embodiment of Horus on Earth. The presentation of this form of theatre reinvigorated the strength of the unified nation of Egypt and the power of the king by reenacting the victory of Horus over Seth, as well as a renewal crowning of the king. Funerary theatre revolved around Osiris as the main protagonist and the deceased as the embodiment of Osiris. The presentation of this form of theatre ensured the safe and

¹²⁰ Ogdon, “Further Notes on ‘A New Dramatic Argument’,” 73.

¹²¹ See Rozik, *Roots of Theatre*, 315-323; Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, 18; Roberts, *On Stage*, 19.

successful passage of the deceased into the afterlife by reenacting the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Osiris. The dramatic performances that comprised key episodes of the Khoiak Festival as well as “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” would fall under this category of theatre, as would portions of the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, and scenes from the Book of the Dead.

It is important to remember that coronation dramas and funerary dramas represent two parts of the same story. In a sense, the funerary dramas served as part one, providing exposition and establishing the first conflict between Osiris and Seth that led to the former’s death. The climax of part one began with Isis and Nephthys searching for the body of Osiris (in some versions it was Isis alone who made the journey) and resurrecting him, leading him on into the afterlife. At that point, Osiris began the journey that only he could take—the one mirrored in the funerary liturgies for every ancient Egyptian who had died. Meanwhile, part one resolved with the birth of Horus, and a new aspect of the story began in part two. With the coronation dramas, part two addressed the final conflict between Horus and Seth, their battle for the throne, and the resolution that saw Horus finally crowned as King of Egypt.

It is worth noting that the dialogue approach to ancient Egyptian drama that Mikhail identified in the work of Sethe, Drioton, and Fairman applied, for the most part, to only one category: coronation theatre. Both Sethe and Drioton analyzed the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus as well as the Shabaka Stone; both Drioton and Fairman analyzed the Edfu drama, with quite different conclusions. It is also worth noting that all three of these Egyptologists specialized in ancient Egyptian language and literature in particular. Scholars of such material today include Gaudard and

Geisen. None of this should come as a surprise, except when contrasted with studies of funerary drama. The most prominent work on the performative funerary texts appears in the corpus of studies on ancient Egyptian religion, usually published by specialists in this area, including Budge, Faulkner, and Ogdon. Joining them in the twenty-first century are Antonio Morales, Andrea Kucharek and Marc Coenen. They have a subspecialty in pyramid texts, coffin texts, funerary papyri, mummy wrappings, tomb reliefs, and the like. As a historiographer, then, it is often quite difficult to distinguish which of these texts might indeed represent dramatic performance and which represent funerary liturgy. It is of course possible, and likely, that they represent both—that they are, and were, one and the same within the context of ancient Egyptian culture. I suggest that Mikhail’s festival approach to drama is better suited to evaluating the funerary genre. With this dissertation, I propose yet another mode of inquiry: the performance approach.

Following such an extensive examination as Mikhail gave to the Osirian Khoiak Festival and his timely intervention in traditional modes of studying drama in ancient Egypt, it is curious that more Egyptologists have not picked up the banner of his work and uncovered more information about ancient Egyptian drama and performance over the last forty years. Gillam and Gaudard have made major contributions, certainly, and a number of smaller but notable studies on the subject (aside from my own) have appeared within the last fifteen years. The best known of these is Ronald Leprohon’s “Ritual Drama in Ancient Egypt,” which appeared in a 2007 volume edited by classicists Eric G. Csapo and Margaret Miller entitled *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond*. Leprohon’s essay provides a

survey of the extant dramatic texts as well as the key festivals that involved theatrical elements. On these festivals he writes, “with their elaborate musical accompaniment and pageantry and with story lines sometimes based on mythological events, they certainly come closer to what might be considered the genesis of true dramatic performances.”¹²²

Another recent study of note is emerging Egyptologist Lena Tambs’ Masters thesis at the University of Copenhagen on “Dramatic Performance in Ancient Egypt.” Tambs specializes in the Greco-Roman period and her research focuses on the Greek theatrical presence in Hellenistic Egypt, highlighting dramatic activity in the Greek dominated city of Oxyrhynchus.¹²³ But she gives thorough attention to the extant dramatic texts and the established theories of theatrical performance practices in ancient Egypt.

However, compared with the persistent and exhaustive number of studies published on Egyptological topics like art, architecture, and archaeological findings, the aforementioned work on dramatic performance represents a surprisingly small number. I cannot help but ask, why is that? I will return to this question in a later chapter. But first, I want to contrast the conversations in Egyptology that I have just discussed with those that have surrounded ancient Egypt in the field of theatre and performance studies—theatre history, in particular.

¹²² Leprohon, 285.

¹²³ Tambs, 65-75.

Chapter 3: Ancient Egypt in Theatre History

Twentieth Century Conversations

I have surveyed approximately thirty-five textbooks published in English between 1903 and 2020, to examine the progression of the conversations about ancient Egypt in American undergraduate theatre history classrooms. For the purposes of this discussion, I am featuring only those books which gave significant attention to ancient Egypt, or which shifted the conversation about Egypt and other non-Western traditions in a new or surprising way.

I will begin with the 1903 publication of *The History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times* by Danish actor, director, and theatre scholar Karl Mantzius (1860-1921). Simultaneously published in English and Danish, this six-volume tome became a seminal source for many early-twentieth century theatre historians in the United Kingdom and the United States.¹ For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the first volume only, entitled *The Earliest Times*. In truth, Mantzius gave no notice to ancient Egypt in this volume (or to any of the African nations) but I think it is worth noting that he gave a significant amount of time to other theatre histories outside of the Western sphere. His introduction, like many that would follow, focused on the “first germs of dramatic art” such as “disguises and mummeries” and various forms of dancing.² He addressed theatrical practices across many indigenous communities in the Americas, Australia and the Pacific Islands. His

¹ Louise von Cossel did the English translation, authorized by Mantzius himself.

² Mantzius, *A History of Theatrical Art*, 4.

first chapter was devoted entirely to Chinese theatre, and this in and of itself was quite significant. He devoted the next two chapters in fact to the Japanese and Indian theatre traditions respectively (followed by a detailed look at both Greek and Roman theatre). This choice appears to have had an effect on the structure of some key textbooks that followed in the next few decades.

The earliest history of dramatic arts in which I have found specific mention of ancient Egypt was the 1915 publication of *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of the Non-European Races* by Sir William Ridgeway (1853- 1926). Ridgeway, himself a classicist and professor of archaeology at Cambridge University, wrote *Dramas and Dramatic Dances* as a follow-up to his 1910 book, *The Origin of Tragedy*. While his books may not have been meant for the American theatre history classroom *per se*, Ridgeway's theories may have influenced the subsequent conversations about the origins of theatre that would appear in twentieth century textbooks from that point forward. It is worth noting that, despite the somewhat clinical title that betrays a distinctly Eurocentric perspective, Ridgeway gave his readers a thoughtful and thorough presentation of the history of world theatre that all but excluded ancient Greece from its development. Here was an entire book (approximately four hundred pages) dedicated solely to theatrical traditions outside of the Western sphere, including those of the Middle East (which he called Western Asia), India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Africa, and indigenous communities of Australia and the Americas. Ridgeway opened the work with the following message:

In discussing the history of dramatic literature, all historians down to a few years since have, without exception, confined their attention to the rise of the Greek drama, to its imitation in Rome, to the Mysteries and Miracles of mediaeval Christianity, to the revival of the Classical form, and to its splendid

development in the plays of Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Calderon, Corneille, and Racine....But as even now the study of art with few exceptions is almost invariably based on *a priori* assumptions, little regard being had to the anthropological method, it could hardly have been expected that writers on the drama would have followed other lines.³

With these words published as early as 1915, Ridgeway admonished the narrow scope from which Western scholars had been observing and evaluating the development of dramatic literature and the history of theatre. And yet, nearly fifty years later, theatre historians still “confined their attention to the rise of the Greek drama,” as Ridgeway had suggested, when considering cultural points of origin for the theatre. Case in point, Oscar Brockett wrote the following in his first edition of *History of the Theatre*: “The Greeks must be considered the inventors of theatre and drama, for, regardless of all antecedents, it was they who first recognized the possibilities which had existed for centuries.”⁴ And nearly fifty years after that, the first volume of *A Cultural History of Theatre* still begins with ancient Greece in 500 BCE.⁵ So why did Ridgeway’s remarkably early plea for diversity and inclusion fail to take the firm hold in mainstream scholarship of theatre history and dramatic literature that it should have, after nearly a century? What follows is an earnest attempt to track the answer to that question.

Ridgeway gave an entire chapter of his 1915 volume to ancient Egypt—approximately twenty-seven pages, in fact. There are, however, a few issues with his treatment that I would like to address. First, he cited only one Egyptological source for the ancient Egyptian material: Sir E. A. Wallis Budge (1857-1934), who was the

³ Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 1.

⁴ Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 1st ed., 6.

⁵ See Martin Revermann, ed., *A Cultural History of Theatre in Antiquity* (2017).

curator of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum in London. Budge provided foundational English translations and analyses of numerous ancient Egyptian funerary texts. He was an exemplary source for Ridgeway to cite; but in citing only one Egyptologist, and only one publication at that, Ridgeway was taking a rather narrow view of the topic himself.⁶ This having been said, the publication he cited, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection* (1911), included extensive commentary on the relevant primary source material, such as texts from The Book of the Dead and the Stela of Ikhnofret, which Ridgeway carefully considered in his own publication. In reference to a particularly long quote on the worship of Osiris in Egypt, Ridgeway insightfully wrote, “I have thought it best to give this admirable statement in Dr. Budge’s own words, as he cannot be suspected of having a bias towards any particular doctrine of the Origin of Greek Tragedy or of Tragedy in general.”⁷

Budge may have been the one to introduce to theatre historians a direct connection between the ceremonial reenactments of the Osirian Khoiak Festival of ancient Egypt and the mystery and miracle plays of Medieval Europe. In a chapter entitled “The Shrines, Miracle Play, and ‘Mysteries’ of Osiris,” for example, Budge

⁶ Ridgeway mentioned a few of Edouard Naville’s archaeological finds, unrelated to the discussion of drama, citing a recent article he had read in the *Times* (see *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 109, 115n3). He did not, however, cite one of Naville’s publications.

⁷ Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 108. The quote Ridgeway was referring to is:

Somehow and somewhere the belief arose that this particular god-man Osiris had risen from the dead, as the result of a series of magical ceremonies which were performed by Horus, his son, under the direction of the great magician-priest, Thoth, and with the help of the embalmer, or medicine-man, Anubis, and it grew and increased until it filled all Egypt. The fundamental attractions of Osiris worship were the humanity of the god and his immortality, and to these were added later the attributes of a just but merciful judge, who rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked. That these appealed irresistibly to the Egyptians of all periods is proved by the absorption into Osiris of all the other gods of the dead in Egypt. (Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 1: 22-23).

wrote of how Pharaoh Ramesses II of the New Kingdom's nineteenth dynasty "revived the Miracle play of Osiris, and took the leading part in the great scene in which the representative of Horus beats back the foes of his father Osiris."⁸

Ridgeway published *Dramas and Dramatic Dances* to expand upon and qualify some of the ideas he had set down in his 1910 volume, *The Origin of Tragedy*.⁹ Ridgeway theorized that contrary to Greek dithyrambic origins, as had been put forth by Aristotle, and the ritual origins of the mythical year-god, as had been put forth by the Cambridge Ritualists, tragedy was rooted in the ancient practice of ancestor worship and funerary cult. This differed from seasonal festivals in honor of an agricultural god because the object of worship had once been human and had led a meaningful life on Earth—one worth memorializing with dramatic performances reenacting their heroic deeds, and even impersonating their likeness and character. Ridgeway reminded his readers that in ancient Roman funeral tradition, particularly for wealthy patricians, it was not uncommon for dancers and mimes to perform in honor of the dead:

According to Suetonius, the chief mime (*archimimus*) wore a mask in the likeness of the deceased, imitated his speech and manners, and even jested at his expense. Then came the *imagines* which, according to Polybius, were masks representing distinguished ancestors of the deceased. These were brought out from the *atrium*, and each was worn by a man who was chosen to resemble as closely as possible the ancestor personated and was clothed in the dress of his office.... Thus the ancestors of the dead man escorted him to the family tomb. This dramatization of the dead, which we shall find to be very widespread and primitive, led naturally to regular dramatic performances as part of the funeral games.¹⁰

⁸ Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 2: 19-20.

⁹ Ridgeway, preface to *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, vii.

¹⁰ Ridgeway, introduction to *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 7-8.

Ridgeway used the problematic adjective “primitive” here, which I would like to take a moment to qualify. I believe Ridgeway, like some of his contemporaries, intended “primitive” to mean something akin to “innate,” “fundamental,” or “natural” by today’s standards, implying essence or origin. The word did not yet carry the stigma that it would inflict years later, becoming synonymous with white supremacist attitudes toward indigenous communities around the world, especially those of color, as being somehow less “evolved” than their European counterparts. This negative attitude reveals itself in an alarming number of publications as the twentieth century progresses, until the word finally begins to disappear from scholarship in the latter decades and early twenty-first century. However, “primitive” with such connotations was not commonly used by Western scholars to describe the ancient Romans, as Ridgeway does here, which in my opinion underscores the innocuous intention behind his use of the word.

Ridgeway’s origin theory calls directly back to ancient performances of the “Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys,” which took place at funeral ceremonies at least two thousand years before the Roman events Ridgeway described. He suggested that Osiris had once walked the Earth as a human being, and had lived as much as Achilles, as Jesus, or as Muhammad had once lived. His heroic deeds and sacrifice elevated him after death, and his resurrection secured deification. But first and foremost, his humanity profoundly connected Osiris with the Egyptian people in a way that other gods like Ra, Thoth, or Sekhmet were not. “Is it seriously maintained,” Ridgeway asked, “that in the Balkans, Asia Minor, and Egypt, of old the seats of the cults of Dionysus, Adonis, and Osiris, women only learned to wail and beat their

breasts for the loved child or husband, from ritual lamentations in honour of empty abstractions?”¹¹

Ridgeway wrote at length about the cult of Osiris, examining both him and Isis from the perspective of the Greeks first (Herodotus, Plutarch, Diodorus, Strabo, Firmicus Maternus, and Macrobius), then the perspective of Budge and the primary sources from ancient Egypt. He discussed Osiris’ affiliation with Apis and the Mnevis Bull, the site of Busiris, and the djed pillar, which he called the “Tet symbol.”¹² But perhaps most relevant to the present discussion was his use of the phrase “Passion Play of Osiris.” Thus far, it is the earliest reference I have found to the mysteries of Osiris as a “passion play” (115).

Based on my research, the first complete and original history of theatre written in English was *The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginnings to the Present Day*, written by Allardyce Nicoll and published by Harcourt Brace in 1927. Nicoll (1894-1976) was a British lecturer in English and dramatic literature who made his way from East College London to Yale University to establish one of the first theatre history programs in the United States. He had already begun publishing his complete history of English drama in six volumes in 1923, his expertise on the subject well established. But Nicoll wrote *The Development of the Theatre* because, in his own words, “there is no book in the English language which presents a summary of theatrical art from the beginnings to the twentieth

¹¹ Ridgeway, introduction to *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 61.

¹² Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 111, fig. 10.

century.”¹³ He gave credit to “the monumental work of Mantzius” but expressed doubts about the accuracy and relevance of much of his information (5).

Nicoll’s *Development of the Theatre* became a foundation for many theatre history textbooks to come, particularly those that gave special attention to theatre architecture and stage design. His chronology, however, began firmly with ancient Greece. He wrote briefly of the origin of tragedy with regard to early sixth-century choral dithyrambs in honor of Dionysus, but he did not attempt to go any further back in time.¹⁴ Nor did Nicoll attempt to move beyond the boundaries of western Europe with his historical inquiry, save the European American tradition that was booming in the United States at the time.

Approximately forty-five years later, however, Nicoll acknowledged the significance of ancient Egyptian drama when he wrote a letter to Padgate College upon the opening performance of the first modern production of Fairman’s *The Triumph of Horus*. According to directors Derek Newton and Derek Poole, Nicoll told them “this was an important occasion as, so far as I am aware, it is the first attempt to ‘revive’ any ancient Egyptian ritual play.”¹⁵ It was an honor for Newton and Poole to receive a congratulatory letter from Nicoll, even if his use of the term “ritual” reminded them of “the very word that in the beginning inhibited our thinking of anything in the way of a theatrical performance” (59).

In 1928, *The Story of the Theatre* by Glenn Hughes appeared. A poetry fellow from Stanford University, Hughes founded the School of Drama at the University of

¹³ Nicoll, preface to *Development of the Theatre*, 5.

¹⁴ See “The Origins of Tragedy and of Comedy,” in Nicoll, *Development of the Theatre*, 19.

¹⁵ Newton and Poole, “The Production of ‘The Triumph of Horus’,” 59.

Washington in 1940, and remained its director for more than thirty years.¹⁶ Of his new textbook, he declared, “So far as the writer knows, it represents the first attempt in English to summarize in one volume the main events of theatrical history from the earliest times to the present.”¹⁷ Hughes was certainly aware of Nicoll’s work when he wrote those words, since he gratefully acknowledged “the brilliant treatises of Prof. Allardyce Nicoll” in his preface (ix). There was one major difference between the two texts, however: Nicoll had not included a comprehensive treatment of non-Western theatre traditions such as Hughes had.¹⁸ Hughes devoted the second chapter of his history to “The Theatre in Asia,” an uncommon choice for a theatre history textbook of this era, but certainly not unprecedented if one compares this choice with that of Mantzius in 1903. Hughes set aside five to seven pages each for Indian and Javanese theatre, twelve pages for Chinese theatre, and twenty-four pages for Japanese theatre—no less than he allotted for the various theatrical traditions of European countries. Unfortunately, in his express desire for “brevity, clarity, and accuracy”¹⁹ Hughes omitted any significant discussion of ancient Egyptian theatre, with the following disclaimer:

No space has been given to the theatrical arts of certain ancient civilizations: Assyrian, Egyptian, and the like, for the simple reason that not enough is known on the subject. Religious dances and festivals, puppets, and other

¹⁶ See “History,” School of Drama, University of Washington, Seattle, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://drama.washington.edu/history>.

¹⁷ Hughes, preface to *Story of the Theatre*, vii.

¹⁸ In subsequent revisions of *Development of the Theatre*, Nicoll added an opening chapter entitled “Theatre of the Orient,” where he focused on Chinese and Japanese theatre. Perhaps Hughes had been an influence on that front. For example, see the fourth edition of *Development of the Theatre* published in 1966 by Harcourt Brace & World (New York).

¹⁹ Hughes, preface to *Story of the Theatre*, viii.

elementary dramatic forms constituted, we may assume, the only theatre which they possessed. (vii)

Ridgeway, with his twenty-seven pages on ancient Egyptian drama (not to mention an extensive chapter on historical and contemporary dramas of the Middle East and North Africa) would certainly have disagreed with Hughes. Perhaps that is one reason Hughes listed Ridgeway's *Dramas and Dramatic Dances* under his selected references for readers.²⁰ But Hughes did spare a word or two for Egypt in his first chapter, "Primitive Theatricals," for better or worse:

While the Hebrews, Egyptians, and Turks never advanced beyond a rudimentary sort of theatrical expression, the Greeks, the Hindus, the Chinese, and the Japanese achieved early in their history, elaborate and extraordinarily effective theatrical systems....One thing is indisputable: namely, that the non-theatrical races mentioned above are only cases of arrested development. They were not wholly devoid of dramatic instinct—they merely failed to develop it beyond a certain point....Egyptians performed religious dances, and quite certainly had puppet-plays. (4)

Here we begin to sense that heavier meaning to the word "primitive" coming through as "rudimentary," describing "non-theatrical races" that "failed to develop" their dramatic instincts. It appears that Hughes' biases were not so much racially motivated as region-specific, or perhaps faith-based, assuming incorrectly that Jewish and Muslim traditions were somehow stunted in their theatrical growth. A closer examination of cultural and historical differences might have remedied this, as later publications would prove. But Hughes specialized in European and Asian traditions, and those were clearly his primary areas of interest and expertise. He wrote a number

²⁰ Hughes, *Story of the Theatre*, 9.

of his own plays, mostly comedies, and published a few of his own translations of Japanese works into English.²¹

Soon afterward, in 1929, *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting, and Stagecraft* by art historian and critic Sheldon Cheney appeared for the first time. The founder of *Theatre Arts* magazine, Sheldon Cheney was “one of the most significant figures in the modernist movement in American drama in the 1920s and 1930s.”²² In contrast to Hughes’ opinion that the early Hebrew and Egyptian traditions were “rudimentary” and “non-theatrical,”²³ Cheney insisted that these same cultures had born the very seeds of theatre, apart from the Greeks. In his second chapter entitled “Where the Theatre Came From, and When,” he wrote:

We need pause only over two later ancient nations before the Greeks. Let us inquire what were the dramatic features of the famous Egyptian religious ceremonials, and what were the dramatic elements in Hebrew literature and life. Of the other pre-Greek civilizations we have practically no theatre knowledge.²⁴

Following this statement, Cheney granted ancient Egypt three pages of discussion on Osiris and the “Passion Play” of Abydos:

Osiris, the chief Egyptian god, legendary king-divinity, was the central figure of a “Passion Play” bearing notable resemblances to those still performed in the twentieth century. In a document estimated to date from 2000 B.C., we have an outline description of the ceremony and drama as then executed. (24)

²¹ Hughes is perhaps best known today as the American pioneer of theatre-in-the-round, or the arena stage. See “Glenn Hughes (1894-1964)” by Cassandra Tate, HistoryLink.org Essay 3694, February 14, 2002.

²² MacDowell Association, “Sheldon Cheney.” MacDowell Fellowships, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://www.macdowell.org/artists/sheldon-cheney>.

²³ Hughes, *Story of the Theatre*, 4.

²⁴ Cheney, *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years*, 23.

The document to which he was referring, of course, was the Stela of Ikhnofret, first published by Egyptologist Heinrich Schäfer in 1904.²⁵ Cheney quotes passages from the stela, as translated into English by Ridgeway's favored source, Dr. Budge.

A troubling narrative began to emerge in some of the early theatre history texts I have just discussed, beginning with Ridgeway's account of the reenactment of the "great decisive struggle in which Horus defeated Set and his confederates."²⁶ In his discussion of the battle reenactments, or "sham-fights" performed at Abydos, Ridgeway presented the possibility that actual human sacrifices took place there where "large numbers of Set[h]'s followers were slain or captured" (117).

The prisoners were probably beheaded at the tomb of Osiris, and it is not unlikely that their blood was poured out on his sanctuary. Whether in the dramatic performance I-kher-nefert actually offered human victims is not clear, but it is not improbable that he did so. Human victims were certainly sacrificed at Busiris... It thus seems highly probable that prisoners of war and criminals were slain at the annual festival to propitiate and invigorate the spirit of Osiris. (117-18)

Ridgeway offered no source for this claim except a vague reference to chapter eighteen of "The Book of the Dead" and an obscure quote with no specific citation. After a bit of digging, I found his source in *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection* by E. A. Wallis Budge. In his 1911 publication, Budge indeed wrote:

The Egyptian texts contain many proofs that the overthrow of the original enemies of Osiris by Horus was accompanied by great slaughter, that their bodies were presented to him as sacrifices... Thus, in Chapter XVIII of The Book of the Dead, we read of the great battle which took place at night.²⁷

²⁵ In *Die mysterien des Osiris in Abydos unter König Sesostri III.*

²⁶ Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances*, 117.

²⁷ Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, 1: 200.

Egyptologists have asserted for many decades now that human sacrifice was not a common practice in ancient Egypt after the first dynasty came to an end in approximately 2800 BCE, at least not the sacrifice of their fellow Egyptians.²⁸ Such a practice would have been anathema to their religious beliefs and perhaps counterintuitive to the long-term stability of the Egyptian state.²⁹ The sacrifice of their enemies, however, the prisoners of war, may have been another matter. According to Budge, “these facts show that the Egyptians had no horror of human sacrifice as such, and that the cult of Osiris...only caused the choice of victims to be made from among foreigners and from among vanquished peoples” (200). This practice, then, was not so different from the ancient Roman practice of forcing vanquished enemies into gladiatorial contests to the death. One could even argue that the Egyptian sacrificial battles held a higher religious purpose in honor of their god, as opposed to the Roman sacrificial battles that served merely as entertainment for the bloodthirsty masses.³⁰

In fact, as the god of chaos, Seth also stood as the god of strangers, especially foreigners from distant lands.³¹ These defeated enemies would have been the most appropriate representatives of the forces of Seth, if the Egyptians themselves represented the forces of Horus. So in the early twentieth century, Budge presented

²⁸ Ellen F. Morris, “(Un)Dying Loyalty,” 85-86. For more on the Early Dynastic Period and the First Dynasty Kings, see William J. Murnane, “Three Kingdoms and Thirty-four Dynasties,” in Silverman, *Ancient Egypt*, 22-23.

²⁹ On religion, see Robert K. Ritner, “The Cult of the Dead,” 132. For the politics behind the Second Dynasty’s rejection of “retainer” sacrifice, see Morris, “(Un)Dying Loyalty,” 86.

³⁰ I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Beth Ann Judas for this point of discussion. For more on the higher purposes behind the ritual performance of human sacrifice in Early Dynastic Egypt, see Ellen F. Morris, “Propaganda and Performance at the Dawn of the State” (2013).

³¹ Christiane Zivie-Coche, “Foreign Deities in Egypt,” 2.

the above claims in his book, which Ridgeway in turn shared with his readers. Somewhere along the line, however, the mention of prisoners of war was dropped. Cheney, who also relied on the expertise of Budge, wrote of the same sequence of events in ancient Egypt, stating “drama is here still very much entangled with practical life, for those who were taken prisoners in the ‘sham’ battles are supposed then to have acted the least desirable roles in an actual ceremony of human sacrifice.”³² Cheney’s words would imply that the unfortunate victims were other Egyptians who simply lost the game, as it were, and were punished accordingly. Subsequently, other scholars picked this up, and the narrative simply spread from there.

The next discussion of ancient Egypt and mention of the passion play of Osiris appeared in Thomas Wood Stevens’ *The Theatre: From Athens to Broadway*, first published in 1932. A theatre director, writer, and artist, Stevens was head of the Drama Department at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, now the Carnegie Mellon University School of Drama, which holds the distinction of being the first American institution to grant an undergraduate degree in drama.³³ He later served as the founding director of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. As for his textbook, *The Theatre: From Athens to Broadway*, Stevens’ choice of title revealed already his belief that “the invention of tragedy” took place in Athens, and he expanded on this in the second chapter: “Then came the first eminent showman, Thespis, who split off his

³² Cheney, *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years*, 24.

³³ Thomas Wood Stevens Papers. Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries, Tucson, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://speccoll.library.arizona.edu/collections/thomas-wood-stevens-papers>; School of Drama, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://www.drama.cmu.edu/about/>.

own individual form of the ritual, and made a new thing of it.”³⁴ Instead, Stevens devoted his first chapter, entitled “Before Thespis,” to the indigenous tribes of the Americas and to the temple of Abydos in Egypt (with no more than three paragraphs for the latter). There he wrote:

Osiris, the god who died with the drying of the exhausted fields, lived again with the rise of the river. His rebirth was the most vital moment in the whole complex theology of the land. So long before Dionysus led his bulls into Athens, the temple of Abydos had its ritual mystery play, repeating his wrestling with the dread Set, his agony, wounds and death, and at the end, his resurrection. The play in the great temple was of a piece with the village festival when his image, made of earth with grain kneaded in, was buried and later dug up to find the omen of his sprouting seeds. (6-7)

Stevens ranked ancient Egypt’s ritual drama above other dramatic traditions that predated Greece, such as the Corn Dance of the indigenous American Southwest (4). As Stevens explained:

The ritual dance is presentational, but not representational. Drama begins when an ordered succession of actions with appropriate words, conspire to represent experience, real or imaginary, and impersonation is added to action. Theatre begins when there is a recognized place for drama.

The temple of Abydos was perhaps a theatre for all that it had but one play. There are other theatres as monotonous, and no one denies them the term. (7)

Stevens’ reference to “theatres as monotonous” is ambiguous, but perhaps he was pointing quite literally to his assumption “that it had but one play,” which I have suggested was (and continues to be) owing to the misnomer, “Abydos Passion Play.” Cheney had already suggested that “other Passion Plays were performed yearly at Busiris, Heliopolis, and elsewhere” in Egypt, and the archaeological evidence

³⁴ Stevens, *The Theatre: From Athens to Broadway*, 8-9.

supports this claim.³⁵ The evidence also supports more than one “play” at Abydos during the festival of Osiris, which included at least four major events over the course of a month, each one featuring a different dramatic reenactment.³⁶

Irrespective of monotony, however, Stevens refrained from implying that ancient Egyptians were “primitive” in any way, and he did not pick up the discussion of human sacrifice in battle reenactments. More to the point, Stevens stated clearly in the above passage that the “ritual mystery play” at Abydos was, in his opinion, representational in nature as opposed to presentational, linking it to mimesis and to theatre as opposed to a performative, transformative ritual. This is contrary to what some theatre historians have concluded more recently. For example, in his 2015 article “Theatre History, Theatrical Mimesis, and the Myth of the Abydos Passion Play,” Alan Sikes of Louisiana State University suggests that the dramatic reenactments that comprised the so-called “Abydos Passion Play” were not meant to be mimetic or symbolic, but were strictly ritualistic because, for the Egyptians, they were imbued with *heka* or “magic.”³⁷ Sikes explains:

The heka of rituals like those recorded on the Ikhnofret Stela may not sustain comparison to the theatrical mimesis we have inherited from the Greeks. Rather than mere “imitations” of “real” events lost to the distant past,

³⁵ Cheney, *The Theatre*, 24. Louis Mikhail lays out the textual and iconographic evidence for multiple celebrations of the Khoiak Festival, at Abydos and elsewhere in Egypt. See *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 51ff.

³⁶ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 57. Among these episodes at Abydos were “the First Procession, led by Wepwawet against the enemies of Osiris” (57) and the “Vigil of Upoker” (56) where an earlier version of “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys” may have taken place.

³⁷ Sikes, “Theatre History, Theatrical Mimesis, and the Myth of the Abydos Passion Play,” 10-11. Oliver Gerland makes a similar argument in his article, “I, My Stela: Command and Trance in the Procession of Osiris at Abydos.” As I pointed out in Chapter 1, Gerland suggests that the Stela of Ikhnofret was meant to be a sign referring to Ikhnofret himself, so that he might oversee the festivities at Abydos eternally (135-37).

they may be enactments of events that extend from the creation of the world, and through the present moment, into eternity. (13)

The next historian I will discuss, as we return to the early twentieth century, is George Freedley, an American theatre practitioner, scholar, critic, librarian and author who served as curator of the theatre collection of the New York Public Library for over twenty-five years.³⁸ Freedley and his colleague John Reeves wrote *A History of the Theatre*, first published in 1941, in which they asserted without hesitation that the theatre had indeed descended directly from ancient Egyptian drama. The subject bookended their entire prologue, beginning with

This is an objective history of theatre which is written with the express purpose of setting down within the confines of a single volume the main events which have occurred since the drama's inception in Egypt thirty-two hundred years before Christ.³⁹

And ending with

The theatre as we know it is a sophisticated art with mass appeal; it blends all of painting and sculpture with architecture and poetry to create dramatic production. It wasn't always thus because the theatre began in the religious impulse in the hearts and souls of men in the mysterious and remote antiquity of the valley of the Nile. (xvi)

They acknowledged "the scholars and artists who have trod the path we now tread," including Nicoll, Hughes, Cheney, and Stevens, all "pleasant sources of inspiration" (xvi). The prologue was immediately followed by Freedley and Reeves' first chapter entitled "Egypt: The Beginning of Theatre," six full pages of supporting evidence for their argument. "Although this chapter enters a controversial field because the Egyptologists have not yet established all the actual theatrical facts," they

³⁸ "The George Freedley Papers," The New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts, accessed March 21, 2021, <http://archives.nypl.org/the/21717>.

³⁹ Freedley and Reeves, prologue to *A History of the Theatre*, xv.

wrote, “the history of world theatre can be extended back a thousand or more years further than was previously possible.”⁴⁰ The authors gave thorough Egyptological credit where credit was due, mentioning the work of Naville, Erman, Sethe, Breasted, Drioton and others, and they conceded that “any exact interpretations of drama remain to be established by scholars and Egyptologists of the present and future” (1). The authors gratefully acknowledged Ludlow Bull from the Metropolitan Museum of Art for his assistance with the chapter on Egyptian theatre, as well as Louis E. Laflin, Jr. “who gave us days of his time in the research and preparation of this same chapter.”⁴¹

Overall, the content of Freedley and Reeves’ chapter on ancient Egypt did not differ greatly from Ridgeway’s data and analysis, with the possible exception of a close examination of the Pyramid Texts as evidence of dramatic literature. What differed somewhat from Ridgeway’s work was their approach. Ridgeway made a specialized inquiry into “non-European” drama that by definition categorized Egypt as “other” and its dramatic tradition as separate from the history of Western theatre. Freedley and Reeves, on the other hand, called it Egyptian “theatre” from the outset, and treated the Egyptian dramatic texts as the earliest evidence of dramatic literature and theatrical performance, unequivocally. They acknowledged the cultural differences that marked Egyptian traditions as unique from the line of traditions that

⁴⁰ Freedley and Reeves, *A History of the Theatre*, 1.

⁴¹ Freedley and Reeves, acknowledgements for *A History of the Theatre*, vi. Dr. Laflin was a prolific playwright who trained as an Egyptologist at Yale University and The Oriental Institute in Chicago. His dissertation at Yale entitled “Drama in Ancient Egypt: An attempt to discuss the Egyptian dramatic texts in terms conformable with both Drama and Egyptology,” written in 1941, was unfortunately never published (Gaudard, “Demotic Drama,” 67n2, 446).

would follow, but never refrained from maintaining Egypt as the source of that line.

They even suggested that the cult of Dionysus came to Greece by way of Egypt:

Herodotus had much to tell but few if any historians of the theatre seemed to be cognizant of the fact that he recorded the religious festivals and the origin of the worship of Dionysos which was later to be transferred to the dramatic festivals in Greece. For hundreds of years much of this information has been unrecognized by the world of theatre scholarship because of the difficulty of the study of the Egyptian language, literature and art.⁴²

With this last statement, Freedley and Reeves offered an insightful explanation as to why Egypt had not featured prominently in any theatre histories until that point. And it was a reason, notably, that did not include a judgment on the legitimacy or the aesthetic or literary value of Egyptian drama. It was simply a concession that studying and understanding the Egyptian material required more specialized knowledge than they had access to at the time.

Freedley and Reeves' fresh approach to ancient Egyptian theatre set a precedent for at least two major textbooks that followed over the next few decades.⁴³ The first, which I will discuss next, was *The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater*, published in 1955. Authors Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz were both professors in the Theater Arts Department at the University of California, Los Angeles, and would be instrumental in the founding of UCLA's College of Fine Arts in 1961. The first chapter of *The Living Stage* provided its readers with a clue as to where Macgowan and Melnitz might stand on the theatre versus ritual debate. They

⁴² Freedley and Reeves, *A History of the Theatre*, 1.

⁴³ Before these, A. M. Nagler's *Sources of Theatrical History* appeared in 1952, which was an important publication in the field of theatre history. Nagler compiled an impressive collection of excerpts from primary sources for examining the history of theatrical practice from antiquity through the nineteenth century. But for Nagler, theatre in antiquity began first and foremost with Thespis in ancient Athens; he omitted Egypt altogether.

entitled this chapter, “Theatre Begins with Primitive Man.” Here, that unfortunate word “primitive” again stigmatizes the material that a twenty-first century reader would peruse. And, indeed, the authors placed a discussion of ancient Egypt within this chapter dedicated to “primitive” theatre. But it was a discussion nonetheless, and a significant one.

Macgowan and Melnitz wrote, “In Egypt some form of recognizable drama goes back five thousand years, and perhaps even to 4000 BC.”⁴⁴ They cited Louis E. Laflin, Jr., who had also served as Egyptological consultant for Freedley and Reeves’ *A History of the Theatre*.⁴⁵ Laflin apparently directed them to Maspero and Naville, while they gleaned additional information from the German classicist August Frickenhaus. They reprinted an illustration from Frickenhaus’ 1917 book, *Die altgriechische Bühne* (The ancient Greek stage), in which Frickenhaus had published a drawing (perhaps the author’s own) of the panel representing the prologue to “The Triumph of Horus” from the temple at Edfu. Perhaps Macgowan and Melnitz had not seen Fairman and Blackman’s work on “The Myth of Hours,” since they labeled the illustration “A Scene from an Egyptian Drama,” crediting Frickenhaus. In the caption, the authors wrote, “the original drama was made in the time of the Ptolomies; the play was probably created almost 5000 years ago.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Macgowan and Melnitz, *The Living Stage*, 17.

⁴⁵ Macgowan and Melnitz, *The Living Stage*, 17. In this case, the authors spelled Laflin’s name as Lafflin.

⁴⁶ Macgowan and Melnitz, 16. This is a confusing statement, however, given the Ptolemaic era in Egypt did not begin until 305 BCE. Perhaps the authors meant to specify that the extant *text* of the play was made in the time of the Ptolemies, while the *performance* of an earlier version of the play is described in a historical record dating nearly two thousand years earlier than the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Like Freedley and Reeves, Macgowan and Melnitz identified the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts as indicative of “plays” in ancient Egypt, the earliest of four or five different forms (17). “The evidence lies in what might be called stage directions,” they wrote, “and the names of characters that speak” (17). The other forms, according to the authors, were the coronation play, the healing or medicinal play and, the final and “certainly the most dramatic” form, the passion play in honor of Osiris (18). They asserted that “what we know about the Egyptian Passion Play...we owe to the first stage director and actor mentioned in recorded history,” this of course being Ikhnofret (18).

The next textbook I will discuss is *On Stage: A History of Theatre*, first published in 1962. The author, Vera Mowry Roberts, was a professor of theatre history at Hunter College, City University of New York, and a key figure in the founding of Arena Stage in Washington, DC. It is also worth noting that Roberts is the first female scholar to appear in this chronology of theatre historians. Like Macgowan and Melnitz, Roberts dedicated a full chapter to ancient Egypt in *On Stage*—chapter two, in fact, following her first chapter, “Ever Present Beginnings,” which primarily discussed theatrical ceremonies of indigenous communities of the Americas, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. The tone in her discussion of ancient Egypt, however, was quite different from that of Macgowan and Melnitz or of Freedley and Reeves. She evidently regarded Egypt’s significance in theatre history as somewhat dubious:

Although comparatively little has been discovered of its dramatic activities, certainly Egypt had its influence (though there is but little factual evidence) on the ancient Greeks who were its near neighbors. It is profitable for us to learn

what we can of that which passed for drama in the land of the Pharaohs and the pyramids.⁴⁷

She then proceeded to a section of the chapter entitled “Poorly Developed Theatre,” in which she described what she perceived as ancient Egyptian “dance-dramas” and pantomimes performed during funeral processions (15-16). She ended the section by stating:

So far as Egyptologists can ascertain, the ancient Egyptians never developed a high order of drama and their only dramatic presentations were connected with religious observance....At any rate, with one exception, there seem to have been no regulated, repeated performances of given plays such as we are accustomed to in many later periods of theatre (17).

Already, one can detect an echo of Thomas Woods Stevens’ assessment of “theatres as monotonous.”⁴⁸ According to Roberts, this “one exception” was the “Abydos Passion Play,” though she did not make this clear for several paragraphs. First, she discussed the “fifty-five so-called Pyramid Texts,” the Coronation Festival Play, the Heb Sed, and the Medicine Play (17). That was at least four plays in total (or fifty-nine if one counts all of the Pyramid Texts). But readers would have seen these dramas mentioned before in the likes of Freedley and Reeves or Macgowan and Melnitz, yet Roberts did not cite them directly. Nor did she cite any Egyptologists in this chapter at all. She did, however, list E. A. Wallis Budge and William Ridgeway in the bibliography for what she called “Primitive Theatre” (520). In fact, Roberts referred to ancient Egyptians as “primitive” no less than seven times throughout chapter two. Based on my in-depth reading and evaluation of her “Ritual Drama in Ancient Egypt,” I propose that Roberts sourced her material from theatre historians

⁴⁷ Roberts, *On Stage*, 15 (parentheses are Roberts’s).

⁴⁸ Stevens, *The Theatre: From Athens to Broadway*, 7.

alone, with the exception of Ridgeway's *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of the Non-European Races*," from which she extracted Budge as her only Egyptological source.

In *On Stage*, there appears to be no careful analysis of the ancient Egyptian material in the context of Egyptian cultural history or the archaeological record. For instance, she mistook a festival scene with high-kicking dancers for a funeral procession, and a funerary papyrus illustrating a scene from The Book of the Dead as evidence for the use of make-up, masks and costumes in ancient Egypt.⁴⁹ At the end of the chapter, she concluded:

Theatre in ancient Egypt...was inextricably bound up with the cult of the dead. The Pyramid Texts bear a relationship to the more primitive cult of ancestor worship; the Medicinal Dramas are extensions of the feats of medicine men and shamans. Even the most truly dramatic presentation, the Abydos Passion Play, might be said to derive from plays of primitive nature worship. The most outstanding characteristic of Egyptian drama, the emphasis upon spectacle, derives from the primitive propensity for putting on a good show. (20)

In fairness to Vera Mowry Roberts, she made a valiant effort to archive a full, diverse, and inclusive history of theatre, one of which Ridgeway would surely have been proud. I am seeking merely to point out the areas, pertaining specifically to ancient Egypt, where she may have inadvertently picked up inaccuracies that carried into theatre histories published in the second half of the twentieth, and even the early twenty-first, century. It is understandable and reasonable, even expected, that the best of theatre historians should build upon the work of those who came before them. I believe, however, that a mistake was made when Egyptological sources were not also consulted with regard to conversations about ancient Egypt, nor accurately interpreted for a modern audience of theatre scholars and practitioners.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *On Stage*, 18-19, fig. 9.

The second edition of *On Stage*, published in 1974, might have cited Fairman and “The Triumph of Horus” as another solid example of a play, but it did not. In fact, Roberts seemed even less convinced of Egypt’s significance in the chronology of theatre history:

Certainly the most germane consideration for our continuum is that of ancient Egypt...It will be obvious, in the ensuing discussion, that at no time in ancient Egypt did dramatic activity divorce itself from myth-cult and religious observance. Nowhere and at no time did theatre become an autonomous art form.⁵⁰

Yet she retained chapter two just as it had been originally, with only minor revisions.

Benjamin Hunningher, a respected art and theatre critic from Amsterdam, wrote a notable essay contemporaneous with the two textbooks I have just discussed. Soon after the Second World War, Hunningher moved to the United States and took up a position at Columbia University in New York. He published his essay, *The Origin of the Theater*, as a monograph in Dutch in 1955, and shortly thereafter penned an American edition in English, published in 1961. It is difficult to imagine that this monograph did not have some impact on the way scholars like Roberts and Brockett later conceptualized ancient Egypt’s place in theatre history. I will explain why. Hunningher’s essay is essentially a historiography tracing the origin of modern theatre to the Medieval period and the liturgy of the Catholic Church. He acknowledged a contradiction in this conclusion, but he never doubted it. “So much is certain,” he wrote, “and free from disagreement.”⁵¹ He explained:

On the one hand stands Christianity jubilant in its freedom from the material world and its participation in eternal invisible salvation; on the other, an art

⁵⁰ Roberts, *On Stage: A History of Theatre*, 2nd ed., 16.

⁵¹ Hunningher, *The Origin of the Theater*, 1.

concerned only with what the eye can see and what the ear can hear in our painful but glorious mortality. (1)

To reiterate, Hunningher's idea of theatre concerned only what the eye and ear can perceive. Surely this notion would immediately exclude ritual from his definition of theatre. But Hunningher was very much in favor of an early and essential connection between theatre and ritual, rooted in Johann Huizinga's theory of "play."⁵²

Still, in terms of identifying theatre in ancient or medieval history, it is only a short distance from "what the eye can see" to what the eye can read. And sure enough, in *Origin of the Theater*, Hunningher went on to state, "only a palpable relic or piece of contemporary writing dealing with the theater can be accepted as final proof of its existence" (3). Having stated this, he conceded that the "transient art" of theatre could not possibly have yielded such material proof—certainly not from a period in European history that yielded something of a "theatrical vacuum" instead of theatre itself (3). Hunningher blamed this in part on what he called an "iron curtain between Eastern and Western Europe" during the span of time between the seventh and tenth centuries CE, "for we know that the mime actor lived on and flowered in Byzantium" (3). Hunningher cited Allardyce Nicoll in this particular conversation, his 1931 publication *Masks, Mimes, and Miracles* to be precise, which he praises "for its modern approach and its illustrative material" (3n4).

Aside from Nicoll, Hunningher consulted mostly European sources, primarily German, Dutch, and French. Hunningher had little to say on the subject of ancient Egypt, but his is the earliest American study of theatrical origins that I have found to cite Kurt Sethe's work (25). Of the other American texts I have consulted, the next

⁵² See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of Huizinga's theory.

one to mention Sethe's *Dramatische Texte* did not appear until 1981: Peter D. Arnott's *The Theater in its Time*, which I will discuss in more detail shortly. It seems that it took approximately fifty years for Sethe's benchmark 1928 study to reach the distinguished field of theatre history studies in the United States. Why? Sethe's insights might have had an even greater impact on conclusions made by Stevens, Roberts, Brockett, and Hartnoll, even Nicoll. I would like to suggest that a political or at the very least a cultural "iron curtain" similar to the one Hunningher described had fallen between German and American scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, due to the stigma of war and compounded by linguistic and geographic barriers. Neither Schäfer nor Erman show up in any of the American-based studies I have examined from that time period, and surprisingly, Drioton's name is also missing from these earlier studies. Hunningher's circumstances, however, were quite different. I believe it is safe to say that his roots in northwestern Europe led him more easily to Sethe's work, which in turn contributed to his (albeit brief) discussion of ancient Egypt in *The Origin of the Theater*.

The most widely used and well-respected theatre history textbook to come out of the twentieth century was Oscar G. Brockett's *History of the Theatre*, first published in 1968. Brockett was a highly distinguished professor of theatre and dance at the University of Texas at Austin, and a renowned theatre historian. This textbook ultimately supplanted Macgowan and Melnitz's *The Living Stage* as the undergraduate classroom standard. Franklin J. Hildy, professor of theatre history in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, came on board as co-author for the eighth edition of *History of the Theatre*

in 1999. Since then, the popular textbook has affectionately been known in theatre history circles simply as “Brockett and Hildy.” For the purposes of this discussion I will focus first on Brockett’s 1968 publication.

Brockett assigned his first chapter to “The Origins of the Theatre,” in which he stated the following:

In exploring the beginnings of the theatre, it has been customary to use evidence drawn from primitive societies. Anthropologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries argued that all cultures go through similar patterns of development, and consequently that a study of primitive groups which still exist can supply valuable clues to the origin of drama 2500 years ago.⁵³

A trace of the earlier meaning of “primitive” as an essential and common human trait or natural point of origin is evident in this passage, but a Western bias is clear as well, rooted in the etic writings of nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists.

The implication that Western cultural practices were somehow superior to those of the global majority was in full effect at this point. Brockett used the word “primitive” no less than twenty-four times in this chapter to describe societies of the past and present who carry their language and history primarily through a strong oral tradition.

The following quote provides a telling example: “Since one mark of a primitive society is the absence of a written language, dramatic ritual serves as a means for passing on traditions” (3). Still, Brockett noted significant parallels between ritual drama and theatre, such as they “employ the same basic elements—music, dance, speech, masks, costumes, performers, audience, and auditorium” (4). He further qualified this by stating, “thus in dramatic ritual all of the basic elements of theatre

⁵³ Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 1-2.

are present, and it is usually assumed that they were gradually transformed into an independent drama” (5).

However, Brockett afforded ancient Egyptian civilization greater respect than he had for some other societies. In a subsection of his “Origins of the Theatre” chapter, entitled “Ritual Drama in Egypt and the Near East,” he highlighted their accomplishments, declaring “the Egyptians were the first people to evolve an advanced society, having developed a calendar in 4241 B.C. (the earliest date known in history) and a central government in 3400 B.C.”⁵⁴ It is interesting, however, that Brockett did not list Egypt’s sophisticated hieroglyphic writing system as one of his qualifications for an “advanced society.” But this subsection of the first chapter was where he finally dropped the word “primitive” from his discussion.

He described the various extant dramatic texts that had indicated ritual dramas took place in ancient Egypt, including one that sounds vaguely similar to the “Triumph of Horus”:

Other contested texts relate to the coronation of pharaohs. One of the few remaining fragments has been interpreted by some scholars as a series of ritualistic scenes performed at various places in Egypt, the new ruler in this way symbolically taking possession of his kingdom. In this text, the pharaoh is associated with Horus, who in mythology succeeded his father, Osiris, as king. Contrarily, other scholars have noted that these “coronation plays” are probably no more “dramatic” than the ceremonies surrounding the coronation of rulers in modern times. (7)

Brockett did not, however, cite who “some scholars” or “other scholars” were in this case.

Now in its eleventh edition, Brockett and Hildy’s *History of the Theatre* still opens with that first chapter entitled, “Origins of the Theatre,” but the tone and

⁵⁴ Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 6 (Brockett’s parentheses).

content have changed considerably from the first edition. For one thing, the word “primitive” appears only six times in the first two sections, usually in the context of recounting earlier arguments surrounding the origins of theatre. The opening discussion in Brockett and Hildy shifts focus from specific cultural communities and the rites they performed to a critical examination of ritual theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They state:

A few points need to be made about those who formulated this theory. First...they assumed that human institutions (including theatre) evolved through a process in which there was a steady development from the simple to the complex. Second, they assumed that societies that had evolved such autonomous arts as theatre were superior to those in which the arts had not been separated from ritual.⁵⁵

This is an important distinction and a significant change from Brockett’s original stance in 1968. This having been said, the conversation about ancient Egypt has changed very little, and in some ways has simplified. Now enveloped in a section entitled “North Africa and the Near East,” Egypt comprises roughly four meaty paragraphs within this section, and centers on the Ikhernofret stela and the cult of Osiris at Abydos. Brockett and Hildy continue to be conservative in their assessment of the Egyptian texts and careful to refrain from connecting Egypt to any definitive form of theatre. Regarding the Pyramid Texts, they write:

Some scholars have argued that these texts are dramas and were enacted by priests at regular intervals to ensure the well-being of the dead pharaoh and to show the continuity of life and power. Their view is based principally on the presence of occasional passages of dialogue and indications of action. But there is no definitive evidence that they were intended to be acted out or that they ever were. (6)

⁵⁵ Brockett and Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 2.

The authors have, however, given special attention to the Stela of Ikhnofret, stressing, “at Abydos, the most sacred spot in Egypt, some kind of performance relating to Osiris occurred annually from about 2500 until about 550 BCE” (7). They assert that “on the basis of this report, scholars have called it the Abydos Passion Play, a title that deliberately links it to European religious dramas of the Middle Ages” (7). In fact, Brockett and Hildy provided a copy of James Henry Breasted’s translation of the most relevant portion of the stela from his *Ancient Records of Egypt* (1906), along with a detailed commentary, an inclusion that I have seen only once before in Freedley and Reeves’s 1941 textbook.⁵⁶

Returning to 1968, Phyllis Hartnoll’s *A Concise History of the Theatre* first appeared in the same year. The text, popular for its manageable size, scope, and plentiful illustrations, is now in its fourth edition, updated by Enoch Brater and rebranded as *The Theatre: A Concise History* (2012). True to the title of her book, Hartnoll kept her chapters short and sweet, sparing only an introductory paragraph for the subject of origins before diving straight into the first chapter’s titular subject, “The Greek and Roman Theatre.” With a cursory nod to ancient Egypt in that opening paragraph, Hartnoll wrote:

It has been argued that the earliest extant Egyptian texts for funerals and coronations, some dating as far back as 3000 BC, are really plays. But an order of service for a coronation in which the king is crowned by the high priest is not a playscript....Even the famous Passion Play of Abydos, which recounts the death, burial and resurrection of the god Osiris, is really a

⁵⁶ See the additional section entitled “Looking at Theatre History” beginning on page 8 in Brockett and Hildy’s *History of the Theatre* (2008) for their detailed discussion of the Ikhnofret stela. In *A History of the Theatre* by Freedley and Reeves, the authors credited Breasted with the full translation but cited his *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, published in 1912, as the source (5). In *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years* (1929), Sheldon Cheney provided an excerpt from Budge’s translation of the stela (published in *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*) but he did not include the work in its entirety nor a detailed commentary on its meaning (25).

directive for a corporate religious exercise. Before we can talk of theatre we must wait for something a little further removed from reality.⁵⁷

Hartnoll argued that any text or practice so “firmly rooted in reality” could not possibly be called a play since, following the standard set by Aristotle, a play must be rooted in mimetic representation and interpretation rather than the presentation of, or an action in, reality.⁵⁸ In the same paragraph, she laid out her definition of theatre “as we understand it today”:

Three things are necessary: actors speaking or singing independently of the original unison chorus; an element of conflict conveyed in dialogue; and an audience emotionally involved in the action but not taking part in it. Without these essential elements there may be religious or social ceremonies, but not theatre. (7)

And yet, on the following page Hartnoll wrote that “the origin of the modern theatre can be found in the dithyramb (or unison hymn) sung round the altar of Dionysus, the wine-god whose cult had spread to Greece from the Near East” (8). How was the dithyramb in honor of Dionysus closer to modern theatre than the “famous Passion Play of Abydos”? Was the hymn sung to Dionysus somehow “further removed from reality”?

A third volume from 1968 is German theatre historian Margot Berthold’s *Weltgeschichte des Theaters*. English-speaking readers, of course, are more familiar with the version entitled *The History of World Theater: From the Beginnings to the Baroque*, translated by Edith Simmons and first published in 1972.⁵⁹ Berthold

⁵⁷ Hartnoll, *The Theatre: A Concise History*, 7. I investigated the first edition of *A Concise History* and found no discernible difference between the 1968 and 2012 versions of this particular section. Pagination is the same.

⁵⁸ Hartnoll, *The Theatre: A Concise History*, 7.

⁵⁹ My discussion and citations are based on material from the English edition reprinted in 1999.

devoted approximately eight pages to ancient Egypt in her book, granting the subject pride of place in her second chapter, “Egypt and the Ancient East” (referring in this case to Mesopotamia).⁶⁰ It immediately follows an introductory chapter on “The Primitive Theater,” a rather common occurrence at this point in time, but that is the extent of Berthold’s commonality with her contemporary theatre historians, at least when it comes to discussing ancient Egypt. Berthold provided an insightful and remarkably thorough survey of ancient Egyptian theatrical practices, reminiscent of Ridgeway’s detailed analysis, from the dramatic dances performed by the priestesses of Hathor (10) to the “coronation ceremonies and jubilees...couched in dramatic form” (14) to a “limestone relief at Edfu” depicting a “dramatic scene from the Horus myth.”⁶¹ She focused the larger part of the Egyptian section on the dramatic aspects of “the cult of the dead” (12) and included the following description of a scene depicted in Spell 148 of the Coffin Texts: “Even the presentation of the goddess Isis in the process of casting a magic spell to protect her little son Horus from the fatal effects of a scorpion sting seems to have been dramatically presented.”⁶²

The breadth of material Berthold included would seem to indicate a deeper knowledge of Egyptology than most of her colleagues. But whom did she consult? Berthold cited one Egyptologist by name in this chapter, and that is “the brilliant” Gaston Maspero, who first identified “the dialoguelike form of these sepulchral

⁶⁰ Berthold, *History of World Theater*, 9-23.

⁶¹ Berthold, *History of World Theater*, 17. The scene in question is a panel from the “Triumph of Horus” text, although she did not name the play or cite Fairman, as his 1974 publication had yet to be released.

⁶² Berthold, *History of World Theater*, 14. See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the dramatic nature of the Coffin Texts and the arguments over this particular spell.

inscriptions, the so-called Pyramid Texts, [which] has given rise to exciting speculations” (12). However, her references to coronation ceremonies like the “Heb Sed” and her descriptions of specific episodes in the celebration of the Osirian Khoiak Festival, like the Raising of the Djed Pillar, suggest that she had consulted the work of other Egyptologists as well, most likely German scholars like Kurt Sethe. She even mentioned the Tale of Sinuhe, a popular story from the Middle Kingdom with many performative elements (19-20). A quick glance at her bibliographical entries for this chapter reveal that she had, in fact, consulted Sethe as well as Theodor Gaster, and for the first chapter she had consulted Benjamin Hunningher as well as Francis Cornford and James Frazer (480-81). All of this said, what did she finally conclude about theatre in Ancient Egypt? Here is her rather surprising sentiment, followed by an astute observation:

The Egyptian lacked the impulse to rebellion; he did not know the conflict between the will of man and the will of the gods, from which arises the seed of drama. And therefore, in ancient Egypt, dance, music, and the beginnings of theater remained bound to the traditions of religious and courtly ceremonial. (19)

Pushing on into the 1980s, one begins to see a new crop of Egyptological citations emerge in the English speaking world, such as Kurt Sethe (some fifty years too late, I would say) and of course, Fairman, whose work on “The Triumph of Horus” by this time was well established in Egyptology, if not widely read in the field of theatre history. Peter D. Arnott’s *The Theater in Its Time: An Introduction*, published in 1981, was perhaps the first theatre history textbook to feature Fairman’s work. Arnott was a British classicist and theatre scholar who had made his way across the pond to take a professorship at the University of Iowa and, later, Tufts University.

He translated and published numerous editions of classical Greek dramas over the years, and as a theatre director, staged many of them.⁶³

Arnott's textbook was quite unlike others that had come before, in both structure and approach. This was the first text, to my knowledge based on those I have examined thus far, to take a thematic approach to the study of theatre history. The first chapter addresses the question of theatre itself, and considers the educational, artistic, and societal value in studying theatre and its history. Couched in the second chapter, entitled "A Theater for the Gods: Festival Drama in the Mediterranean World," is the discussion of ancient Egypt, along with ancient Greece, under the heading "The Origins." It begins with a subsection that Arnott called "Ritual Drama in Egypt." Here one can see, perhaps, the conversation shifting away from Egyptian "theatre" and settling more firmly into Egyptian "ritual drama." That being said, Arnott refrained from using the word "primitive" anywhere in this chapter, and applied a respectful tone to the origins of theatre and to ancient Egypt, even if he did not give more than two paragraphs to the latter. Within his brief discussion, he mentioned the "ritual combat over a sacred image," citing Herodotus.⁶⁴ Arnott then discussed "The Triumph of Horus," which he suggested was at least 3,300 years old.⁶⁵ Arnott had this to say about the play:

Its most interesting quality, from the standpoint of later drama, is the way in which language can be used to create setting and action. The word is the deed.

⁶³ See "Peter D. Arnott," Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD), University of Oxford, accessed February 1, 2022, <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/people/1591>.

⁶⁴ Arnott, *The Theater in Its Time*, 15.

⁶⁵ Much like Macgowen and Melnitz before him, Arnott was probably conflating the extant text from Edfu (ca. 2nd century BCE) with the archaeological record of similar ritual battles having taken place for more than a thousand years prior. See note 46 of this chapter.

When the chorus tells us we are at the Sacred Lake, we suppose ourselves there; and the excitement of the sacred hippopotamus hunt is brought before us by evocative language and symbolic gesture. (18)

Reading these words, one cannot help but imagine Arnott attending one of the live performances of this play at Padgate College in England in the early 1970s.

His conversation about ancient Egypt ended there, without mention of the Pyramid Texts or Coronation Dramas, Medicine Plays, or even Ikhernofret and the mysteries of Osiris at Abydos (with the exception of the ritual combat, which might just as easily have been referring to an early version of “The Triumph of Horus”). In any case, Arnott’s volume demonstrates that while the subject of ancient Egypt remained relevant, with even some new content, it had nevertheless been significantly reduced from what had appeared in earlier textbooks.

B. Donald Grose, formerly of the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and O. Franklin Kenworthy of Indiana University-Purdue University published *A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre* in 1985. The title might lead one to assume that ancient Egypt does not appear in the chronology, but in fact, Grose and Kenworthy devoted four pages to “Egyptian Drama” and “Egyptian Play Production” in a section of their first chapter, “The Emergence of Theatre,” called “Theatrical Beginnings: Egypt and Mesopotamia.” It follows a previous section entitled “The Ritual Origin of Theatre,” implying that Egyptian drama served as a bridge between ritual and formal theatre. The authors briefly mentioned the “Abydos Passion Play” but focused their attention primarily on “The Triumph of Horus,” which they called “an authentic ritual play.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Grose and Kenworthy, *A Mirror to Life*, 7.

In it the speakers are named at the beginning of speeches, stage directions appear throughout the play, the text is in a nonnarrative style, and the acts and scenes flow in sequential order, consistently developing the main theme of the play. Although these factors are not definitive in determining whether a work is a play, they are significant as far as ritual drama is concerned. (7)

Grose and Kenworthy speculated about the production details of the play, which is perhaps the first time I have seen such consideration given to specific ancient Egyptian performance practices since the work published by Fairman himself. They discussed the location, venue, props, costumes, masks, the use of music, and the ancient Egyptian audience, whom they concluded must have fully participated in the action (8-9). “The stories were known,” they wrote, “so a high degree of concentration on the plot was unnecessary. It is likely that audience participation, totally spontaneous and enthusiastic, often interrupted the presentation to the greater enjoyment of all” (10).

University of Arkansas theatre professor George Riley Kernodle published *The Theatre in History* in 1989.⁶⁷ Kernodle gave exceptional attention to ancient Egypt, granting a full chapter—Chapter One—to “The Egyptian Theatre.” His express use of the word “theatre” is key, just as it was in the work of Freedley and Reeves before him. It is curious that nearly fifty years had passed before another theatre history textbook would call ancient Egyptian drama “theatre” without reservation. But there are other elements of Kernodle’s language and perspective that cling to an outdated view of ancient Egyptian culture, by twenty-first century standards. For example, Kernodle chose to give the first part of his book the title of “Primitive Theatre,” and it was under this heading that he placed the Egyptian

⁶⁷ The George R. Kernodle Scrapbooks, University Libraries ArchivesSpace at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://uark.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/2/resources/1638>.

chapter. In fairness, however, Kernodle was one of the few theatre scholars since Freedley and Reeves who treated this subject almost entirely from the point of view of Egyptologists. He cited Schäfer, among others, and throughout the chapter gave special attention to the primary texts. While he did refer to “the mystery play of Osiris at Abydos” as the “Abydos passion play,”⁶⁸ he carefully explained the multiple dramatic performances that comprised the “play” and their temporal, political, social and religious contexts.

From an Egyptological perspective, Kernodle took liberties with the material as well, but these liberties were not without their own merits. His section on the New Kingdom positioned the pharaohs’ mortuary temples as theatres in their own right. He wrote:

The most striking one still exists in a good state of preservation: the theatre of the remarkable woman Hatshepsut. It is a beautiful sculptured form of two colonnades facing two large open platforms and two ramps, the final achievement of a theatre form freed from subservience to the pyramid. (31)

Egyptologists and theatre scholars alike might scoff at Kernodle’s suggestion. But there was potential in this connection—an opportunity for further exploration that has thus far been missed. I have seen this space myself first-hand, and I concede that it is, in essence, an impressive performance space. This mortuary temple complex, located in the south of Egypt at a site called *Deir el-Bahri* in Arabic, was never used as a final resting place for the famous female pharaoh. The evidence suggests she was entombed with her royal ancestors in the Valley of the Kings: rock-cut tombs hidden deep within the cliff-face of the desert mountain range, where no grave robbers could

⁶⁸ Kernodle, *The Theatre in History*, 22-23.

reach her sarcophagus.⁶⁹ The mortuary complex, on the other hand, was a glorified decoy. So if the mortuary temple complex at Deir el-Bahri was never meant for the burial of Hatshepsut, what *was* it used for? It was meant as a ceremonial place of worship for the royal cult as well as the cult of the gods for whom the site was dedicated. Hatshepsut's complex housed a temple dedicated to the goddess Hathor, for instance, but the complex itself stretched far beyond the temple walls. It does resemble, in many ways, a theatre complex with multiple levels, rooms and stations, and a grand central causeway that leads to two consecutive and expansive flat, open spaces.⁷⁰

It is likely that Kernodle had read Ronald W. Vince's *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, first published in 1984. Vince is currently Professor Emeritus in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Ontario.⁷¹ The first chapter of this self-proclaimed historiographical handbook is an examination of the scholarship on origins of the theatre, largely based on the ritualist theories of the Cambridge anthropologists and, in particular, Theodor Gaster's study of ancient Near Eastern dramatic rituals, *Thespis*. First published in 1950, *Thespis* included a discussion of Sethe's Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone, as well as a reiteration of the Ikhnofret Stela, as translated and published by Heinrich Schäfer in 1904.

⁶⁹ John Baines and Jaromir Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 95

⁷⁰ For a detailed discussion of Deir el-Bahri and Hatshepsut's mortuary complex, see Richard Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt*, 175-79. See also Baines and Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 95-97.

⁷¹ "Ronald Winston Vince," Experts, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://experts.mcmaster.ca/display/vinceron>.

In *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, Vince includes a section entitled “The Egyptian Connection” which naturally appears in the first chapter, “Origins of the Theatre.”⁷² He does not use the phrase “Abydos Passion Play.” Rather, he refers first to the Egyptian primary sources and lists three significant dramatic texts among them, describing them as “at least arguably dramatic although their ‘performance’ remained ritualistic and therefore continues to beg the question concerning the relationship between ritual and theatre.”⁷³ He names the texts as follows: 1) the Ramesseum Drama; 2) the Memphite Drama; and 3) the Edfu Drama (also known as “The Triumph of Horus”), all three of which, he states, are “very suggestive” (17-18).

Following this discussion, Vince briefly mentions the festival of Osiris at Abydos as attested in the Stela of Ikhnofret. He writes, “The difficulties of interpreting this material are formidable, and its significance uncertain. So far as we know, Egypt never developed a theatre that was not bound to ritual and worship” (18).

Twenty-first Century Conversations

Eli Rozik’s *The Roots of Theatre* (2002) is a more recent contribution to the literature on origin theories of the theatre. Rozik provides an impressively comprehensive examination of both primary and secondary sources for these “roots,” including a fairly thorough investigation of Sethe’s Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus

⁷² The first chapter is an examination of the scholarship on origins of the theatre, largely based on the ritualist theories of the Cambridge anthropologists and, in particular, Theodor Gaster’s study of ancient Near Eastern dramatic rituals, *Thespis*. First published in 1950, *Thespis* included a discussion of Sethe’s Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone, as well as a reiteration of the Ikhnofret Stela, as translated and published by Heinrich Schäfer in 1904.

⁷³ Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, 17.

(which he refers to as the “Egyptian Coronation Drama”) and the “Memphite Drama,” or Shabaka Stone. But Rozik’s discussion of these texts is truly an analysis of Theodor Gaster’s interpretation of them in his highly influential 1950 publication, *Thespis*. According to Rozik, it is an interpretation rooted in the assumption that the Cambridge School of ritual theory was correct—and he firmly believes it was not.

Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb published the first edition of *Living Theatre: A History* in 2003. Both authors have had long, distinguished careers in the theatre as prolific authors and educators. Wilson, a veteran theatre producer and Professor Emeritus at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, was the first recipient of the Doctorate of Fine Arts degree from the Yale School of Drama.⁷⁴ Alvin Goldfarb is President Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Western Illinois University, and has enjoyed a long-standing career in higher education administration.⁷⁵ With *Living Theatre*, they sought to create a vibrantly engaging “chronicle...to bring theatre from the past to life today.”⁷⁶ Ancient Egypt, however, did not rate inclusion in Part One: Early Theatre. Egypt does appear briefly in the introduction to the book under the heading “Ceremonies and Rituals: Theatrical Aspects of Ceremonies and Rituals,” couched between a discussion of ceremonies in Africa and the following section on “Indigenous Latin American Ritual” (3-5). The authors allot only two paragraphs for Egypt and the “Abydos Ritual,” which they call a “ritual containing theatrical elements” (4).

⁷⁴ Edwin Wilson, personal website, accessed August 4, 2021, www.edwinwilsonwrites.com.

⁷⁵ “Dr. Alvin Goldfarb,” National Jewish Theater Foundation, accessed August 4, 2021, https://www.njtfoundation.org/dr_alvin_goldfarb.

⁷⁶ Wilson and Goldfarb, preface to *Living Theatre*, v.

Theatre Histories: An Introduction appeared in 2006, written by Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei (with Williams serving as general editor). While the latest edition of Brockett and Hildy's book remains the most widely used in American theatre history classrooms,⁷⁷ *Theatre Histories* runs a very close second. What sets the text apart is its wholly thematic approach. Zarrilli and his colleagues all but abandoned the chronological route taken by almost every other textbook mentioned in this chapter (with the exception of Arnott's *The Theater in its Time*), and opted for an anthropological approach that examines the history of theatre against the development of human communication around the world. As such, *Theatre Histories* decenters Europe and written drama as the primary source and life force of *the* theatre. To be precise, the authors identify their book as a "historical study of world performance, theatre, and drama."⁷⁸

We relate the histories of performance and theatre throughout the world to the key developments in modes of human communication that have reshaped human perception.... We have also designed this book to challenge our readers to reflect on the very methods by which history is written. (xvii)

Their aim with this book was to establish greater diversity in the American theatre history curriculum and, ultimately, a more inclusive classroom environment for college students coming from a wider variety of cultural and educational backgrounds than ever before (xvii). The authors of *Theatre Histories* are all professors of theatre, drama, or performance, though their research areas differ greatly. Before his death in 2020, Phillip Zarrilli was Professor of Performance

⁷⁷ The Brockett and Hildy textbook still holds sway internationally as well. An Egyptian colleague of mine has assigned it for her theatre history classes in the English department where she teaches in Cairo.

⁷⁸ Zarrilli et al., preface to the first edition of *Theatre Histories*, xvii.

Practice at the University of Exeter, and a theatre director who specialized in South Asian performance including Kathakali dance-drama and Asian martial arts (xiii). Bruce McConachie, a theatre practitioner and historiographer, hails from the University of Pittsburgh where he is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts. Gary Jay Williams, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Drama at the Catholic University of America, is a historian, theorist, and critic specializing in Shakespeare. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, now Professor Emerita of Theatre at UCLA, is a “scholar, translator, playwright, and director focusing on Japanese, intercultural, and fusion theatre” (xiv).

But let’s take a closer look at how their global, anthropological and thematic approaches play out in *Theatre Histories*’ discussion of ancient Egyptian drama. Zarilli and colleagues couched a section entitled “Commemorative ritual ‘drama’ in Abydos, Egypt” within their larger chapter on “Religious and civic festivals: Early drama and theatre in context.” This chapter also features the Festival of Dionysus in ancient Athens as well as Mesoamerican sung dance-drama, liturgical drama in early Medieval Western Europe, and the Ta’zieh of Iran.⁷⁹ Right away, readers can see that the authors are putting ancient Egyptian ritual drama in the same category as drama in ancient Athens, which is an important step toward acknowledging Egypt’s significance in theatre history. But why put the word *drama* in quotes, as seen in the title of this section? The quotes are missing from most of the other section titles in the chapter, such as “Dialogic drama in the city-state of Athens” or “Medieval Christian liturgy and drama.” The one exception is “Islamic commemorative mourning

⁷⁹ Zarilli et al., *Theatre Histories*, 1st ed., 53-98 (Chapter 2). The section on Egypt appears first, on pages 54-59.

‘dramas’.” Could it be the “commemorative” aspect that inspired their hesitation to firmly establish these two traditions as dramatic? It seems an unlikely explanation, since the Christian liturgical drama was also commemorative in nature (i.e., the reenactment of the Passion of Jesus was the centerpiece of most mystery cycles).

It is perhaps worth mentioning that this chapter appears in Part One of the book, which Zarrilli and colleagues set aside for “Performance and theatre in oral and written cultures before 1600” (3). The authors include a subsection on the “hieroglyphic texts as mnemonic manuscript records” (58) and highlight the fact that regardless of the “wisdom texts,” “dream books” and other literary forms extant from the Middle Kingdom (stelae among them), no manuscript for the Khoiak Festival dramas has survived from the same period (58). According to the authors:

If any manuscript had been used, it would have recorded the sacred words used to animate and honor Osiris; there would have been no “dialog” specially authored for the figures central to the re-enactment. The focus of the performance would have been on the processional spectacle and re-enactment manifesting the presence and power of Osiris in his annual going-forth, his conquering of death, and rebirth. Perhaps the contemporary focus on narrative in literary works of the Middle Kingdom helped create a climate within which dramatizing parts of the Osiris story was an obvious means of enhancing the efficacy of the annual commemoration. (58)

Zarrilli et al. were certainly on to something when they wrote these words—the notion of performative efficacy. They realized it was not enough to speak the words or tell the tale. The gestures and movements—the *performance* of the reenactment—was every bit as important, if not more so, than recalling the story. And yet documents like the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus and the Shabaka Stone provide evidence that there *was* a need at some point for recording these dialogues—the “spoken words,” who spoke them, when they were spoken, and to whom. Like many

of their predecessors, however, the authors of *Theatre Histories* discuss only the Khoiak Festival in their section on ancient Egypt, and the “quasi-dramatic commemorative ritual,” as they call it, which took place there (57). They did not attempt to explore the finer points of ancient Egyptian drama that might have urged them to remove those quotation marks surrounding the word *drama*.

The sources Zarrilli et al. consulted for their ancient Egyptian discussion were *The Egyptian Book of Living and Dying* by Joann Fletcher (2002), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* edited by Ian Shaw (2000), Theodor Gaster’s *Thespis* (1950), and *Ancient Egyptian Religion* by Henri Frankfort (1948). Aside from Gaster’s book, which I have already discussed in this study, none of the above sources relates much information on the topic of Egyptian drama. In fact, Frankfort reported only “the absence of drama” in his book, even while citing Kurt Sethe and describing the contents of the Shabaka Stone.⁸⁰ His interpretation was that “texts of this type do not represent a new art form; they are simply the ‘books’ of rituals. They have been called dramatic texts. They certainly are not drama” (135-136).

Frankfort’s assessment reflected the Eurocentric bias of his day. He believed that drama could be only one thing: the suspension of disbelief. He considered the mere fact of performativity in ancient Egyptian ritual reenactment—a presentation that activates an unchanging truth as opposed to a representation of changing reality—as “counter to the spirit of drama” (136).

Likewise, Joann Fletcher discusses public performances at the Festival of Osiris and the Festival of Victory only in the context of ritual processions and

⁸⁰ Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 135.

ceremonies.⁸¹ She does not use the word *drama* or even *performance* when describing them. Instead, she focuses on the revelry, dancing, music, drinking and feasting. Beyond that, she describes a “ritual reenactment of the conflict with Seth and the triumph of Osiris’s followers” but nothing more (101).

Theatre Histories is now in its third edition, published by Routledge in 2016, with a partially new group of authors. Bruce McConachie and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei remain, joined by Tamara Underiner of Arizona State University and Tobin Nellhaus of Yale University, who replaced Zarrilli and Williams. Nellhaus, who serves as general editor of the latest edition, had already been involved in some capacity in the writing of these books. The original four authors thanked him in their acknowledgements for the first edition.⁸² No significant revisions are evident in the third edition’s section on ancient Egyptian drama, with the possible exception of the following passage:

The “drama” of Osiris was like many rituals, and may have incorporated impersonations of gods as some rituals did. Unlike most rituals, it probably also possessed the lengthy narrative we find in storytelling. However, there isn’t adequate information to help us judge whether it was a type of theatre. Great caution is advisable when applying modern terminology to ancient forms of performance, especially when evidence is scarce, in order to avoid misinterpretation, anachronism, and perhaps ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, it is clear that writing played a role in conceptualizing and organizing the Abydos “Passion Play.”⁸³

⁸¹ Fletcher, *The Egyptian Book of Living and Dying*, 100-103.

⁸² They wrote, “Tobin Nellhaus’s insights into the importance of major new communication technologies for theatre history helped us shape the periodization of our book” (Zarrilli et al., xv).

⁸³ Tobin Nellhaus, “From oral to literate performance,” in McConachie et al., *Theatre Histories*, 43. The third edition of *Theatre Histories* credits the author of individual chapters while the previous editions did not.

This might explain the authors' choice to retain quotations marks around the word "drama" in the context of ancient Egypt. The primary change, however, is that the section itself has shifted from Chapter 2 to Chapter 1, "From oral to literate performance" (formerly "Oral, ritual, and shamanic performance"⁸⁴), immediately following the sections on storytelling and ritual in oral traditions of West Africa, and preceding the sections on Mesoamerican performance and the Mayan sung dance-drama *Rabinal Achi*.⁸⁵

The first edition of the Norton Anthology of Drama, published in 2009, did not include an ancient Egyptian play among its literary contents. The editors did, however, mention the subject briefly in a section of their introduction to the first volume, "Antiquity through the Eighteenth Century." Editors J. Ellen Gainor of Cornell University, Stanton B. Garner, Jr. of the University of Tennessee, and Martin Puchner of Columbia University begin their "Short History of Theater" with a familiar discussion of ritual and theatre.⁸⁶ "The nature of this connection has been debated by scholars," they write, "but the consensus view is that theatrical activity represented an extension of ritual's symbolic forms of representation into nonritual contexts" (4). They provide an example in the (also familiar) ancient Egyptian dramatic commemorative reenactments of the death and resurrection of Osiris at Abydos. Much like Henri Frankfort did in his 1948 publication, however, they assert:

⁸⁴ Zarrilli et al., *Theatre Histories* (1st ed.), 18.

⁸⁵ McConachie et al., *Theatre Histories* (3rd ed.), 37-43. It is worth mentioning that they also shifted their section on ancient Greece. Under the heading "Performance in a literate culture: Theatre in the city-state of Athens," Greece now ends Chapter 1, with ancient Rome kicking off the revised Chapter 2 on "Pleasure, power, and aesthetics" (see pages 50-68).

⁸⁶ Gainor et al., *Norton Anthology of Drama* (1st ed.), 3.

Ritual differs from theater, of course, in that its prescribed actions, passed down from generation to generation, are designed to effect change in the natural or spiritual worlds. The ritual performances of Egypt remained tied to their religious and dynastic functions and never developed in the direction of theater. In those cultures in which theater did emerge, symbolic performance asserted itself as an object of interest in its own right, thereby paving the way for institutions, practitioners, and audiences who conceived of theater as a communal artistic activity. (4)

They proceed to offer ancient Greece as their first example of such cultures.

The final book I will mention in this chapter is also the most recent: Mark Pizzato's *Mapping Global Theatre Histories*, published in 2019. A uniquely structured book, utilizing numbered paragraphs for ease of reference, Pizzato's histories, like those of Zarrilli et al., play out against a backdrop of anthropological and cognitive insights emphasizing what he calls "deep history" and the "inner theatre" of the human brain.⁸⁷ This comes as no surprise as Pizzato, Professor of Theatre and Film at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, shares a special interest in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology with *Theatre Histories* author Bruce McConachie.⁸⁸ With this book, Pizzato also seeks to expand the scope of theatre history beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of Europe, but unlike *Theatre Histories*, he sticks to a strictly chronological approach that supports his theme of "mapping" these histories. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that he gives ancient Egypt its own section within Chapter 2, "From Prehistoric to Ancient Theatricality." Like many of his predecessors, Pizzato allocates between one and two pages to the topic, including an extremely brief timeline of ancient Egyptian history.

⁸⁷ Pizzato, *Mapping Global Theatre Histories*, 1-2.

⁸⁸ Dr. Mark Pizzato, faculty directory page. Film Studies, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://filmstudies.uncc.edu/directory/dr-mark-pizzato>.

He discusses the now requisite Stela of Ikhnofret, but refrains from using the oft-cited term “Abydos Passion Play.” Instead, he refers to the “Wepwawet procession, out of and returning to the Temple of Osiris in Abydos,” highlighting the fact that it “involved scenes of Osiris’ son, Horus, getting revenge against his evil uncle Set” (40). Pizzato proceeds to give an unusually detailed account of the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus, offering the following discussion prompt: “How do the mythic roles, props, and conflicts in the Ramesseum drama, expressing political elements and neural networks, relate to outer and inner theatricalities today?” (40) I believe that question is a first for any discussion of ancient Egyptian drama, which I sincerely appreciate, even if the discussion does not necessarily further our knowledge or understanding of ancient Egyptian dramatic performance. I must also give credit to Pizzato for highlighting “The Triumph of Horus” in the following paragraph (41). As I believe this historiography shows, the Edfu drama has received remarkably little attention, relatively speaking, in theatre history textbooks over the last century.

Conclusions and Theories

I first approached this historiographical study with a preconceived notion of why ancient Egypt held minimal significance in the chronology and greater narrative of theatre history. That preconceived notion was that the reason lay in racial and cultural bias, in Eurocentric intellectualism. While there can be no doubt that such biases *do* exist, I have discovered throughout the course of my research that I was wrong about the initial underlying cause of such biases. It appears now that the root cause was a problem of *access* to information. Freedley and Reeves summed it up

perfectly when they wrote: “For hundreds of years much of this information has been unrecognized by the world of theatre scholarship because of the difficulty of the study of the Egyptian language, literature and art.”⁸⁹ Theatre historians are not necessarily trained in Egyptology, but many *are* trained in classical studies—in Greek and Latin language and literature as well as the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. This was especially true of theatre historians and scholars of dramatic literature in the early part of the twentieth century, when the classics were still an integral component of liberal arts education in the United Kingdom as well as the United States. Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford, Gilbert Murray, and William Ridgeway, for example, were all trained classicists. James Frazer and Theodor Gaster, on the other hand, were scholars of comparative religion. Gaster was a biblical scholar and Frazer a social anthropologist—fields of study that pushed them beyond the boundaries of their native Europe to explore a wider variety of multicultural perspectives.

In the early history of the modern field of theatre history, scholars tended to fall into one of two camps: the literary camp and the cultural camp. I venture to say that the classicists, including scholars of classical English drama, stood at the gate of the literary camp. Anthropologists, including scholars of religion, stood at the gate of the cultural camp. These disciplines followed very different courses of study, learned different languages and trained in different methods of inquiry. Both camps studied in detail the expression of drama through public performance. Classicists called it theatre, while anthropologists called it ritual. Rarely have the two met, agreed, and collaborated. In the twenty-first century, this kind of agreement and collaboration is

⁸⁹ Freedley and Reeves, *A History of the Theatre*, 1.

starting to happen more frequently in our field, but we still have a long way to go. We are still at a point where a conscious effort must be made to bridge those disciplinary gaps and disparities of access to information.

Having established these two camps in the historiography of theatre, I must concede that Egyptology falls into neither one. Egyptology is its own “gated” community, as it were, due to its disciplinary specificity. Many Egyptologists might characterize themselves as anthropologists, but still more would self-identify as archaeologists or philologists. I wager only a select few, if any, would call themselves theatre historians.

In the United States and throughout the English-speaking world, we are very fortunate that much of our theatre history and dramatic scholarship is either published in or translated into our own language. Both Mantzius and Hunningher, for instance, made sure that their work was published in English as well as in Danish and Dutch, respectively. American theatre historians are not necessarily expected to read a foreign language unless that language is relevant to their area of expertise. A specialist in Latinx theatre, for example, would be expected to read Spanish in addition to English at the very least.⁹⁰ However, graduate programs in Egyptology across the globe expect their students to be proficient in three modern languages by the time they receive their degree: English, French, and German. And these are in addition to the required phases of ancient Egyptian language: Old Egyptian, Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic (representing nearly four thousand

⁹⁰ In some PhD programs, however, a second language proficiency is required for all students. See “Program of Study” under the PhD Program in Theatre and Drama, UC San Diego Theatre Dance, University of California, La Jolla, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://theatre.ucsd.edu/academics/graduate/phd.html>.

years of linguistic development).⁹¹ Even Egyptian graduate students, whose native Arabic is one of the modern languages most closely related to ancient Egyptian, must be well-versed in English, French, and German to advance in the field of Egyptology. In my own research I have found a great number of Egyptological studies written in French or German that have not been published into English because, presumably, there is no need to do so if English-speaking Egyptologists are proficient enough in reading these languages. This presents a significant barrier to scholars of theatre history who wish to achieve a full understanding of ancient Egyptian performance traditions.

In summary, it is possible that important information about ancient Egyptian dramatic performance has eluded most theatre historians because they have not had access to Egyptological training. Embodied practice of dramatic rituals and reenactments as well as the performance of storytelling, recitations, singing and dancing can help bridge that gap, at least when it comes to understanding ancient Egyptian religious, social, and political practices. Frankly, the reverse is also possible. Egyptologists who specialize in these areas, but who lack theatre training, have much to gain from participating in or observing the performance of these practices. It allows for an understanding of culture and history on another level, utilizing what creative arts researcher Estelle Barrett refers to as “multiple intelligences in the production of

⁹¹ See “Egyptology and Egyptian Art and Archaeology,” Graduate Programs, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://neareast.jhu.edu/graduate/egyptology-and-egyptian-art-and-archaeology/>.

knowledge.”⁹² It could also allow for greater recognition of these dramatic performances as *theatre* when seen, heard, and experienced in an embodied context.

⁹² Introduction to Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 2.

Chapter 4: Interventions in Historiography

Defining Theatre

The conversation that took place in many of these theatre history textbooks about what defines theatre is also telling. As Sheldon Cheney insightfully articulated in *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting, and Stagecraft* (1929):

If one could spread out a picture of the world's stages, if the entire pageant of their activities could be momentarily fixed on a magic canvas, the spectator would know at once that no definition ever can be broad enough, elastic enough, to snare in words the elements and the modes of the art, the facets, and the directions of theatric-dramatic life.¹

In *Living Theatre: A History of the Theatre* (2003), Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb call theatre “an event that exists not in the past but in the present. In fact, theatre exists only at the moment when it occurs. The essence of theatre is an immediate exchange between the audience and what unfolds onstage: performances, words of a text, and visual effects of sets, lights, and costumes.”²

In *The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater* (1955), Kenneth Macgowen and William Melnitz wrote that “the story of the theater is the story of both the playhouse and the play. Drama cannot be studied without considering the physical theater; a theater is meaningless apart from the drama it presents.”³ And in a section of the first chapter entitled “Two Theaters and Two Histories,” they continued:

¹ Cheney, *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years*, 1.

² Wilson and Goldfarb, preface to *Living Theatre: History of the Theatre*, v.

³ Macgowan and Melnitz, preface to *The Living Stage*, vii.

There are two ways of looking at the theater. We can say that it exists only when we have (1) a written play, (2) performed by actors, (3) in an envelope of auditorium, stage, scenery, costumes, and lights, or some of these. That is the theater in the terms of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Miller. And it is a very complex organism. But we can look at the theater in another way, and perhaps we had better call this “theater” rather than “*the* theater.”⁴

Macgowan and Melnitz explained that “theatre” as opposed to “*the* theatre” is simple as opposed to complex, and it includes a child’s make-believe games as well as ceremonial performances (3). I suggest that Macgowan and Melnitz were identifying *performance*, in the context of performance studies as theatre scholars might recognize it today, as “theatre” without the definite article. Macgowan and Melnitz went on to qualify the term with “this kind of theater is very simple because it is primitive. It is so simple that you may think it is not theater at all” (3).

Considering, then, Macgowan and Melnitz’ definition of theatre, at what point does theatre become *the* theatre, or rather, at what point does the performance go from simple to complex? Reviewing their qualifications as listed above, it would appear that “theatre” from their perspective meets two of the three requirements. A ceremonial performance such as the Mountain Chant of the Navajo, to use one of their examples (3), is performed by actors (or dancers, as the case may be) and is enveloped, presumably, in costumes and a designated performance space or circle set in a particular manner for the performance itself. What is missing, then, is the written play.

But Macgowan and Melnitz surprised their readers with a third way to think about the subject, and that was to consider how these “simple” performances “made magic and theater at the same time,” claiming:

⁴ Macgowan and Melnitz, *The Living Stage*, 3.

If you approach the theater in this way, if you look for its elements in dance as well as drama, in masks and magic, in the ancestor worship of animals and gods, you will find that the theater is the most widespread and the most ancient of the arts. (4)

It is important, then, to take note that Macgowan and Melnitz wrote a subsequent section of the first chapter (“Theatre begins with primitive man”) entitled “The First Plays—in Egypt and Judea.” It would appear that Egypt, according to Macgowan and Melnitz, did indeed have written plays, and therefore one could surmise that the ancient Egyptian performances qualified as “*the* theatre” by their definition.

Music scholarship, or musicology, is an academic discipline similarly structured to that of theatre history, in which the study of music history begins with ancient Greek modes and continues through the Western musical traditions, with particular emphasis on the Baroque and Classical periods.⁵ In fact, musicology has established a separate field entirely for the study of non-Western traditions: *ethnomusicology*.⁶ In theatre scholarship there is no formal distinction between the subdisciplines of Western and non-Western theatre. The latter is sometimes called *world* theatre, or *global* theatre, but neither one of these terms has really “stuck” as a label within the discipline as a whole. I do not mean to say that such a distinction is desirable; it is not, necessarily, but for the fact that this lack of distinction is not the result of inclusion, but of a general *exclusion*. Such exclusion is evidenced by a long list of theatre history textbooks over the last one hundred years that have mentioned,

⁵ “Baroque” and “Classical” point to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries CE—the likes of Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven.

⁶ Formerly *comparative* musicology. See J. Lawrence Witzleben, “Whose Ethnomusicology,” 1997; Mi-kyung, “What is Ethnomusicology in Korea,” 1998). Also, as Jairazbhoy wrote (1984), the term ethnomusicology still carries with it the connotation of the study of “others’ musics.”

but spent relatively little ink on, theatrical traditions outside of the Western sphere. Most theatre history textbooks include a chapter that covers Asian theatre—one chapter divided into sections devoted to the traditions of India, China, and Japan, often in that order according to the chronology. The development of Sanskrit drama coincided with the Hellenistic period in the ancient Mediterranean region, and the rise of the Roman Republic. China’s theatrical traditions emerged concurrently with the Byzantine era in Eastern Europe, or the decline of Imperial Rome. The numerous forms of Japanese drama came to fruition alongside the Medieval or early modern period in Western Europe. Each one of these eras in European history—Hellenistic, Roman, and Medieval—has merited its own chapter in nearly every theatre history textbook I have examined. Meanwhile India, China, and Japan have usually shared only one chapter per book, often with two or three additional cultural traditions from other countries.

For example, *The Living Stage* by Macgowan and Melnitz (first published in 1955) featured individual chapters on “The great Greeks and the much lesser Latins,”⁷ “The renaissance theater in Italy” (71-110), “Spain’s golden age” (111-34), and “The American theater—1800-1900” (369-98), among others. France merited two chapters, one for the Renaissance (188-217) and one for the eighteenth century (272-91). England also received two chapters, one for the Elizabethan period (135-87) and one for the Restoration and eighteenth century (218-50). Twelve chapters in all featured the history of European theatre (thirteen if one considers that “The American theater” focused exclusively on early European-American traditions). Two chapters alone ventured beyond the scope of Europe: “Theater begins with primitive

⁷ Macgowan and Melnitz, *The Living Stage*, 21-51.

man” (1-20) and “The Oriental theater” (292-324). The latter chapter featured India, Southeast Asia, Persia, Tibet, China, and Japan, in that order.

I do not mean to criticize Macgowan and Melnitz for the overall content of their textbook (setting aside the use of the words “primitive” and “Oriental”). I do, however, want to bring attention to the subtitle they used for their book: *A History of World Theater*. Would it not have been more accurate to call it *A History of Western Theater*, or perhaps *A History of Theater in Europe (and a few other places)*? My point is that by calling it a history of world theatre but leaving a great deal of the world out of the book, the message that theatre is primarily a European cultural institution is sent subliminally, if not directly. In other words, by *not* making a clear distinction between what is Western theatre and what is not, the field effectively excludes non-Western traditions from the definition of *theatre* altogether.

I propose that we stop seeing the Western tradition of theatre as “standard” or “the norm,” but rather the aberration—a *form* of theatre that broke with traditional practices (religious, collective, symbolic, transformative) and became secular, individualistic, and dialogue-driven entertainment. If we begin to talk about ancient Greek theatre and the European theatrical form it yielded as a distinct product of European culture—a *departure* as opposed to an *invention*—we can begin to see the overarching subject of *theatre* in a more global and inclusive way.⁸

Raising the Volume on Modern Egyptian Voices

As I review the list of Egyptologists and theatre historians I have named in the previous two chapters who have made major contributions to scholarly understanding

⁸ And the plural term “theatres” may be more aptly applied.

of ancient Egyptian theatre, I see a glaring discrepancy. Nearly every scholar is of European descent, inheritors of the Western (or European) scholarly tradition.⁹ What is largely missing are interventions made by scholars of other nationalities and ethnicities; in particular, those of African descent. And among those, most importantly, are *Egyptian* scholars. I could argue that Egyptian scholars are also inheritors of the Western scholarly tradition, as they have lived and trained under its massive shadow for well over two centuries now. I am limited in my ability to discuss theatre in modern Egypt within the scope of the current study. But I have done some investigating on this subject, and on current Egyptian scholarship on theatre and performance studies, to see what is there and possibly identify any relevant connections to the practice of their ancient counterparts. From what I have gleaned so far, the self-identified Egyptian theatrical tradition traces back no further than the eighteenth century CE.

In his essay on Egypt for Martin Banham's *A History of Theatre in Africa*, Egyptian theatre director and drama professor Ahmed Zaki writes that "theatre in the form of written, staged and acted drama is a comparatively modern construct in Egypt."¹⁰ Zaki does not neglect to discuss, however, the contributions to Egyptian theatre history that were left by the Pharaonic era. He devotes a quarter of his essay to ancient Egypt, noting that "an example of the grand ceremonial religious drama first appeared in written form on the Shabako Stone, which is a late copy of probably the

⁹ Although my focus is not on gender disparities in this study, I would like to point out that the vast majority of these contributions have also been from cis-male scholars.

¹⁰ Zaki, "Egypt," in *A History of Theatre in Africa*, ed. Martin Banham, 13.

first drama in history, the Memphite Drama.”¹¹ He also mentions the “Abydos Osiris Passion Play” that “attracted thousands of pilgrims as well as the court” (14) and points out that “scenes of mourning” (evoking “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys”) were “re-enacted spontaneously by the peasants in Upper Egypt in 1881, when the women wailed in mourning and ran with dishevelled hair as the royal mummies were transported by steamer down the Nile from Luxor to Cairo to be placed in the museum” (16).

According to *Time Out* reporter Kate Stratton, if you were to ask someone from Cairo “about theatre...there’s a standard response. It’s a ‘new’ Egyptian art, you’re told, imported by Napoleon in the late 1790s, and one that’s never gelled with Egypt’s indigenous performing arts.”¹² There is one exception, however. Stratton did a feature story in 1997 on El-Warsha (“The Workshop”) Theatre Company in Cairo. Under the artistic direction of Hassan el-Geretly, El-Warsha has blazed a trail for independent Egyptian theatre for over thirty years, specializing in community-oriented devised work. In that time, they have attempted to revive and recreate the “true spirit of ancient Egypt’s performance heritage.”¹³ Initially, El-Warsha focused on producing Egyptian versions of European works, such as French playwright Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. But according to el-Geretly, something was missing. “Gradually we realised that during so many years of reworking European pieces we had been using a Western structure with its conventions of plot and characters. We realized that we

¹¹ Zaki, “Egypt,” in Banham, *A History of Theatre in Africa*, 14. See Chapter 2 in the dissertation for a discussion of the Shabaka Stone, or “Memphite Drama.”

¹² Stratton, “Mummy dearest: The El-Warsha Theatre Company,” 19.

¹³ Stratton, “Mummy dearest,” 19.

needed to relocate our work in terms of our cultural world view; we needed to plow a different field.”¹⁴ That new “field” turned out to be “traditional oral ballads, folk songs and stories still thriving at fairgrounds, wedding parties, and saints’ feasts,” including “shadow plays, glove puppet sketches, music and dances.”¹⁵

Egyptology is at its core a scientific field; archaeology is its foundation. The discipline is based on empirical methods of research, inherently and unapologetically positivist, rooted firmly in diligent fieldwork that yields new discoveries, and new insights on the past as a result of those discoveries. Here I am following theatre historian Tobin Nellhaus’ definition of *positivism*, which “asserts that only physical, observable objects and events can be the basis of scientific knowledge.”¹⁶

Egyptologists, like archaeologists, are always seeking *new* information. Traditionally speaking, they are less interested in examining what has already been published for the sake of historiography, with a few notable exceptions.¹⁷

I am curious to see, in the future, how the face of Egyptology—and perceptions of theatre history in Egypt—will change as Egyptians begin taking charge of their own history and, indeed, their historiography, again. The tide is beginning to turn. In the current moment, Egyptology (like theatre history and so many other

¹⁴ Quoted by Stratton in “Mummy dearest,” 20.

¹⁵ Stratton, “Mummy dearest,” 20.

¹⁶ Nellhaus, “Science, History, Theatre: Theorizing in Two Alternatives to Positivism,” 506.

¹⁷ Andrew Bednarski, Affiliated Scholar at the University of Cambridge, is a specialist in the history of Egyptology, the reception of Egypt in nineteenth century Europe, in particular. He has led the charge, so to speak, to expand the subdiscipline of Egyptological historiography. Just last year, Bednarski along with Aidan Dodson (Professor of Egyptology at the University of Bristol) and Salima Ikram (Distinguished University Professor at AUC) published a new volume of essays devoted to the subject called *A History of World Egyptology*. Furthermore, philologists are always taking a fresh look at ancient Egyptian texts for the purposes of revising previously published translations due for an updated approach. A case in point is the new translation and analysis of the RDP undertaken by Christina Geisen, now a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Egyptology at Yale University.

academic fields) is taking a critical step toward recognizing and re-evaluating the racial and cultural biases that have historically and traditionally defined the discipline. Vanessa Davies, an Egyptologist based at Bryn Mawr College, has done extensive research on the unsung contributions to Egyptology made by early twentieth century Black luminaries including W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, Marcus Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey.¹⁸ Both Stuart Tyson Smith, Professor of Anthropology at UCSB, and Solange Ashby, President's Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA, are specialists in ancient Nubia, and have been doing important work highlighting Nubia's vastly underrated significance in the discipline of Egyptology. Smith has brought attention to the African heritage shared by both ancient Nubia and ancient Egypt, interrogating longstanding Egyptological bias in the field.¹⁹ Ashby, who specializes in the cult of Isis in ancient Nubia, has brought attention to the significant Nubian presence and influence at the Temple of Philae in southern Egypt.²⁰

Addressing Challenges in the Archive

This section will examine four separate instances where theatre historians and performance scholars have sought to break away from the traditional positivist mode of inquiry to employ alternative methods of observing, contemplating, understanding, and expressing the past, to analyze evidence from a new perspective.

¹⁸ See Davies, "Pauline Hopkins' Literary Egyptology," 127-144.

¹⁹ See Smith, "Black Pharaohs? Egyptological Bias, Racism, and Egypt and Nubia as African Civilizations" (online lecture, W. E. B. Du Bois Virtual Lecture Series, Harvard University).

²⁰ See Ashby, *Calling Out to Isis: The Enduring Nubian Presence at Philae*. It is worth noting that Dr. Ashby is the first African American scholar to receive the PhD in Egyptology. She completed her degree at the University of Chicago.

Judith Pascoe's Eighteenth Century "Audio Files"

Judith Pascoe conspicuously chose a title that would raise eyebrows for her 2011 book, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice*. Celebrated English actress Sarah Siddons lived from 1755 to 1831. There are no audio recordings of her performances, and yet Pascoe was able to publish an entire book about the extraordinary voice of this renowned star of the London stage. The title appears to be a misnomer, when in fact it states exactly what this book is: a collection of files—indeed, evidence—regarding the *sound* of Sarah Siddons' voice. How was this possible?

With her proverbial detective's hat on, Pascoe pursued a number of different avenues to gather the pieces of evidence that might lead her to the truth of what Sarah Siddons *sounded* like. These included eyewitness (or in this case "ear"-witness) accounts from letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, and other formal and informal written records that described not only the sound of Siddons' voice but its *effect* on the people who heard it. She also collected visual representations of Siddons' likeness in portraits, sculpture, and in sketches and paintings of her performances. One such oil painting by Henry Fuseli entitled *Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers*, dates to 1812 and now belongs to The Tate Gallery in London.²¹ This dynamic painting depicts Siddons as Lady Macbeth, bursting forth from behind the stage right curtain and rushing to her husband, the reluctant murderer, to keep him quiet and assume the weapons herself. The power of her presence on stage is palpable in this image.

²¹ Pascoe, *Sarah Siddons Audio Files*, 15, fig. 8; Tate Gallery reference no. T00733.

Now, can modern onlookers trust that Fuseli painted Siddons and her co-star exactly as they appeared on stage that day without another form of corroborating evidence? No, we cannot; but can we trust that this painting accurately represents an emotional effect—a strong sense of intimidation and foreboding in Fuseli’s consciousness that was inspired by Siddons’ performance? I will venture to say yes, we can. In his 1996 book, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, theatre historian and performance scholar Joseph Roach tells us:

The kinesthetic imagination exists interdependently but by no means coextensively with other phenomena of social memory: written records, spoken narratives, architectural monuments, built environments...however, [it] inhabits the realm of the virtual. Its truth is the truth of simulation, of fantasy, or of daydreams, but its effect on human action may have material consequences of the most tangible sort and of the widest scope. This faculty, which flourishes in that mental space where imagination and memory converge, is a way of thinking through movements—at once remembered and reinvented—the otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable.²²

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander reminds us that the concept of a “live” performance did not exist in history until there was the possibility of recording one, which means “liveness” is truly a postmodern concept. He writes, “It is only since the advent of mechanical and electric technologies of recording and reproduction, however, that performance has been mediatized.”²³ So what did this mean for Siddons’ eighteenth-century admirers? Pascoe writes:

I wanted to believe that the ascendancy of electronic media, which allows us to immerse ourselves in enthralling earbud-conveyed soundscapes, has retuned our ears to some aspects of the more aurally saturated soundscapes of the romantic period, but I strongly suspected that it was the very ability of

²² Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 27.

²³ Auslander, *Liveness*, 52.

electronic media to preserve and replicate aural experience that created the divide between the romantics' listening experiences and our own.²⁴

Judith Pascoe learned to embrace the archival absences in her study of Sarah Siddons' voice, and shift her line of inquiry toward what it meant to be an eighteenth-century *listener*. In the following subsections, I will use two historiographical case studies to evaluate alternative methodologies at work in the study of the ancient world.

“Domesticating Dionysus” with Odai Johnson

Odai Johnson's 2018 book, *Ruins: Classical Theater and Broken Memory*, offers a series of case studies in the history of classical Greek theatre where the most relevant information has gone missing or, in some cases, has been carefully omitted from the historical record. But the questions remain—long neglected or perhaps overlooked questions—that address key socio-political and socio-cultural issues pertinent to our modern understanding of classical theatre. Each case

speaks to a certain marked critical disappearance, a forgetting, a replacement, a rupture that realigned the shape of theater and whose absence remains somewhat legible. Each represents an absence that refused to entirely recognize its own erasure by reallocating memory, the watermarks of theater's disappearances.²⁵

One case study in particular discusses a controversial topic very near to the heart of my own research: the ritual origins of the City Dionysia. Much has been made of Greek drama's ancestral connection to the cult of Dionysus, and the lack thereof. When Plutarch posed the question, “What has all this to do with Dionysus?”

²⁴ Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files*, 14-15.

²⁵ Johnson, *Ruins*, 11-12.

in the first century CE, it was not a new one (the origin is unknown).²⁶ Since then, scholars have repeated and attempted to answer it with varying degrees of “everything,” “something,” and “nothing.”²⁷ Johnson’s perspective is that Greek tragedy had nothing to do with Dionysus...not *anymore*, at least. At one time it certainly had *something*, he asserts, and before that, *everything*. How does he know this, and what defines *everything*? The answers to those questions are the main thesis of “Domesticating Dionysus,” the first chapter of Johnson’s *Ruins*.

Johnson’s methodology is one of the latest trends in historiography when it comes to analyzing a scattered, nearly unrecognizable and often unintelligible historical record like that of the ancient world. It involves studying the clues left behind in the *absence*, in the memory of what was once there but is no longer. He writes, “in the absence of more evidence, I turn instead to the absence itself—the stela on the street, the moments of amnesty—and press its most legible gaps into a narrative whose subject is scars, vanishings, erasures, and silences, all the breakages that constitute the ruins of antiquity.”²⁸ He defines amnesty more precisely in this context as “the public promise to remember to forget,” as opposed to another relevant

²⁶ *Plutarch’s Moralia*, Table-Talk 1.1, 615a, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 21. The sentence is “Accordingly, just as people said when Phrynichus and Aeschylus introduced old legends and tales of suffering into tragedy, ‘What has all this to do with Dionysus?’” Johnson introduces the discussion on page 28 of *Ruins*.

²⁷ For examples of the ongoing debate, see: John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, ed., *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Victor Castellani, “Everything to do with Dionysus: Urdrama, Euripidean Melodrama, and Tragedy,” *Themes in Drama* 14 (1992): 1-16; Scott Scullion, “‘Nothing to Do with Dionysus’: Tragedy Misconceived as Ritual,” *The Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2002): 102-37; David Mirhady, “Something to Do with Dionysus: Chamaeleon on the Origins of Tragedy,” in *Praxiphanes of Mytilene and Chamaeleon of Heraclea: Text, Translation, and Discussion*, ed. Andrea Martano, Elisabetta Matelli, and David Mirhady (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 387-410.

²⁸ Johnson, *Ruins*, 8.

term, amnesia, which is “simply forgetting” (2). For example, according to Johnson, here is what we know for certain about the City Dionysia, or the Festival of Dionysus in Athens, as it pertained to the worship of Dionysus: 1) the festival was named for the god; 2) it was during this festival and *for* this festival that dithyramb competitions first took place; 3) it was during this festival and *for* this festival that the first tragedy competitions were held; and 4) the competitions continued to be held during the Festival of Dionysus for hundreds of years.²⁹

Johnson likens the theatre—or, at least, the theatre as the ancient Greeks conceived it—to mixed wine. The original celebration of the Dionysian rites was the unmixed wine; the pure, unadulterated, raw, and extremely potent fermented liquid that didn’t just cause drunkenness, it caused *madness*. Naturally this is the kind of madness, the wild abandon that has always been synonymous with Dionysus, the god of wine himself. Johnson writes, “Somewhere, quite early on, that dangerous chronic ecstasy that bordered on madness...was domesticated into a very controlled experience, something quite different altogether.”³⁰ With “Domesticating Dionysus,” Johnson

returns to the reorganization of the City Dionysia to consider what it replaced as it incorporated the cult of ecstasy into the new civic celebration...how a cult of ecstatic abandon became so circumscribed by regulations that governed its every aspect that it began to resemble nothing so much as its own ritual practice—*sparagmos*—a tearing apart and reassembling of the god. (12)

He examines two important figures associated with the cult of Dionysus: the satyr and the maenad. At the City Dionysia, every playwright in competition

²⁹ Dramatic competitions took place at other festivals in Attica as well—each one a festival in honor of the god Dionysus. Dramatic competitions did not take place at every Dionysian festival, however.

³⁰ Johnson, *Ruins*, 25.

presented three tragedies (a trilogy of plays connected by a common story or theme) followed by a satyr play. The satyr play was a light-hearted farcical version of the tragic story that featured, naturally, a chorus of satyrs. The satyrs, always under the dubious authority of their father, Silenus, wreak havoc on the main characters of the story through their zany antics. Johnson finds the whole concept of the satyr play curious. All things considered, the satyr play is, on the surface, irrelevant to the primary activities of the City Dionysia by the end of the fifth century—*unless*, he suggests, it was a holdover from the foundational Dionysiac rites of the festival. He writes:

If there was ever the risk of forgetting the god, satyrs were the memory sticks. Satyrs are sites of remarkably dense and persistent memory, the unruly intruders into tragedy's ordered and grief-filled house. They seemed to have been kept around...to commemorate some older excision. In this capacity, are we amiss to think of satyrs as a sort of amnesty between the theater and its origins? The contract to remember what they had forgotten? (35-36)

For Johnson, the satyr play is a palimpsest. Its very existence in the historical record is evidence enough for the direct historical connection between Greek tragedy and the worship of Dionysus. The satyr plays not only provided comic relief for the audiences after what must have been an emotionally draining, cathartic day of seeing tragedies play out, but they were a nod of gratitude and recognition to the patron deity of the theatre, even if he himself figured very little into the contemporary festival activities.

An example of one such palimpsest from ancient Egypt may be found in the original text of Fairman's *The Triumph of Horus*. The language of the text inscribed on the walls of the Ptolemaic-era Edfu Temple was Middle Egyptian, the classical Egyptian hieroglyphs of the Middle Kingdom era (c. 2055-1650 BCE), and was

accompanied by illustrations of the scenes that were to have taken place.³¹ According to Fairman, it was comprised of a specific dramatic literary form, such that would be recognizable to theatre practitioners and scholars of dramatic literature today. He wrote:

In form it is a play and falls easily and automatically into acts and scenes without any manipulation of the reliefs or their order. The acts are distinct from each other in their content, yet they show a consistent development of the main theme. In the text we find many explicit references to individual speakers, a limited number of stage directions which would be difficult to explain except as parts of a drama, even a little elementary characterization. It is certainly “dramatic”, it even has a certain degree of tension and excitement, and it is obviously designed to give an important part to a Chorus and to cater for a strong element of audience participation.³²

Even with archaeological and philological evidence in favor of Fairman’s theory, scholars have contested the relationship of *The Triumph of Horus* to an ancient Egyptian dramatic tradition, and argue that if it was in fact a play, as Fairman proposed, its format bears proof of the Greek influence on Egyptian culture. This argument is valid, as the date of the text falls squarely within the Hellenistic period under the reign of Ptolemy IX, Soter II, a direct descendant of Ptolemy Soter I, the renowned Macedonian general in Alexander the Great’s army who took control of Egypt upon Alexander’s death. A massive influx of Greek immigrants followed who brought with them Greek culture to Egypt, from language, literature and art to religion and customs, all of which became engrained in Egyptian culture from that point forward. Considering the importance of dramatic literature and theatre to the

³¹ This is not unusual in a Ptolemaic-era (c. 110 BCE) temple context. Though it was nearly two thousand years old by that point, the Middle Egyptian script held the same status for Ptolemaic Egyptians as Latin did for European scholars in the Renaissance era, and was used most often by high priests in religious contexts.

³² Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 19.

Greeks, it stands to reason that such literary forms and practices would have eventually made their way into the Egyptian consciousness.

But too often in historical scholarship, answers are left at face-value judgments such as these. This is why critical historiography is vital to revealing the palimpsest. Fairman, for instance, offered a counterargument:

The Late Egyptian usages that are occasionally to be found in the text of the play suggest that it is a slightly edited and modernised version of a compilation of the later New Kingdom, i.e. some thousand years before the foundation of the Ptolemaic temple. All the available evidence indicates clearly that there was little originality in the inscriptions of the Graeco-Roman temples, except of course the 'historical' texts describing the temple and recording its building history, and religious and ritual texts draw very heavily on older texts...it is therefore inherently probable that *The Triumph of Horus* was based directly on a much earlier prototype. (34)

Fairman's argument is not unlike Johnson's argument that Greek tragedy once had everything to do with Dionysus. So could I take Johnson's methodology from *Ruins* and apply it to the case of Egypt's cultural ownership of the play, *The Triumph of Horus*? Yes, I believe I could. Like Johnson, I will move beyond the text, as translation and interpretation of ancient texts are problematic in and of themselves. Instead, I will look at the performance of the ritual reenactment that takes place through this play, and the meaning of that performance. There may be no other texts from earlier periods of Egyptian history that explicitly reveal a long history of this *play*, as such. But as I discussed in Chapter 2, there *is* a history—a truly long history—of the performance of a ritual reenactment of the battle between the forces of Horus and the forces of Seth. Such a history has been well attested by documents like the Stela of Ikhnofret and the Stela of Neferhotep I, both of which date roughly fifteen hundred years earlier than the Edfu Temple. The Stela of Ikhnofret, of

course, is a document well-known to theatre historians as bearing evidence of performance activity in ancient Egypt.³³ The stela is a testament to the effective performance of the Pharaoh's sealbearer, companion, and overseer, who served Senwosret III of the twelfth dynasty.³⁴ It describes in detail the decree given him by the pharaoh to carry out the ritual reenactment and the program he was to follow. It then describes, point by point, the steps Ikhnofret took to fulfill his duties.

I conducted the procession of Wep-wawet when he proceeds to avenge his Father. I repelled the rebels from the *neshmet*-barque and I felled the enemies of Osiris. I conducted the great procession following the god at his footsteps...I cleared the god's paths to his cenotaph tomb in front of Poqer. I avenged Wen-nofer on that day of the great fighting, and I felled all his enemies on the sand-banks of Nedit.³⁵

Ikhnofret was not leading a literal battle against his majesty's enemies. He was leading a procession that began the ritual representation of this battle, a memorial to Osiris, and celebration of Horus' triumph over Seth to claim his rightful place on the throne of Egypt—a seat that every living pharaoh had occupied since that victory.

In the nineteenth century BCE, during the time of Senwosret III, this dramatic reenactment was one of a series of such rituals that took place at Abydos in celebration of the mysteries of Osiris. Later, in the precinct of Edfu, farther south than Abydos, an annual celebration was established called the Festival of Victory, where a similar ritual reenactment took place of the battle between Horus and Seth. The ritual drama was written out in detail on the interior of the enclosure walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu—the text now referred to as *The Triumph of Horus*.

³³ "The Stela of Ikhnofret," trans. William Kelly Simpson, in *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 425-27.

³⁴ Senwosret III reigned c. 1878-1839 BCE.

³⁵ Simpson, "The Stela of Ikhnofret," 427. Wep-wawet and Wen-nofer were alternative names for Horus and Osiris, respectively.

Eric Csapo's Material "Evidence for Ancient Acting"

An older article, but one no less instructive, is Eric G. Csapo's "A Case Study in the Use of Theatre Iconography as Evidence for Ancient Acting," published in *Antike Kunst* in 1993. Csapo, a renowned classicist who has written extensively on the topic of theatre in ancient Greece, begins the article by discussing an overwhelming bias in classical studies toward textual evidence, especially among scholars who specialize in Greek and Latin language and literature. Regarding classical philology, he explains:

It has, for example, found it convenient to suppose that images on ancient artifacts are mute in a way that words are not. Even though the theatre, by nature, is a medium which employs both words and images, no subdiscipline of classical philology exemplifies these blindspots so well as the study of the ancient theatre.³⁶

Csapo proves his point by taking on a scholarly debate that had been going on for well over a hundred years. That is, "the question whether the running slave, a stock scene well attested in Roman comedy, had already been attested in Greek comedy, or was substantially a Roman innovation" (42). The "running slave" trope inspired a number of ancient Roman paintings and engravings that bear the image of this iconic character and the scenario it represents. Csapo's intention with this article is twofold: first, to study these images for distinctive representation of how this character might have been performed on stage; and second, to answer the question of whether this popular trope first appeared in Greek comedy, suggesting it was not a Roman innovation at all, but a Greek one. The argument for Roman innovation is fueled by the lack of explicitly written evidence of the "running slave" in the ancient

³⁶ Csapo, "A Case Study," 41.

Greek dramatic canon. However, as Csapo demonstrates, the *image* of the running slave appears in ancient Greek theatre iconography that predates the Roman evidence. Csapo argues that “not only ought these artifacts to have settled the matter once and for all in favour of the Greek origins of the scene, but they provide a major source of evidence for ancient acting styles when studied in conjunction with the dramatic texts” (41).

The scenario of the “comic running slave” is essentially a classic messenger scene from Greek tragedy, turned on its head; it “succeeds by making the business of delivering news in as obtrusive, long-winded and stylized a manner as possible” (42). The scene follows a specific format, key moments that must be struck for maximum comedic affect. The scene generally begins with a character on stage (sometimes the master of the house) who prepares the audience for the slave’s arrival by declaring that they are anxiously awaiting his return with important news.³⁷ They spy him in the distance and remark on his haste and worried expression. Thereafter the running slave enters, but pauses to deliver a monologue directly to the audience. His speech proceeds to be an exceedingly long and verbose rant against the many societal annoyances that delayed him from fulfilling his task and delivering the message sooner. “Here humour is created by the slave’s loquacity,” Csapo explains, “and the contents of his monologue which stress the urgent need to deliver the news as quickly as possible” (43).

At some point during the monologue, the master enters, or if the master is already on stage, he listens incredulously to the slave’s lengthy tirade and finally calls

³⁷ The comic playwright Terence used this motif in the beginning of *Phormio*, as did Plautus in *Trinummus* (which Csapo points out in “Evidence for Ancient Acting,” 45).

for the slave's attention. With this the slave, not noticing his master and assuming that the person trying to grab his attention is yet another unsolicited and distracting passerby, disregards the call and sometimes tosses an insult over his shoulder to boot. This leads to an argument between the two, the slave remaining ignorant of whom he is addressing, and the master growing increasingly impatient and angry. Following this routine is the slave's ultimate recognition of his master and the long-awaited delivery of the message.

The comic scene as it appears on the page reveals very little about how the actors might have performed it on the ancient stage. However, in some cases, the playwright has left significant details in alternative places, as Csapo explains.

“Plautus wrote two metatheatrical running-slave scenes in which the principal rogue of the respective dramas fakes a highly conventionalized running entrance in order, in one case, to add style, in the other, ‘plausibility’ to the false message he is about to deliver” (46). In one of these scenes, according to Csapo, the rogue character declares, “Now it’s decided, I will throw my cloak (*pallium*) on my neck in the traditional manner of comic slaves, so that he’ll hear this news from me first” (46). This text provides some idea of what the running slave character might have been wearing and how the actor might have used his costume in performance. With this in mind, I will turn to Csapo’s examination of the running-slave iconography, to see how it compares with the previous text.

For his case study, Csapo catalogued some twenty-four ancient artifacts that depict the running slave. Dating from the 4th century BCE to the 3rd century CE, they represent a broad range of media, from wall paintings and terracotta figurines to

engraved gems and painted pottery (46). According to Csapo, “the illustrated running slaves show four different types of costume: exomis, chiton only, chlamys, and himation” (47). Each one of these costume pieces represents clothing traditionally worn by men in ancient Greece. Csapo continues:

Though several slaves wear the himation (the usual translation for *pallium*) none of the himation-wearing slaves certainly throws the garment over his shoulder or onto his neck. This is in fact a very awkward movement for a himation-wearer and difficult to envision. On the other hand, the gesture comes naturally to the chlamys-wearer, and it is the chlamys-wearing slaves who sport their cloaks in the manner of the Roman descriptions...perhaps the *pallium*, to Roman eyes the stereotypical Greek dress, was selected for overuse on the Roman stage as a signifier for Graecitude, and thus displaced the chlamys. (48)

I could apply a similar methodology to the question of performance of *The Triumph of Horus* by examining the iconography that accompanies the text on the walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu. Each panel, as differentiated by Fairman, contains the script along with an illustration of the scene. To the untrained eye, these illustrations are hardly distinguishable from the myriad images that appear in Egyptian temple wall reliefs—offering scenes and smiting scenes that demonstrate the pharaoh’s strength and favor with the gods. However, the ancient Egyptian artists who carved these reliefs and painted the temple and tomb walls followed a very strict pattern. Every image was created on a grid, painstakingly and mathematically measured for symmetry. The ancient Egyptians, with rare exception, represented themselves idealistically, not realistically, and they did so for millennia. However, careful consideration of one panel in particular from *The Triumph of Horus* reveals an intriguing anomaly. The panel features Horus standing in a ship with an unfurled sail—a sail that was quite clearly conceived and executed with the use of

perspective.³⁸ It is possible that this rare realistic depiction of a sailboat is an indication that the scene was in fact an event or performance which took place, as opposed to an idealized representation of myth. The question certainly begs further investigation.

Exploring Performance as a Site of Historiography

Performing History with Freddie Rokem

What is the difference between historical drama and dramatic history? Perhaps there is no difference at all—this is one of the main ideas that theatre historian and theorist Freddie Rokem asks his readers to consider in *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (2000). Rokem suggests that significant events in history were dramatized long before anyone thought to reenact them on stage. He writes, “The events of the French Revolution were immediately turned into spectacle, so anyone who tries to represent the Revolution as a theatre performance is already contending with a theatricalized performed history.”³⁹

While Rokem’s book revolves around the dramatic staging of events in modern history, the alternative archival framework he presents is of particular interest to me as I assess the potential value of performance as an alternative site of historiography. *Performing History* takes two major events in European history, the

³⁸ I am grateful to Quint Gregory, Director of the Michelle Smith Collaboratory for Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, for bringing this unusual feature to my attention and providing a much-needed art historical context that I had not previously considered.

³⁹ Rokem, *Performing History*, 99.

Holocaust (or Shoah, which is the word Rokem uses) and the French Revolution, and examines specific productions of theatrical representations of these events in post-World War II Israel, Europe, and the United States, respectively.⁴⁰

It is tempting to ask, “What exactly do the Shoah and the French Revolution have in common? For Rokem, this question is not finally the point. He does not ask, “What do these moments in history have in common?” but “What do theatrical representations of these moments have in common, and what can we *learn* from them about history?” One intervention Rokem makes is to highlight the effectiveness of metatheatrical formats in presenting historical events on stage—particularly events that were large in scope and brought about massive change not only in the course of the future but in the collective consciousness of society. He suggests that perhaps the best way to “accurately” convey past events that are so unthinkable, so unbelievable to us in the present day so as to seem like a “fantasy” *is* to put it on stage (36). And even more so, to perform it in a metatheatrical way, as in the proverbial “play within a play.” For example, both the Neve Zedek-Theatre Centre’s adaptation of *Adam’s Purim Party* and Peter Weiss’ play *Marat/Sade* tell stories from the Shoah and the French Revolution, respectively, from the perspective of patients in an asylum who stage a historical drama for their peers.

This brings our attention to another central idea in Rokem’s book: “the notion of the actor as a hyper-historian when performing history” (13). He writes, “the actor

⁴⁰ The Hebrew *Shoah* meaning “destruction” is the most common word used in Israel to refer to the Holocaust, and is increasingly used by Jewish people worldwide as opposed to *holocaust*, which in essence means “burnt sacrifice.” A sacrifice, according to Rokem, implies a positive, sacred intention, which in no way applies to what was meant to be the annihilation of an entire group of people. See Rokem, “Refractions of the Shoah on Israeli Stages: Theatre and Survival,” in *Performing History*, 27-98.

serves as a connecting link between the historical past and the ‘fictional’ performed *here and now* of the theatrical event...the actor is ‘redoing’ or ‘reappearing’ as something/somebody that has actually existed in the past” (13).

In the final chapter of the book, “Theatrical Energies,” Rokem delves into a metaphysical discussion that seems somewhat out of place following such politically charged discussions of the Shoah and the French Revolution, coupled with aesthetic analyses of artistic practice in their theatrical representation. But Rokem also writes, “The postwar theatre, and in particular the theatre performing history, can no doubt be seen as an attempt to create restorative energies, in the sense of recreating something which has been irretrievably lost” (13). This calls back to my previous assertion that in ancient history, the dead are truly dead and so is the meaning of their world. But *is* it?

Performance/Practice as Research

The historiographical approach to ancient Egyptian theatre that I undertook in Chapters 2 and 3 attempts to recognize and understand an exclusionary pattern over the last century in the relevant fields of study. My performance approach to ancient Egyptian theatre, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5, attempts to identify ways of breaking that pattern. When it comes to ancient Egyptian drama, instead of asking, “But is it *theatre*?” a question that admittedly carries a heavy Western bias, perhaps we should be asking, “But is it *Egyptian* theatre?” Yet the inevitable question follows: how would we know?

This is where performance as research, or “PAR” as it is often called in the American field, becomes an extremely useful tool.⁴¹ Called “studio-based enquiry” or “practice as research” (PaR) in other English-speaking parts of the world, this growing subdiscipline acknowledges and applies the valuable contributions that artistic practice can make to scholarship. Not only does practice sustain theatre and performance studies in many mutually beneficial ways, it opens new avenues of inquiry that can break down cultural and disciplinary barriers. According to creative arts researcher and educator Estelle Barrett, practice (or performance) as research is “generative enquiry that draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research.”⁴² As such, it provides a valid alternative to traditional modes of historiography as well.

Practice as Research (PaR) is a relatively new phenomenon in PhD programs. It has been far more common in MFA and other conservatory programs where theatre practice and creative arts research by means of practice are paramount. But as PhD programs in the creative arts grow and expand in the United States and elsewhere, PaR is becoming an increasingly viable methodology for dissertation research on the creative arts. Still, while PaR has arrived at the academic party, so to speak, it struggles to find its footing there. This is because PaR in the creative arts, much like art itself, cannot be quantified in the same reliable way that scientific data can be—not unless the practitioner adheres to a strict code for identifying the “how, what, where, when, and why” in their investigations. As Barrett points out, “innovation is

⁴¹ See Shannon Rose Riley, “Why Performance as Research? A US Perspective,” in *Practice as Research in the Arts*, ed. Robin Nelson, 175-87.

⁴² Barrett, introduction to *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 1.

derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and ‘outcomes’ of artistic research are *necessarily* unpredictable.”⁴³

With *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt seek to “reveal and identify additional criteria for assessing quality research in the field” (1). In the introduction to their book, Barrett recommends that “artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action” and stresses that “knowledge is derived from doing and from the senses” (1). More traditional researchers, however, still need convincing, and their skepticism is not unwarranted (3). Performance as research is unquestionably valuable for artistic discovery and the generation of ideas, but can it produce facts and generate hard evidence? I would respond to this question with another question: can *any* method of historical research into the ancient world *truly* produce facts and generate hard evidence? Material culture unearthed, examined, dated and analyzed yields information that is interpreted, re-interpreted, and re-evaluated time and time again. What is true today may not be true a year from now. So why not cast our nets wider, and implement some new modes of inquiry *in addition to* the more traditional modes? Perhaps through this multi-faceted approach we, as historians, can come closer to that elusive thing called “fact.”

But there are more specific and practical reasons why performance, or practice, as research could be an especially valuable, useful, and even recommended tool for a project such as this one. They are: 1) when there are considerable gaps in the archive, and material evidence in the archaeological record is rare; 2) when the research subject falls under the category of intangible heritage, especially the

⁴³ Barrett, introduction to *Practice as Research*, 3.

intangible heritage of a culture that is not Western and in fact predates the Western intellectual tradition by at least a thousand years;⁴⁴ 3) when the subject is performance, and the research project is addressing questions about the manner and experience of that performance, it stands to reason that at least one method of inquiry should *be* performance; and finally, 4) when one of the research goals is to improve learning outcomes for theatre history students.

Today, in 2021, academia is in a self-reflective moment, scrutinizing its institutions for long-standing cultural and intellectual biases that could be marginalizing many current and potential students. We are reevaluating and reorganizing curriculums, pedagogies, *and* research methods to make room for “alternative modes of logic.”⁴⁵ New intellectual approaches rooted in active learning and practical application such as PaR will diversify pedagogies and create a more inclusive learning environment for students.

Conclusion

To sum up, these alternative modes of historiography have inspired and informed my own attempt to glean new information about ancient Egyptian drama and performance from a rather experimental practice as research approach, and to take a new look at old material from a different perspective (or at least a road less traveled, as it were).

⁴⁴ In this case, methods of inquiry rooted in the Western tradition are, at a certain point, irrelevant.

⁴⁵ Barrett, introduction to *Practice as Research*, 3.

In his 2010 essay, “PS: Can We Talk About Something Else?” theatre historiographer Henry Bial equates the initials “PS” (which stand for both “postscript” and “performance studies”) with a shibboleth—a code word to discern whether someone is “One of Us” or “One of Them.”⁴⁶ He uses this metaphor to illustrate the growing turf war between theatre historians and performance studies scholars:

The rise of performance studies was part of a broader wave of challenges to the Western humanities canon often characterized in the United States as the “culture wars” of the 1980s and ‘90s...though PS did not demonize theater history per se, the reluctance of some theater scholars to join the “performance studies project” was (perhaps inevitably) construed by many as naïve at best, sexist, racist, or jingoistic at worst. Add to this conflict an ever-diminishing pool of resources...and the stakes increase, to the point where a generation of would-be theater scholars has been challenged to declare an allegiance to one camp or the other. (278)

Bial suggests that theatre historiography might serve as a bridge between the two camps. Bial asks, “Can we talk about theater itself as a site of historiography, and historiography as a site of performance?” (283). I will go one step further and suggest that ancient Egypt’s cultural and performance history might serve as a bridge between Western and non-Western theatre. To my knowledge, no one disputes the fact that culturally, Egypt falls outside of the Western sphere, a firm member of the “global majority.” And yet, one of the primary differences between the Western and non-Western intellectual and performance traditions is that the Western theatre is rooted in the literary tradition, while non-Western theatre is rooted in the oral tradition. Ancient Egypt was rooted in *both*. The vast majority of material in the archaeological record from this ancient civilization is enveloped in its *written language*. This is, perhaps,

⁴⁶ Bial, “PS,” 276.

one of the reasons historians of the Western tradition have tended to lump Egypt in with Greece and Rome, in seclusion from the rest of ancient Africa. But it is in the realm of performance and the oral tradition that Egypt bears its African roots. Here ancient Egyptian drama veered away from that of Greece and Rome (or rather, Greece and Rome veered away from Egyptian drama and took a different course toward establishing this thing called “theatre”). Therefore, when Bial poses the question, “Can we talk about something else?” my answer is: Yes. Let’s talk about ancient Egypt, and the modern performance of ancient Egyptian dramatic texts as an alternative site for theatre historiography.

Chapter 5: Embodied Words

In December of 2019, theatre students at the University of Maryland, College Park, performed a new adaptation and staging of the ancient Egyptian coronation drama *The Triumph of Horus*, with a prologue featuring the ancient Egyptian funerary drama *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys*.¹ I served as director and dramaturg, adapting the scripts from English translations by H. W. Fairman, R. O. Faulkner, and Miriam Lichtheim. Initially I planned to mount this production purely for the learning experience of staging an ancient Egyptian dramatic work, and the opportunity to see one performed. At the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, I had access to a performance space, a built-in audience, professional-grade technical equipment, exceptionally talented designers, and theatre students excited for the opportunity to perform. Why not give it a try? At that point, my dissertation was to be a straightforward historiography with no performance-as-research component. It wasn't until I began crafting my dissertation proposal that I considered, with the encouragement of my committee, incorporating the staging of *Lamentations* and *Triumph* into my plan of study, and I started thinking about the research and pedagogical objectives I might attain from doing so.

Production History of *The Triumph of Horus*

Today, *The Triumph of Horus* lives primarily as an instructive piece, occasionally performed in classrooms or on college campuses as part of a course

¹ A video recording of the full performance is available to view at this link: <https://vimeo.com/401011033/1800c4c912> (accessed April 19, 2022).

assignment on ancient Egyptian civilization. A recent example is Stuart Tyson Smith's course in ancient Egyptian religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara. An Egyptologist and professor in UCSB's Department of Anthropology, Smith has incorporated Fairman's play into his course for more than ten years, along with reenactments of temple rituals like the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. In small groups, his students stage these performances themselves as part of their final project, and perform them for their peers in an outdoor venue on UCSB's campus.² For *The Triumph of Horus*, they use an abridged version of Fairman's script, compiled by Professor Smith.³

Peter Piccione, Associate Professor of Ancient Egypt and Near Eastern History at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, incorporated a performance of *The Triumph of Horus* into the final project assignment for his course, Survey of Ancient Egypt, in the Spring of 2000. In lieu of the final exam, Professor Piccione gave his students the opportunity to collaborate on staging a play entitled "The Victory of Horus: A Sacred Drama of Ancient Egypt," based on Fairman's text. The students directed the play themselves and gave a public performance on April 20,

² Conversation with the author on February 24, 2021.

³ Stuart Tyson Smith's abridged version is available online at <https://stsmith.faculty.anth.ucsb.edu/courses/Triumph.pdf> (accessed September 25, 2021). I have used this text to teach the play in my History of Theatre I classes at the University of Maryland. Smith distills Fairman's forty-two pages into six manageable pages of accessible English with a brief introduction that provides the necessary context. In addition, Smith has developed scripts for "The Daily Temple Ritual from the Great Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak," "The Opening of the Mouth," and "Raising the Djed Pillar," from The Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus. The latter is based on translations and commentary by Kurt Sethe, Henri Frankfort, and Edward Wente.

2000, in a courtyard before Randolph Hall at the heart of campus. The event was covered by local media outlets and professionally recorded for posterity.⁴

The first full-scale theatrical production of *The Triumph of Horus* took place at the Padgate College of Education in England under the direction of Derek Poole, Principal Lecturer in the Department of Drama in Education and Theatre Crafts, with Derek Newton, Head of the Department of Drama, serving as producer. They developed the production in close consultation with Herbert Fairman himself, whose daughter Jennifer was a Padgate student at the time. Derek Newton recalls the day he casually asked her, “I don’t suppose your father has got any Ancient Egyptian plays tucked away in a drawer at home?”⁵ To his surprise, she replied, “Yes” (59). Two years later, Jennifer appeared as a member of the ensemble in the premiere performance of *The Triumph of Horus* on June 23, 1971 (76).

The Padgate production was large and elaborate, with a cast of nearly seventy actors, all Padgate students. They performed the play in an auditorium on a proscenium stage. Newton and Poole chose to rehearse intensively over a two-week period immediately following the end-of-term exams, putting the students through a rigorous schedule compatible with a professional production. The schedule, however, was where any similarity to “real-world” theatre practice ended for the students. “The play was felt to be a reversal of all their drama in education training,” write the creative team of their young cast (61). “There was no question of being able to use modern methods of actor involvement” (61). Newton and Poole believed the original

⁴ Peter Piccione, Survey of Ancient Egypt, Final Class Project: History 270, “The Victory of Horus,” piccione.people.cofc.edu/hist270/index.html (accessed September 26, 2021).

⁵ Newton and Poole, “The Production of ‘The Triumph of Horus’,” in Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus*, 59.

ancient Egyptian performances must have required “intense personal discipline” on the part of its performer-priests. A modern staging required the same level of commitment from its actors, not least of which, the chorus:

This discipline appeared to hold their audience both in and outside the play. It was obvious that the Chorus, if only by the number of lines given to it, fulfilled a vital role in the play. It was equally obvious that the chorus members could not have been an *ad hoc* collection of individuals but were most likely associated with the temple and possessed of certain dramatic skills—perhaps mime, dance, and music. (61-62)

Newton and Poole looked to the English folk drama tradition of the Medieval period for inspiration as “a staging method of basic ritual drama” (71). They also consulted Fairman’s images of the Edfu temple walls and studied them closely to create a “silhouette as near as possible to the scene shown on the original reliefs” (69).

Technical design for the Padgate production took a literal approach, using the classic ancient Egyptian aesthetic portrayed in traditional tomb paintings, wall reliefs, and popular culture as their model for costumes, accessories, makeup, sets, and props. Nearly every cast member wore a black braided wig and heavy eye makeup with iconic Egyptian eyelines. Ornate headdresses and lavish robes adorned the actors playing the gods and the Lector Priest, while the men’s chorus wore very little apart from their wigs, white kilts, and golden bands. Nothing was left to the imagination, not even skin color, as the majority white cast wore body make-up to darken their skin. Photographs from the production depict an impressively ambitious undertaking, but one utterly tone-deaf to the racist implications of such a display.⁶ In fairness, racial sensitivity was probably not their top priority but, rather, authenticity

⁶ Newton and Poole, 70-72, plates 3 and 4.

(inasmuch authenticity as a group of twentieth-century white college students could bring to this particular performance). As Newton and Poole pointed out, “The wigs, accessories and indeed the stylised make-up treatments did not bear the close-up inspection of the film camera, but at the ‘viewing’ distance we had chosen the illusion was complete” (72). From a twenty-first century perspective, however, Padgate’s version of authenticity fell uncomfortably short.

Sets and props were fabricated largely in two-dimensional cut-outs to create the sacred boat and the hippopotami, among other key elements (71). The Padgate production faithfully followed Fairman’s script, editing nothing from the original. The full play lasted one hour and ten minutes (72). On this subject, Robyn Gillam offers her opinion that “the play was well-received, although anecdotal evidence suggests that the repetitious uncut text made the audience a little restless.”⁷

Gillam first staged Fairman’s *The Triumph of Horus* with her undergraduate students at York University in Toronto in 1998, in the context of a new course entitled “Egypt in the Greek and Roman Mediterranean.”⁸ She describes the process and discusses the intentions and outcomes of this and subsequent similar projects in her 2005 book, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*. Unlike Newton and Poole, Gillam did not ask the students to memorize and recite Fairman’s text exactly as written, but instead gave them the opportunity to create their own scripts based on his published translation. Gillam points out that “the rewriting of the materials is an essential part of the process of understanding and re-presentation that facilitates the

⁷ Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 138.

⁸ Gillam, *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, 138.

learning process” (140). As such, the scripts they used were condensed, much like Stuart Tyson Smith’s adaptation, making for a shorter performance of approximately twenty-five minutes (141) and “reflecting the different allocation of time and attention span between twenty-first century university students and ancient Egyptians” (140).

This does not mean, however, that the full cast of characters as originally set down by Fairman was not represented. This production of *The Triumph of Horus* faithfully featured the King and Queen of Egypt, dressed appropriately in traditional Greek garb as would have been the custom of the Ptolemies, with multiple priests and a large chorus in addition to the central figures of the gods (141-42). Furthermore, the Ritual of the Ten Harpoons was performed in its entirety. The students took on the responsibility of all technical aspects of the production, such as costumes, masks, and props, which photographs suggest were quite elaborate (141, fig. 10). The performance took place in the Vari Hall Rotunda, a “well-let indoor public space with a high volume of pedestrian traffic” (141), suggesting that this was not a ticketed event but one easily accessible and visible to passers-by. The class distributed handouts with lines for any audience members who wanted to join in the cheering and chanting, evoking the participatory nature of the original ancient Egyptian performances (141).

The 1998 production of *The Triumph of Horus* was not the last time this play was presented at York University under the direction of Robyn Gillam. She has continued to engage her undergraduate students with this and other performance-based assignments, including reenactments of public rituals like the Funeral

Procession of the Apis Bull (143-44) and Mysteries of Osiris like the Raising of the Djed Pillar (142) and the Festival of Sokar as outlined in the Dendara texts.⁹ In 2004, the latter featured a performance of excerpts from the Bremner Rhind Papyrus “by two students with the names of the goddess written on their arms,” as indicated in the original text (144). This was, as far as I have gathered from my research, the first and only modern performance of “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys,” outside of my own presentation of the “Lamentations,” as I will discuss shortly.

Some of these reenactments were public performances, some private classroom presentations, but all of them were developed as pedagogical tools for teaching undergraduate general education students about ancient Egyptian civilization (138-40). According to Gillam:

The Triumph of Horus was the most “theatrical” and most tightly structured of our performances. It was also one in which the instructors played a highly interventionist role. Later activities have moved away from this model and have tended to emphasize process over product. (142)

In *Performance and Drama in Ancient Egypt*, Gillam lists the many benefits for students who participate in these reenactments: honing their critical reading and writing skills and learning different ways to solve the puzzle of an ancient hieroglyphic text, gaining access to knowledge that might otherwise seem very inaccessible to students (144). “However,” she writes, “it can also be argued that from a scholarly perspective these student performances provide some valuable insights into the texts and the performances they record” (144).

I have demonstrated that I am by no means the first person to attempt to stage Fairman’s *The Triumph of Horus*. But I believe that my approach to this piece was

⁹ *Performance and Drama*, 142. Gillam also provides a beautifully detailed storyboard that her students created to illustrate the process of the Sokar episode of the Khoiak Festival (147, fig. 12).

quite different from that of my predecessors. They are primarily Egyptologists, with the exception of Padgate's creative team, and as such prioritized the instructional value of performing the play, from an Egyptological perspective. Being a scholar of ancient Egypt myself, the same intentions drew me to Fairman's play in the first place. But as a theatre historian and theatre practitioner, what became even more important to me was locating the artistic integrity in the piece—its potential as an emotionally compelling and transportative experience for the audience—that might transcend ritual drama and become what the Western world calls *theatre*.

Staging “Lamentations” and “Triumph” at the University of Maryland

The Triumph of Horus

I had chosen *The Triumph of Horus*, in particular, for two reasons. First, as translated, edited and published by Fairman it is the only fully scripted version of an ancient Egyptian drama that is currently available in English. Second, because it had been done before, it was already proven, to a certain extent, as a viable performance piece. This removed some of the guesswork for me and my production team as to the translation and interpretation of the structure, meaning, and intention of this relatively obscure text (which was necessary given the limited amount of time we had been granted to bring this production to fruition). This left us more room to experiment with “how” we would present it as opposed to “what” we would be presenting. Most importantly, it would give undergraduate theatre students at the University of Maryland the rare opportunity to work with this material and delve deeper into the study of ancient Egyptian theatre.

My intention was to incorporate the historiographical research I had already begun conducting on ancient Egyptian theatre into the performance of this text. Early on I could not say exactly what that was going to look like. I knew that I did not want to stage our version of *Triumph* with modes of traditional Western theatre in mind, but with what I believed were modes of traditional *Egyptian* theatre in mind—or the closest approximation that I could make with the knowledge I had gathered up to that point. For instance, I wanted the performance to be as participatory as possible, engaging the audience as onlookers at the Festival of Victory. The performances of this coronation drama in ancient Egypt would have played out in a participatory mode, evoking a sense of the ancient Egyptian festival context. I also wanted a procession to either kick off or close the performance—a procession in which audience members would be invited to join and participate with the actors. For this reason, I initially requested that my performance dates be in April of 2020, so the seasonable weather might allow us to move the procession outdoors.

The play takes place, theoretically, in the courtyard of the Temple of Horus in Edfu, an outdoor venue. Indoors, the courtyard environment could be created to a certain extent with the use of projection and lighting, and the audience would sit around the action of the play as though they were gathered in the temple's hypostyle hall to witness the event. To allow enough space for a sense of this environment, to be as true to the ancient Egyptian experience as might have been possible, I requested the dance theatre in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center for our production: a wide, open and flexible space where a relatively large audience (at least one hundred people) could comfortably sit or even stand around a central performance area.

I had another important reason for requesting that our show go up in April. To realize my vision, I aimed at using techniques of devised performance and embodied approaches to allow the students themselves to bring their own experience and knowledge to the process. In the case of our production of *Triumph*, I imagined a significant point of inspiration for the actors would be the panel images from the walls of the Temple of Horus, all of which Fairman had meticulously traced and recorded for us in his work. Though we were using Fairman's translated text as a touchstone, my intention was to guide the students in finding their own version of the language, much like my predecessors Piccione, Gillam, and Smith had all done. I wanted to veer away from the Anglocentric Shakespearean-inspired verse that Fairman had used—language I expected my young group of student actors would find inaccessible and alienating.

"The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys"

To expand the scope of this experiment, I decided to incorporate another ancient Egyptian dramatic text into this production: the funerary drama called "The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys" that appears on P. Berlin 3008. The English script we used for the "Lamentations" was based on a translation by Raymond O. Faulkner (who also translated the longer, more lyrical "Songs of Isis and Nephthys," which was edited and published by Miriam Lichtheim in the third volume of her *Ancient Egyptian Literature* series.¹⁰ The "Lamentations" is brief (only about six

¹⁰ Faulkner, trans., "Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys," in Lichtheim, *Anc. Eg. Lit.*, 3: 116-21.

minutes long) and to my knowledge the text had never been staged in a modern full-scale theatrical setting, certainly not in the United States.

I chose to incorporate this piece into our production of *Triumph* for a few specific reasons, both academic and artistic. The first was simply to put “page to stage” and embody the text. A number of scholars have referenced Lamentations as a ritual drama, or a dramatic ritual, but it has never been edited, published, and performed as a “play” like *The Triumph of Horus* has. So, naturally, I wanted to explore its theatrical potential. I wanted to put it on its feet and see what it might look like, especially *sound* like, if performed live. The second reason was to allow for a significant female role in addition to Isis: her sister, Nephthys. And the third reason was to provide our modern American audience with important context for *The Triumph of Horus*. The ancient Egyptians who attended and participated in the performance of this drama during the Ptolemaic period needed no introduction or explanation for it. My audience needed a quick informative, yet aesthetically pleasing, lesson in the myth of Osiris. At the start of the performance, I had the actor playing the Lector Priest enter the space first and tell the story of Osiris to the audience. This introduction led directly into the first passage of the “Lamentations,” also spoken by the Lector Priest, which reads:

Recitation of blessings made by the Two Sisters in the house of Osiris-Khentamenti, the great god, lord of Abydos, in the fourth month of Inundation, day 25, when the same is done in every place of Osiris, at every feast of his.¹¹

The Lector Priest goes on to explain exactly what effects this performance should have on all participants, including the performers, the gods, and the deceased:

¹¹ Faulkner, “Lamentations,” 116.

To bless his *ba*, steady his body, exalt his *ka*, give breath to the nose of him who lacks breath. To soothe the heart of Isis and Nephthys, place Horus on his father's throne, and give life-stability-dominion to Osiris, the justified. It benefits the doer as well as the gods.¹²

As I expressed in the director's program note: "In our production, the 'Lamentations' serve as a prologue to the 'Triumph,' to convey the depth of Egypt's grief over the loss of Osiris, and to sound the call for justice that Horus will soon answer," defeating once and for all his father's murderer, Seth.¹³

Production Plan

Drawing from my own training and experience as an actor, director, and drama-in-education facilitator, I planned to use theatre games and improvisational exercises to guide the students toward creating their own sense of how these iconic figures of ancient Egyptian religion might move, sound, and interact with one another. I believed that the students would need the majority of the academic year to learn and understand a substantial amount of the relevant areas of ancient Egyptian history and culture and to study the text closely enough to be able to create their own script and develop their characters in an organic yet well-informed way. I imagined

The TDPS Second Season, now called the Experimental Performance Series, sponsored my production, and as such I was obliged to work under certain

¹² Trans. Faulkner, "Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys," 116-17. In P. Berlin 3008, the penultimate line reads: "...and give life-stability-dominion to the Osiris Tentruty, born of Tekhao, called Persis, the justified." I removed the name of the deceased from our script, for obvious reasons, and left the focus on Osiris the god as written above.

¹³ See Appendix B for a full copy of the program for "The Triumph of Horus."

restrictions.¹⁴ First, my budget could not exceed two hundred dollars. Second, the entire presentation could be no longer than thirty minutes. Third, I had a maximum of sixty hours of rehearsal time with the students to prepare for the show, to be scheduled as I saw fit, not including one four-and-a-half- hour technical session during the week of our opening night, to be scheduled at the discretion of the TDPS Production Office, and a final dress rehearsal the night before our first performance, open to a small invited audience. The sixty-hour rehearsal limit was to ensure that the student actors were not overburdened with responsibilities on top of their schoolwork and other university activities.

I soon learned of two more restrictions that would affect my production. First, I could not use the Dance Theatre but I could use the Cafritz Foundation Theatre, a smaller black box performance space. Second, as was the custom of Second Season productions, I would share the evening with another thirty-minute production, which in our case took the first act of the evening, while ‘The Triumph of Horus’ took the second act. For my purposes, the only downside of this arrangement was the configuration of the space and its relation to the audience seating area, which had to suit both presentations. Third, the only performance dates available to me were over the first weekend of December 2019. This drastically reduced the amount of time I had to work with the students in the way that I had hoped to. Within the year, however, I would be grateful for this decision on the part of the TDPS production

¹⁴ According to TDPS, “The Experimental Performance Series features original works created, performed, and produced by students” (email communication on February 4, 2022). For more information on this and other TDPS programs, see “About,” School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, College of Arts and Humanities, University of Maryland, College Park, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://tdps.umd.edu/about>.

office. Due to the impending coronavirus pandemic, every live production in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies scheduled for Spring 2020 was canceled. Those productions that were logistically conducive to an online platform made that transition, but beyond those few exceptions, productions came to an abrupt halt for more than a year. I now look back on those December performances with relief and gratitude. At the time, however, I had to scramble to meet the challenges of these new limitations. First and foremost, I came up with a rehearsal schedule wherein I would meet with the actors for four hours each week from September through November, and those four hours would be spread across two days each week.¹⁵

A Note on Casting

In contrast to Newton and Poole's 1971 production in England, I wanted UMD's "The Triumph of Horus" to present a more nuanced picture of ancient Egypt and its people, and to push back against stereotypes. There is a long Western history of stage and screen portrayals of ancient Egyptians with white skin and European features, for instance. Two famous examples that come to mind are Anne Baxter as Queen Nefertiri in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and Elizabeth Taylor as the titular queen in Joseph L. Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra* (1963). The tradition continues in the twenty-first century. As recently as 2014, Hollywood chose well-established white actors Joel Edgerton and Sigourney Weaver to play Pharaoh Ramesses II and his mother Queen Tuya, respectively, in Ridley Scott's *Exodus*:

¹⁵ See Appendix C for the initial rehearsal schedule. The availability of the actors ultimately determined the days and times of our weekly meetings.

Gods and Kings.¹⁶ These pictures of ancient Egypt, however, are not rooted in reality. The archaeological record shows that ancient Egyptians depicted themselves most often with brown skin in a variety of shades. To view the evidence, one need only leaf through a copy of *The Art of Ancient Egypt* by Gay Robins, art historian and Professor Emerita at Emory University.¹⁷ An especially telling example comes from a wall painting in the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I in which four specific ethnic groups are represented from the neighboring foreign lands. The painting shows Libyans from the West with fair skin, a shade or two darker than the white skin of Canaanites from the East; Nubians from the South with black skin; and Egyptians themselves with brown skin.¹⁸ I intended our version of “The Triumph of Horus” to be a subtle reflection of this and similar iconography that I have seen and studied.

I achieved my goal to a point, but not to the full extent that I had hoped. Only twelve students showed up at the first round of auditions, the majority of whom were white women. I suspected the obscurity of “The Triumph of Horus” (and of ancient Egyptian drama in general) made it hard to compete with productions of popular

¹⁶ According to *The New York Times*, government officials in both Morocco and Egypt sought to ban the film for its “historical inaccuracies” as well as religious differences (Rick Gladstone, “Egypt Reported to Ban Latest U.S. ‘Exodus’ Film,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/27/world/middleeast/egypt-has-reportedly-banned-exodus-gods-and-kings-movie.html>).

¹⁷ See, for instance, the painted sandstone head of King Nebhepetra Mentuhotep (Robins, 94, fig. 94); or the panorama of hunting motifs on the east tomb chapel wall belonging to Khnumhotep (Robins, 13, fig. 1); and the wall painting from the tomb of “the official Nebamun hunting birds in the marshes, accompanied by his wife and child” (Robins, 22, fig. 11). I should emphasize as well that these examples represent both the Middle and New Kingdoms, spanning over seven hundred years.

¹⁸ In 1820, Prussian archaeologist Heinrich Menu von Minutoli made an illustration from the now-faded wall painting that shows these ancient depictions more clearly. A copy was published in Erik Hornung’s *The Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I* in 1991 (see Hornung, 262, fig. 198). It is worth noting, of course, that the illustration was Minutoli’s interpretation of the original wall painting and should be treated as such, although similar depictions of Nubians, Libyans, and Egyptians exist across the archaeological record from ancient Egypt that support Minutoli’s interpretation. For one such example, see Robins, *Art of Ancient Egypt*, 137, fig. 155.

modern plays that were holding their auditions at the same time. In fact, I soon learned that I was up against one concrete obstacle: our rehearsal schedule was going to conflict with the school's Mainstage production of Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*, which called for an all-Black, predominantly female cast.

That was my first lesson in letting go of my initial vision and allowing the piece to take on a life of its own—to be, as they say, what it was going to be. I came to the conclusion that I had my cast of actors already. Having seen their level of commitment to the piece and their enthusiasm for performing it, I realized that I did not require anyone else but the twelve intrepid students who were right there in front of me. Although, not all twelve remained with the production through opening night; a few of them dropped out for personal or academic reasons. In the end I had an eight-person cast, and a slightly more diverse group than I had expected I would at the start of rehearsals. The three young men in my cast were all students of color, two of whom came on board late in the process to replace two of the actors who had previously dropped out. The characters of Isis and Nephthys were played by two white women, however, as was the Lector Priest, a role that in ancient Egypt would certainly have been male. That having been said, all three women played their roles exceptionally well and with a level of professionalism and commitment for which I was grateful.

In retrospect, I realize something else. “The Triumph of Horus” is based on a Ptolemaic text from the first or second century BCE, and Egypt in the Ptolemaic era was a melting pot where groups of people from many countries across the ancient Mediterranean settled, worked, and lived, including a large Greek population. A cast

of actors performing “The Triumph of Horus” during this period would probably have been an eclectic group of people. All things considered, it is possible that our production reflected somewhat the multicultural population residing in Egypt at the time. Still, if given the opportunity to direct this piece again I would strive for even more diversity in the cast and a nuanced reflection of the Egyptian figures that appear in much of the ancient iconography, especially to break down those lingering stereotypes of white ancient Egyptians in black braided wigs, gold lamé, and heavy makeup.

The Rehearsal Process

I felt adamant from the very beginning that our rehearsal process be as collaborative and organic as possible. I wanted to avoid imposing my preconceived notions of what this performance should look like, with the exception of whatever the original text dictated (which was altogether very little). I did not want to tell the students where to go on stage, how to act their roles, or how to interact with one another. I wanted to give them the artistic and intellectual freedom to make these discoveries on their own, at least in the beginning of the rehearsal process. This devised approach, in my opinion, was going to be the most effective and authentic way to lead the students into fully embodied practice, and toward the insights that might emerge about the material from that practice.

This was, however, a risky approach. Usually, devised pieces are collaboratively written by the actors who bring their own life experiences to the development of the play script as well as the staging of the performance. These students had little to no prior knowledge of ancient Egypt or experience with ancient

Egyptian forms. Another factor that is essential to any devised work is *time*. It takes time, patience, and a long-term commitment from everyone involved to successfully build an organic collaborative piece. Accomplishing this within three months of rehearsal, meeting twice each week for only two hours at a time, was certainly going to be a challenge. An extended period of time is even more vital to the preparation of a devised production when you are not working with seasoned professionals who have experience with this kind of practice. The fact that I was working with student actors, some of whom were taking on their first role in any kind of production, meant that I was going to have to adjust my expectations—and ultimately my methodology—quite a bit, in order to achieve success.

Before the actors could make any significant contributions in rehearsal, however, they needed to learn a great deal about ancient Egyptian history and culture, and more about the context of these two dramatic pieces, in particular. So I decided to devote the first month of rehearsals to nothing but reading and interpreting the play in its published form and giving them the foundational knowledge of ancient Egypt that they would need to develop their characters as they saw fit. This required a substantial amount of dramaturgy on my part, which included supplemental reading assignments, lectures, images, and videos for the actors to study. In this way the project became more than putting on a show; it essentially became a course, in and of itself.

The Work of Devising

Having engaged them intellectually with ancient Egypt, I then undertook a number of improvisational exercises with the students in rehearsal, to help them

visualize ancient Egypt, to explore sound, scent, energy, movement, vocal techniques and improvised interactions with one another in character to engage them physically and emotionally with the piece. Early in the rehearsal process, I began each session with a series of theatre games, largely inspired by the pioneering work of Viola Spolin, to help them get to know one another and become more comfortable working together.¹⁹

One example of these games is a verbal “give and take” exercise where they split off in pairs and, responding to a specific prompt, take turns speaking and listening to one another. When called back to the group (usually seated on the floor in a circle so they are all facing one another) each pair takes a turn introducing each other to the rest of the group and sharing three facts they learned about their partner during their conversation. The primary goal of this exercise is to get student-actors to practice giving their full attention to their partner, listening carefully and retaining the information they receive. We tried many non-verbal “give and take” exercises as well, encouraging them to practice observation, balance, and hand-eye coordination.²⁰

In the weeks that followed, I worked with them on voice and movement, which I felt was especially critical to the type of performance we were undertaking. Here is one example of the vocal exercises I asked the two actors portraying Isis and Nephtys to practice in preparation for the “Lamentations.” Standing opposite one

¹⁹ Viola Spolin (1906-1994) was in many ways the “mother” of improvisational theatre in the United States. She founded the Young Actors Company in Hollywood in 1946, where she perfected her repertoire of creative theatre games to train children in the fundamentals of acting. She applied these same techniques as a director to her work with adult theatre companies like the Compass Players and the Game Theater in Chicago. She was a major influence on the work of her son, Paul Sills, who formed the Second City comedy troupe (Spolin, *Theater Games for the Classroom*, author’s bio).

²⁰ Spolin, *Theater Games for the Classroom*, 117-19.

another, leaving four or five feet of distance between them, they took turns speaking one line of their dialogue to the other, at an easy and comfortable volume, as though they were having a conversation. Then I asked them to take one step back, increasing the distance between them slightly, and repeat the process. They continued to take one step away from one another after each dialogue exchange, until they were far enough apart that they were forced to project and to speak more clearly so the other person could understand them. (One line to one line, they spoke the same line of dialogue each time so that they could notice the changes in how they were using their voices and bodies to say the words as they moved farther and farther away from one another). Once I felt they had reached a distance comparable to how far they might be from the audience on stage, I asked them to remain standing where they were, and to try the next exercise: speak the same line of dialogue, but this time speak very slowly, as if they were talking in slow motion. I could tell they felt self-conscious doing it this way, but I assured them the speed was just right, in fact, for the “Lamentations.” After trying it a few times this way, one of the students remarked that they felt “more religious, more ceremonial,” like the way priests might speak to the congregation at a Catholic mass. I took note of her comment, which would be relevant to our later discussion of the play.

At the next rehearsal with almost the full cast assembled, we talked about ritual. But first, I asked them what “The Triumph of Horus” is all about, in their minds. The actor playing Horus spoke up immediately with his answer: community. He said, “coming together as a community to show support for Horus.” Others chimed in with “family,” “unity,” “power,” and one astute actor added, “a

performance of power.” I asked them what sort of celebrations or commemorations do we have like this in our own lives, in our modern American culture? “The Fourth of July,” one student replied. Another said, “Civil War reenactments and other battle reenactments.” Then one student called out, “People love to celebrate victory. Commemorate victory, relive it.”

On Tuesday, October 8, I tried something new with the cast. It was a small group; five of the nine cast members were present. They were still expressing uncertainty about what actually went on in an ancient Egyptian temple and what purpose the temple served. So I asked them, “How many of you come from a Christian background or have had some experience with Christian ceremonies, or Catholic mass?” It was a reasonable question to ask this particular group of students who were all European-American. But to my surprise, most of them answered “No.” Moving on the next question, I asked them: “Can you think of a sacred ceremony that you’ve attended, perhaps one that all of you would likely have in common, regardless of your cultural background or religious affiliation?” “Yes,” they replied, “a wedding,” some said. Others said, “a funeral.” Seeing as how the “Triumph” was supposed to be somewhat jubilant, I went with the wedding idea. So I had them create wedding tableaux. Tableaux, also called still images or frozen pictures, are a drama in education convention employed by Augusto Boal for the Theatre of the Oppressed.²¹ The first step of what Boal called “Image Theatre” asks the actors to “make a group of statues, i.e. one image, which shows in a visual form a collective perspective on a

²¹ Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was a Brazilian theatre director and political activist who pioneered the use of theatre games for community outreach and social change. He developed the genre of “Forum Theatre,” where audience members can stop the action on stage and take the place of an actor to change the outcome of a scene.

given theme.”²² In our case, the theme was a wedding. One of the keys to this improvisational exercise is to give the actors a very limited amount of time in which to create the image, to encourage them to “express themselves rapidly” and without words “in a series of freeze-frames” (3).

According to Boal, “Each ‘statue’ (actor) must act like a character in role, and not display his or her own personal character traits” (3). For the still wedding images, the actors took on the generic roles of bride, groom, flower girl, priest, and father of the bride. Generally when I use this exercise as a director or studio teacher, I have my students create three images in total, each one representing a different state of, or chronological moment in time within, the theme. To get student-actors to move quickly, I give them a slow countdown of five, and invariably they are in place by the time I reach “one.” I did the same with this group, and I repeated the process for each tableau, in order. This went well, and they had fun doing it. From the tableaux we shifted into silent improvisations (or pantomime), which led to full improvisations with dialogue.

The wedding exercise gave them a clearer idea of what a sacred ceremony looked like in their own world. Then I took them a step further, asking them if they could think of another kind of celebration in which they have all likely participated, one that was not sacred but a commemoration of an important event in history, and a happy occasion that brings people together. All of these students being American, they were unanimous in their answer: the Fourth of July. “Okay,” I said, “now imagine that you are doing a historical reenactment of some aspect of the Fourth of

²² Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors*, 2.

July.” They chose the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This allowed them to take an important step forward, because now they were not just reenacting an event. They were taking on specific roles representing historical figures: John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, Caesar Rodney, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson. They all had the same exact image in mind, too—the famous oil painting by John Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence*—which took them straight into the tableau. I took them through the same process I had with the wedding: three tableaux into silent improvisation with pantomime, then improvised dialogue.

I asked them what it felt like to improvise the signing of the Declaration, and if it felt any different from improvising a wedding. “Very different,” they replied. I asked them why. They said, “Because we were playing real people who had once lived, famous historical figures.” I asked them why that made a difference, and they told me they had felt more of a responsibility to their roles, because those roles held more significance for them. So while the wedding had provided a sense of the sacred ceremony and community ritual, they did not feel the personal connection with their roles, since they could have been portraying any bride, groom, or priest. The Declaration carried greater weight and solemnity. I pointed out to them that the “Triumph of Horus” was quite like ancient Egypt’s Fourth of July, reenacting and celebrating the victory of Horus over Seth, and the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under one kingdom. Horus, Isis, and Thoth were not just gods to the Egyptians, but larger-than-life historical figures. For them the sacred, the religious, and the political were one and the same. This sacred drama was a religious ceremony, a ritual that was also a historical reenactment, reaffirming Egypt’s identity as a nation as well

as their common belief system, and a way to honor their gods. And the entire community came out to participate in the celebration together. Furthermore, the images carved into the walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu were not unlike Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* hanging in the Capitol Rotunda: concrete representation of a historical event that every Egyptian would have shared.

Keeping all of this in mind, we returned to the temple setting, and eventually worked our way toward the goal of this particular rehearsal: temple tableaux inspired by the play. I asked the actors to observe closely Fairman's drawing of the temple wall relief that matched the scene from the play's prologue. Then I had them recreate that scene in tableau, taking the positions of their own roles in the play. But this time I asked them to imagine that they were not portraying Isis or Thoth or Horus but ancient Egyptians (priests, priestesses, laypeople, or even the King and Queen) with the responsibility of portraying these gods, reenacting the battle between Horus and Seth with reverence. This suggestion met with some resistance. The actors were not keen on this idea, and I was unsure why. Maybe they just didn't know how to play it, or maybe they didn't understand what I was driving at. So I took a step back and tried another approach, based on a conventional acting exercise inspired by Stanislavski called "the moment before."²³ Stanislavski advised his students:

During every moment we are on the stage, during every moment of the development of the action of the play, we must be aware either of the external circumstances which surround us (the whole material setting of the production), or of an inner chain of circumstances which we ourselves have imagined in order to illustrate our parts.²⁴

²³ Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 63-71.

²⁴ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 63-64.

In the spirit of these words, I wanted to guide the actors toward creating for themselves an “imaginary moving picture” (65) that illustrated life in ancient Egypt, just moments before the events of the dramatic reenactment began. I played some Egyptian-themed music in the background, and had them enter and move through the space as ancient Egyptians, imagining that they were arriving at the Temple of Horus in Edfu to prepare for the victory celebration. Then I asked them to slowly but surely move into their character’s position in the tableau. That marked the end of Tuesday’s rehearsal.

The next day, one of the student-actors arrived late for rehearsal and was quite lost. They had trouble joining in and, while trying very hard, were not quite getting it. They eventually caught up to an extent, but something was definitely lost in having missed the introduction to the day’s exercises. This confirmed for me that to truly make this “experiment” a success, to do it “right,” the actors needed to be present at every rehearsal from start to finish. Devised theatre is like a team sport. The whole team *must* show up to practice and train *together*, regardless of the position they play. This is a process, and one that requires all participants and their full commitment. Every warm-up, every exercise, every improvisation serves a purpose. It’s meant to teach them something. Each one builds on the one that came before, and everyone needs to complete the lessons in sequence, together.

Text and Context

Following the close of the production I surveyed the actors about their experience and they almost unanimously agreed that their biggest challenge had been coming to terms with the text. It was challenging for many of them to learn the script,

which is quite dense even in English, and to speak the words aloud in a meaningful way. One method that was ultimately quite effective was to take the text, line by line, and put it in their own words as they understood them, in their vernacular, to help them understand the context, find the intention behind the words, and ultimately, learn the lines more efficiently as a result of this exercise. This proved especially fruitful for our lead actor playing Horus, a first-year theatre major who was taking on his first leading role. In one of our earlier rehearsals, my assistant director, Fraser Stevens, and I worked one-on-one with both Horus and Isis to tackle the opening sequence of the “Triumph.” Introduced by the Lector Priest, Horus speaks the following lines upon his entrance:

I cause Thy Majesty to prevail against him that is rebellious toward thee
On the day of the *melée*.
I put valour and strength for thee unto thy arms
And the might of my hands into thy hands.²⁵

Based on his knowledge of the myth of Horus and the background story of Osiris and Seth, the actor put a new passage forward:

Seth, for everything you’ve done to my family, for all the trauma, all the pain you caused my father, my mother, and me, I swear to you on this day I will beat the crap out of you!

The change in this young man’s demeanor and diction while he spoke these lines was remarkable. The tone of his voice deepened and expanded in volume. He stood up straighter and held his arms out as though he were growing in size. Channeling his own understanding of the context and using his own words to speak the lines allowed him to more fully embody the figure of Horus. Once he had established that connection, he was ready to speak Fairman’s text with the same

²⁵ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 80.

emotion and emphasis. The result was a strong, emotionally compelling reading. He went home that evening with an assignment to complete before the next rehearsal: do the same exercise with every passage in the scene.

We practiced the same exercise with the actor playing Isis, using her opening lines in the prologue of “The Triumph of Horus.” Fairman’s text reads:

I give thee power against those who are hostile toward thee,
O my son Horus, thou lovable one. (80)

Her translation was something to the effect of:

Horus, get it done. Beat him to death!
I will make sure of it. I love you.

She said she felt like Isis is giving him a pep talk in this passage. She wants him to know that she is behind him, and she loves him no matter what, but she is not entirely convinced that he can “get it done.” I asked her, do you as Isis really believe he doesn’t have it in him? He is a god, after all. So are you. You both have the power to destroy Seth, there is no doubt about that, but he has to be the one to do it, to claim the throne. She spoke the original lines again, this time with complete confidence, fierce loyalty and strength as well as compassion.

In addition, I thought it might be helpful for the actors to hear a little of what the original language might have sounded like, and maybe even have them recite a bit of it in performance, if they were comfortable doing so. Not having a copy of the original ancient Egyptian text, I had only the English translation to work with. But with my limited knowledge of Middle Egyptian the language, the help of Raymond Faulkner’s hefty dictionary and James Allen’s Middle Egyptian grammar book, I took the opening line for both Isis and Nephthys, “Come to your house,” and set about

translating it back into ancient Egyptian.²⁶ Naturally, I was not going to rely solely on my own devices; I consulted a few of my Egyptological colleagues who are far more skilled at deciphering the language than I am.²⁷ Together we came up with the following:²⁸

mi r pr.k

(*mi* = Come; *r* = to; *pr* = house; *.k* = your[s]²⁹)

I wrote it out for the actors as “Mi-reper-ek.” They were very happy to take this line and run with it. Since there is no way to know exactly how the line would have been pronounced in ancient Egyptian, they experimented with different pronunciations and settled on what felt most natural, which sounded like “mee-repair-ek,” pronounced as one word, with both “r” sounds rolled, as in Spanish. The Egyptian line became part of our script. Isis and Nephthys began their lamentations with this line, each repeating it twice in tandem,³⁰ almost like a chant, before shifting to “Come to your house,” letting the English version take over. Just that one line was enough to set the mood of the piece and provide a suggestion of the sound of the original language. And the emotional effect was quite remarkable.

²⁶ Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (1962); James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 2000), with a grateful nod to Dr. David P. Silverman, my Middle Egyptian professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

²⁷ I would like to thank Egyptologists Jane Hill, Beth Ann Judas, and Melinda Nelson-Hurst, all of whom together have expertise in three different phases of the language, for assisting me in identifying the correct ancient Egyptian phrasing of this line.

²⁸ Thanks to the recent publication of the excellent new translations and extensive commentaries by Andrea Kucharek and Marc Coenen, I have confirmed that this is indeed the first line of the hieratic script on the original papyri. See *Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys: Fragmentary Osirian Papyri*, vol. 1 (2021).

²⁹ The second person masculine singular suffix pronoun, preceeded by a mark (usually a dot) at the end of the modified noun. See Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, 48-51.

³⁰ Also indicated in Kucharek and Coenen, *Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys*, 1: 31.

In their latest volume, Kucharek and Coenen published approximately seven copies of The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys (P. Berlin 3008 included), compiled from twenty-six different fragments of papyri located at eight different institutions across Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. “Come to your house” (*mī r pr.k*) is the first spoken line in each of them, preceeded by the phrase *ḏḏ mdw* (translated as “Words to be recited”) followed by *i in 3st ḏḏ.s*, “Spoken by Isis, she says...” (150-151); or *ḏḏ mdw in 3st ḏḏ.s*, “Words to be recited by Isis, she says...” (151)

My earliest ideas for the presentation of both the “Lamentations” and the “Triumph” included a script made up entirely of the students’ own words and interpretations of the text as written in English. After all, what they had in hand were translations from ancient Egyptian, and not the original hieroglyphs or hieratic script. Furthermore, the performances in antiquity at both Abydos and Edfu were most likely enacted from memory and repetition rather than a proscribed text. Once we began rehearsals, however, I came to the realization that I would be asking a great deal more of my student actors than was reasonable with such a limited amount of time to learn the material. The “translation” of a few passages for the purposes of rehearsal proved useful as preparation exercises, but that would be the extent of it. The English translations by Faulkner and Fairman would remain as they were, and the students agreed to memorize them as written.

There was yet another reason for this conclusion. Throughout the first six weeks or so of rehearsal it became increasingly clear to me that the majority of my student actors preferred a more conservative, Western-style theatrical approach to

learning and staging a play: to receive and memorize the text as written, and move across the stage as dictated by their director. They were naturally uncomfortable with troubling that approach.

I sympathized with them. They were not professional actors yet, and many of them had limited experience on stage beyond high school productions or community theatre. An unconventional approach was simply not what these students were accustomed to. This was, however, a great source of disappointment for me, because my dissertation proposal called for a largely devised piece based on collaborative, improvisational techniques that fall outside of the traditional Western rehearsal “box.” For the experiment to work I needed *every* member of the cast onboard. I wanted to build what Victor Turner called “communitas” to better replicate the ancient Egyptian communal context, and to ensure that all the actors were on the same page when it came to understanding that context. In the simplest of terms, communitas is unity. From an anthropological perspective, communitas happens when humans within a society can transcend their social structure—class, role, gender, and other distinctions that identify and separate individuals from one another—and become what Turner called a “spontaneously ‘equal’ people.”³¹ In his book *From Ritual to Theatre*, he wrote: “When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one” (47). He described it as

This moment when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or

³¹ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 47-48.

cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as “essentially us” could sustain its intersubjective illumination. (48)

This sense of unity is relevant to the work of a group of actors, especially our group of student actors, because it not only connects them as individuals with one another as a cohesive group (and their characters with one another in the performance space), but it allows for greater connection with the action of the play and the culture in which the play is grounded. According to Turner:

Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event. Their “gut” understanding of synchronicity in these situations opens them to the understanding of such cultural forms—derived typically today from literate transmission of world culture, directly or in translation—as eucharistic union and the I Ching. (48)

This kind of spontaneous *communitas* that Turner spoke of was evident in performances of *The Serpent* by The Open Theater in 1969. Under the direction of Joseph Chaiken, the experimental theatre ensemble took stories from the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament and recreated them in a highly stylized manner, setting their biblical themes against contemporary political events.³² In a documentary film about *The Serpent*, writer Jean Claude Van Itallie explained the concept behind this devised piece and his role as playwright:

It was conceived as a piece in which the actors would be priests in a sense, that there would be a feeling of oneness in the sense that the congregation feels that the priest is questioning the same sorts of things that they’re questioning....My job then was how to put some of the impulses that the actors had had and that Joe had had concerning Genesis into a shape that would be meaningful to an audience, and into words, because most of their original explorations were wordless. It’s an exploration of a feeling or it’s looking for a direction. (2:37-3:25)

³² “The Open Theatre ‘The Serpent’ Part I,” YouTube, posted by Joshua Stewart on April 30, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB2OHclka5o> (accessed September 26, 2021).

The filmmaker had this to say about the Open Theater Ensemble, as he had witnessed them: “The form of their theatre and acting style is personal and complex, but they are always concerned with breaking down the barriers between the performers and the audience” (0:13-0:23).

However, the kind of focus and advanced skill required of a theatre ensemble working at this level might be easier to come by in a professional setting rather than a university setting, with students who are fresh out of high school or only one year into their training as young actors. I am reminded of the words Derek Newton and Derek Poole, the creative team behind that first modern production of *The Triumph of Horus* at Padgate College, wrote of their experience with student-actors working on this piece: “The play was felt to be a reversal of all their drama in education training. There was no question of being able to use modern methods of actor involvement. Intense personal discipline was required.”³³

Based on my own experience with *The Triumph of Horus*, I have come to the same conclusion. Perhaps my expectations for this particular production had been too high. As December loomed, I had to accept one simple truth: the most *important* thing was for the production to *happen*, and *how* it happened was ultimately a secondary concern. I learned to pick my battles with the students. The script remained intact (except for those edits that were necessary to keep the performance time within the allotted thirty minutes), but there were other experimental approaches to the staging of this play that I was not willing to compromise.

³³ Newton and Poole, “The Production of ‘The Triumph of Horus’,” 61.

Embodying Ancient Egyptian Gesture

If I could not induce the students to create their own script, I could still induce them to find their own movements across the stage and their own voices within the characters. In their book *Black Acting Methods*, theatre educators Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer define the work of devised theatre as a “process in which the actors create their own script or performance based on an idea, picture, theme, object, or some other form of inspiration.”³⁴ Taking a cue from Luckett and Shaffer and applying the work of devising to our own project, I began to consider that the detailed images etched into the walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu might serve as an alternative script for this ritual drama, as well as a guideline for staging and characterization.

My colleague, Fraser Stevens, himself an experienced theatre director, aided me in developing what he called a movement “grammar”—creating a “script” of sorts using specific movements or *gestures* and positions as suggested by the images that accompanied the original text, illustrated in Figure 1. So the students effectively began learning the play not by studying the lines or reading the dialogue but by *embodying* the scene—mimicking the gestures the figures are making in the “script” and exploring movement within these gestures and within the transitions to tell the story. What began as an experiment became a successful rehearsal strategy. The students responded positively to the new movements and gestures right away. More importantly, in doing so they began to let go of their individual personas and started

³⁴ Luckett and Shaffer, *Black Acting Methods*, 24.

to embody their characters. This was fascinating to watch. The movement and gestures were stiff and stilted at first but they had *purpose*. They were specific and compelling.

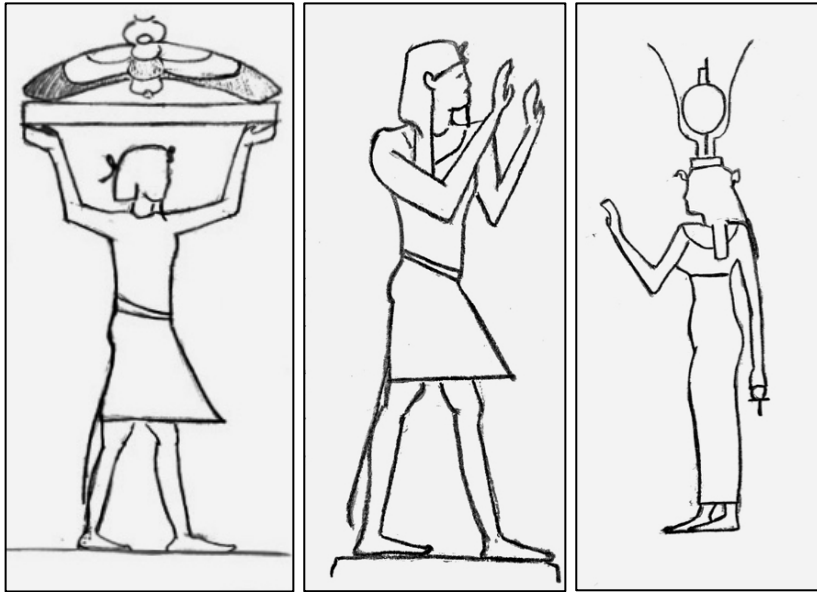


Figure 1. Script of Gestures

Ancient Egyptian gestures illustrated by the author after Fairman, from his drawings of the figures in relief on the temple walls at Edfu. See Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, for the complete original renderings.

The actors continued to practice each gesture, each pose, and began to practice moving their body from one pose into the next, as illustrated by Figure 2. Then they tried moving through the space at the same time, using the movements, first stopping, pausing, and starting again. Fraser directed them to try moving as though they were practicing the ancient Japanese art of Kabuki theatre: taking a strong stance, weight shifted to the legs, keeping the upper body completely still except for the arms swaying at their sides, and walking forward, step by step using their slightly bent knees as shock absorbers. “No bobbing your head,” he instructed. As they walked randomly around the space using the gestures as well as the Kabuki gait, Fraser

pulled them out of the exercise one by one to watch the others and observe the differences in them.



Figure 2. In Rehearsal

Actors use the script of gestures to locate their characters' movements on stage. Photo: Allison Hedges.

For the “Lamentations,” I incorporated two new gestures: the ancient Egyptian female mourning pose, illustrated by Figure 3 (a pose often seen in funerary iconography of the “wailing women”), and the familiar adoration pose assumed by Isis and Nephthys on either side of a central image or symbol of Osiris, as illustrated by Figure 4. Two key lines from “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys” (P. Bremner Rhind) refer to this specific action taken by the actor-priestesses in performance.³⁵

They are:

Mine arms are extended to greet thee,
Mine arms are upraised, are upraised to protect thee.³⁶

Taking on these gestures and fluidly shifting between them, the students were no longer moving like twenty-first century Americans. Their modern quirks and affectations fell away.

³⁵ Elizabeth Wickett, *For the Living and the Dead*, 155.

³⁶ Faulkner, “The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus” [stanza 12, lines 27-28], 129.



Figure 3. Isis in Mourning

Above Left, “Mourning Isis,” Ptolemaic Period, housed by The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 12.182.23b, Rogers Fund, 1912). *Above Right*, Madeline Lomvardias as Isis in the “Lamentations” sequence of the University of Maryland production. Photo: David Andrews.



Figure 4. Isis and Nephthys Adoring Osiris

Madeline Lomvardias as Isis (*left*) and Maddie Osterman as Nephthys (*right*) assume the traditional adoration pose, flanking an imaginary symbol of Osiris (projected onto a screen in performance). Still shot taken from video footage of rehearsal, courtesy of TDPS.

Eventually we began every rehearsal with a warm-up comprised of this movement grammar. They became familiar enough with the gestures to move effortlessly from one to the next, both at random and repetitiously, along with ancient Egyptian-themed music, which we eventually used in the final performances. The gestures were an almost instantaneous way for them to shift from their everyday lives

as college students into the mindset and physicality of their ancient Egyptian counterparts.

We began to stage the opening sequence of “The Triumph of Horus” with the script of gestures in mind, directing the actors to retain the exaggerated rigid movements, holding strictly to the “grammar,” as it were, until the gestures became automatic and the actors began to relax into a more natural flow and carry themselves with ease through the space, as seen in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Thoth Strikes a Pose

Kevin Romeo Ortiz as Thoth adopts a pose on stage from the script of gestures. Photo: David Andrews.

I encouraged the actors to consider the stylistic differences between classical Greek art and ancient Egyptian art and the cultural differences reflected, particularly in stance and gesture as depicted in sculpture. Greek poses are often relaxed, gestures fluid, lines soft and asymmetrical. While Egyptian poses are erect, gestures exact, proportions carefully diagrammed, and lines symmetrical, reflecting the power of

order over chaos, the careful observance of hierarchy, and conformity in style with very little room for individualistic expression in the depiction of human figures and the gods. In performance studies this is often the difference between representation and presentation. Egyptian ritual drama generally falls into the latter category. Rituals and recitations were to be performed and spoken correctly in a very specific manner in order to be efficacious.

Odyssey of a Hippo

Those familiar with “The Triumph of Horus” are usually most curious about the central battle sequence between Horus and Seth, and how we interpreted and fabricated Seth’s hippopotamus form. The battle reenactment takes place in the form of a hippopotamus hunt, in which the hippopotamus itself is a manifestation of Seth. The hippo appears in two sequences in the play: first, as the antagonist in the ritual reenactment of the battle; second, in the form of a “cake” served up to the gods, the King and Queen, the priests, and the onlookers. This was to signify the dismemberment of Seth, in retribution for his dismemberment of Osiris, and the final blow: Horus and Isis consuming their enemy.

In ancient Egyptian culture, the hippopotamus hunt is a recurring motif in kingship iconography that goes back to the Early Dynastic period. The oldest known example is a clay seal impression from Abydos that twice illustrates King Den, fifth ruler of the First Dynasty, locked in battle with a hippopotamus.³⁷ In one image he has hold of it with a rope and is poised to spear it with his harpoon. In the other he is

³⁷ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 35, fig. 2.

wrestling the animal, bare-handed. The Palermo Stone, a basalt stela from the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2400 BCE), bears mention of a feast of the “Harpooning of the Hippopotamus,” but there is no illustration to help us visualize it.³⁸ A more vivid example of a hippopotamus hunt appears in a tomb painting, also from the Fifth Dynasty, where a group of hunters are standing in a boat, harpoons at the ready, pulling at a struggling hippo caught in their ropes.³⁹ This image calls to mind a passage from Act 1, Scene 1 of Fairman’s text, spoken by the Chorus:

O Horus, fair are thy trappings of giraffe’s hair,
Thy net which is Min’s,
And thy shaft which belongs to the spear of Onuris.
Thy arm was the first to cast the harpoon.
...
Horus is in his bark like Wenty,
Having overthrown the hippopotami from his war-galley.
Hold fast, Horus, hold Fast!⁴⁰

In *The Triumph of Horus* text, as translated by Fairman, the hippopotamus has no dialogue and is not indicated in the script as a character that requires an actor. The Temple of Horus wall reliefs in Edfu illustrate a miniature version of the hippo, and in some panels multiple miniature hippos. The depiction of the diminutive hippopotamus has inspired two main ideas about how this battle might have been reenacted. The first is that the hippo may have been represented by a puppet of some sort. According to Louis B. Mikhail, there is evidence to suggest that the use of puppets, “jointed statues” or “dolls” that move “by the help of strings,” was prevalent

³⁸ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 34; Shaw, Introduction to *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 4.

³⁹ Baines and Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 193.

⁴⁰ Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 85.

in ancient Egypt.⁴¹ However the more likely scenario for this performance, according to Fairman, is that they used live hippopotami in the reenactment, perhaps captured or bred for this purpose,⁴² and that the small size of the hippo in the wall reliefs is symbolic, indicating the smallness of Seth's power and character as compared with the might of Horus.

In any case, I could not very well use a live hippo of any size in my production. But I *could* attempt to build a puppet that might be just as effective, and much safer for everyone involved. I did not, in fact, intend to build this puppet myself, having neither the background nor expertise in fabricating one, nor did I have training as a puppeteer. But I had great faith in the knowledge and capability of my colleagues and fellow theatre students at the University of Maryland who had such experience, especially those studying design. I set about recruiting one or two to assist me. Soon my technical director, fellow PhD candidate Christen Mandracchia, and I began a deep dive into all the hippo puppet possibilities we could find on Pinterest. I found inspiration particularly from Bread and Puppet Theater⁴³ as well as the minimalist approach taken by White Box Theatre in their interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh, under the direction of Sebastienne Mundheim.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Mikhail, *Dramatic Aspects of the Osirian Khoiak Festival*, 73-76.

⁴² Fairman, *Triumph of Horus*, 48-49.

⁴³ Visit their website at Bread and Puppet Theater, Glover, Vermont, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://breadandpuppet.org>.

⁴⁴ The Penn Museum in Philadelphia commissioned White Box Theatre to create this unique performance incorporating dance, puppetry, and original music by composer John B Hedges. The performance took place in the Harrison Theater of Penn Museum in September of 2019. More information is available here: "Gilgamesh – In Development," White Box Theatre, Philadelphia, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://whiteboxtheatre.com/projectsprogramsperformances/gilgamesh-in-development/>.

The key was to keep in mind our biggest roadblocks: time and money. However we chose to fabricate this puppet, it was going to have to be a relatively simple and inexpensive process. I considered building a shadow puppet with paper craft and using a lighting effect to create the illusion of a much larger animal looming over Horus as he moved to confront it. An important question remained, however: who was going to puppeteer this creature? Beyond the fabrication of the puppet itself, we needed at least one person, if not more, with the skill to move and maneuver it effectively.

As November closed in, we still had no clear hippopotamus plan. I grew concerned that if the hippo was not executed perfectly, our “Triumph of Horus” would devolve into a play about a puppet, and not in a helpful way. I decided that even though the battle was perhaps the most popular part of this ritual drama, for those who know it, the hippopotamus was not the true essence of staging and performing it. The hippo, at least in our production, was nothing more than a glorified prop, a theatrical device. The success of the battle reenactment depended on the skills of our Horus, first and foremost, as well as his fighting companion, the Demon Bull. Fortunately, I had cast these two actors well. Both were strong dancers and game for the mock stage combat that was going to be required of them.

I finally realized that we did not need a material hippopotamus at all. With the right choreography, prop weapons, and full commitment on the parts of Horus and the Demon Bull, we could create the illusion of a clear and present danger in the invisible form of a hippopotamus, as illustrated by Figure 6. All that was needed for the hippo itself were sound effects. My technical director, Christen, with her experience in

sound production, had that covered. She created a chilling sequence of deep, belly-shaking, menacing guffaws (the same sound that hippopotami make when they open their great jaws and sigh heavily), as well as a series of mournful bellows for the final defeat. We were also fortunate enough to have a colleague in the program who specialized in stage combat, and she was willing to volunteer an evening or two to choreograph a pantomimed battle sequence with our two actor-dancers.

Our battle sequence was sorted; our hippopotamus plan complete. To demonstrate the success of the outcome, I will paraphrase the words of my eight-year-old nephew who came to see the performance with his parents. After the show, he declared his favorite character to be the hippo, and he was very sad that it got hurt.



Figure 6. The Hippopotamus Hunt

Brian Wilson as Horus and Kevin Romeo Ortiz as the Demon Bull battle Seth in the form of a Hippopotamus as the Chorus looks on (*from left*, Alie Karambash, Sara Reilly, Maddie Osterman, and Annabel Lee). Still shot from video footage courtesy of TDPS.

The Hippo Cake

Any discussion of the hippopotamus motif in *The Triumph of Horus* would be incomplete without mention of the accompanying hippo cake. The temple wall reliefs clearly illustrate the cutting of a cake made in the shape of a hippopotamus, and the

words in the text are explicit about the use of this cake in the victory ceremony. The Lector Priest, or Reader, declares:

Bring in the hippopotamus in the form of a cake into the presence of Him-
with-the –Upraised-Arm.⁴⁵

Not only must the cake be brought before the audience, but the Butcher must make the following announcement and cut the cake into multiple pieces:

I am the skilled butcher of the Majesty of Re,
Who cuts up the Hippopotamus, dismembered upon his hide.

After the Lector Priest performs a ritual over the cake by which Seth is symbolically annihilated and banished from all existence, Horus, under the strict guidance of Isis, must methodically distribute each piece in a prescribed manner. For instance, Isis says:

Give his liver to Sepa
And his fat to the disease-demons of Dep.
Give his bones to the Khemu-iyet,
His heart to the Lower Egyptian Songstress.
Mine is his forepart, mine is his hinderpart, for I am thy Mother whom he
oppressed.
Give his tongue to the Young Harpooners,
The best of his inward parts to thy followers.
Take for thyself his heart and so assume the White Crown and the kingly
office of thy father Osiris.
What remains of him burn in the brazier of the Mistress of the Two Lands.
(117)

Past productions have generally chosen to use one form of the hippopotamus to meet the requirements of both the battle and the dismemberment of Seth. The York University production engaged an artist-puppeteer to fabricate a sort of piñata in the shape of a hippopotamus, made out of papier-mâché.⁴⁶ When the moment came for

⁴⁵ Fairman, 113 (Act III, sc. iii).

⁴⁶ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 141.

Horus to finally defeat the hippo, he used his prop staff to tear into the piñata, releasing “fruit wrapped in red tissue paper” that spilled out into the hands of the ensemble.⁴⁷ At Padgate, the students built a two-dimensional wooden cut-out in the shape of a hippopotamus, and made it thick enough (approximately two inches thick) to hold pieces of cake inside the back of it.⁴⁸ When the time came to distribute the pieces, the Butcher simply reached into the cutout to grab “morsels of cake that were thrown to the waiting crowd.”⁴⁹

I took my first cue from the Toronto production at York. But instead of building a piñata, I wanted to build a marionette of sorts with movable parts and removable limbs so that it might easily be pulled apart into “pieces” and put back together again for the next performance. As for eating those parts, I always knew that I wanted the cake to be a separate component that would be presented from off stage and served not only to the actors on stage but to the audience as well. The idea was that Seth is defeated in battle and his broken body whisked off stage to be prepared for consumption. In the next scene he emerges as a cake on a platter carried by the Butcher.

What *kind* of cake was the next question. I decided against a cake in the shape of a hippopotamus for the same reason I decided to abandon the hippo marionette. It had the potential to become too “cutesy,” or worse, laughable, if not executed properly. I thought a plain sheet cake in red velvet with a neutral shade of icing would do the trick. I was even willing to bake it myself if necessary. But the production

⁴⁷ Gillam, *Performance and Drama*, 141.

⁴⁸ Newton and Poole, “The Production,” 71 and Plate 3b.

⁴⁹ Newton and Poole, “The Production,” 71.

office soon burst that bubble. They informed me that the venue, and the department, had strict regulations governing any food that was to be served at an event in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. Cake could not be served to the audience unless it was officially catered by The Clarice's contracted caterer, which was going to be prohibitively expensive, far beyond our modest budget. As a result, audience participation in the dismemberment of Seth was vetoed. That was a disappointment, but no real problem. The most important thing was that the actors on stage were able to take part in the consumption of Seth.

Taking more logistical matters into consideration, such as the messiness of a cake, the difficulty of slicing it on stage without making more of a mess, the question of keeping it fresh each night, and above all, dietary concerns of the cast. In the end, there was no "cake" at all, but a loaf of pumpernickel bread, pre-sliced.

Outcomes and Next Steps

So what was the final outcome of this project for the students in terms of their experience embodying these texts? I surveyed the actors after the close of the production and here is an overview of the responses I received. The vast majority found that the movement exercises we practiced had the strongest impact on their character development. One student who is a trained dancer pointed out that mimicking the ancient Egyptian gestures from the temple wall reliefs taught them "shapes and patterns [that] informed [their] weight bearing and transition walks," while another likened it to "walking through honey." The vocal exercises had the strongest impact, ultimately, on their performance for an audience. The most difficult

part of the production for them was learning, memorizing, and understanding the texts, while the aspects of the rehearsal process that they felt taught them the most about ancient Egypt were the articles, discussions, and the images.

In addition, I gave them a list of seven terms—*ritual*, *ceremony*, *play*, *pageant*, *chant*, *spell*, and *concert*—and I asked them three concluding questions. Based on their experience working on our production, I asked them first to identify which of these terms they felt best described “The Triumph of Horus.” The responses I received were, in equal measure: “ritual,” “ceremony,” “play,” “pageant,” and “all of the above.” Next, I asked them to identify which of these terms they felt best described “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys.” Seventy-five percent of them answered “ritual,” while the remaining twenty-five percent answered “chant.” Interestingly, not one of them chose “play” for this particular piece. Finally, I gave them a new list of six terms: *ceremony*, *theatre*, *worship*, *entertainment*, *storytelling*, and *dance*. This time I asked, “In your opinion, which of the following terms best describe ancient Egyptian drama?” Sixty percent answered “ceremony,” twenty percent answered “worship,” and the remaining twenty percent, “all of the above.”

I hope for the opportunity to do a production like this again, next time with a new group of actors who can bring a fresh perspective and a different set of skills and experiences to the material. These dramatic texts represent a “repertoire” that has persisted for many millennia, passed down through the generations by means of spoken and embodied words. Of Egyptian funerary laments, both ancient and modern, Elizabeth Wickett writes that “lament performance was rooted, then as now, in the oral tradition, and these mere fragments serve to reveal the continuity of these ancient

performance conventions.”⁵⁰ In this way, the “Songs” and “Lamentations” of Isis and Nephthys represent a long oral tradition that is still evident in Egypt today. It is certainly possible that written documents bearing these texts once existed in the earlier Pharaonic periods of Egyptian history, and are now lost to antiquity. But I am more inclined to believe that they were not written down, because such documentation was not necessary for the continuation of this aspect of ancient Egyptian culture. Those who performed the dramas, priests and priestesses in particular, were trained to perform them in a specific way, learning and repeating each utterance and gesture. However, in the Late and Ptolemaic periods of Egyptian history, with an unprecedented influx of foreign rulers and immigrants bringing foreign customs with them, it became necessary to write these dramas down. But these pieces of dramatic literature were not meant to be read in silent contemplation, they were meant to be spoken aloud. They were meant to be embodied. And therefore, to interpret and understand them to the full extent possible—to identify the “effective utterance”—they must be performed.

Another firm conclusion I have come to is that these texts represent a dramatic culture that was unique to ancient Egypt. It might be easy to claim a Greek influence over “The Triumph of Horus” because of its Ptolemaic date and context, but the content of this text in as much as it appears on the walls of the Temple of Horus is anything but typically Greek. It is, in my opinion, a perfect example of ancient Egyptian *coronation theatre*, while “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” is a perfect example of ancient Egyptian *funerary theatre*. And whether one agrees that

⁵⁰ Wickett, *For the Living and the Dead*, 166.

they represent theatre in the traditional Western sense of the word or not, these dramatic texts certainly deserve their place in the world theatre history canon.

Conclusion

I have had my work cut out for me with this line of inquiry, on multiple levels. I will be completely honest with the reader at this point and admit that at the end of this dissertation you will likely find no new answers to the question of ancient Egyptian theatre. What you will find, however, are new questions. In other words, my study has yielded some *suggestions* for new ways of *answering* the question. But the question itself, I am afraid, will not truly be answered to anyone's satisfaction at this time.

That having been said, here are the suggestions I am making as a result of this study, for the purpose of identifying and understanding theatre in ancient Egypt. First, *theatre* is a Western word derived from ancient Greek that twenty-first century Western-trained historians use in order to categorize a specific form of performing art in cultures around the world. My suggestion is that the word does not define the art, it simply categorizes it. As I am a twenty-first century American scholar, I am using this term *theatre* to categorize the ancient Egyptian performing art that this dissertation has discussed.

Second, theatre is a *medium* through which a performing art is rendered, just as sculpture represents a specific medium of visual art. Other performing art media include music or dance. And just as music can be divided into a number of different genres, so can theatre. Third, the overall nature of a particular culture's theatre reflects the nature of that particular culture. For example, modern American theatre is secular entertainment. This is because modern American society is secular, and in that society, we as Americans generally go to see theatre because we enjoy it. Ancient

Egyptian theatre was religious and an act of service to the community. This was because the ancient Egyptian society was rooted in a common religious belief, and the people attended or participated in theatre to fulfill a communal practice of worship.

Fourth, because theatre is a performing art, at least one mode of theatre historiography should be performance. If a dramatic or performative text exists in the archaeological record, that text should be read, translated, interpreted, and read again. It should be transcribed, transliterated, and written anew, if need be. It should also be spoken aloud and embodied—in other words, *performed*. Fifth, Egyptologists should enlist the help of theatre artists and scholars to assist them in understanding a dramatic or performative text. And finally, number six: theatre historians should enlist the help of Egyptologists to assist them in understanding the cultural relevance of an ancient Egyptian dramatic or performative piece.

In addition, I have made some observations throughout the course of the PAR component of this project that I think are worth noting. For one, performative ritual *becomes* theatre when staged out of its original context for a modern live audience and performed by actors. Regardless of whether “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” or “The Triumph of Horus” were once meant to be performative ritual dramas, they are now theatre for our practical and pedagogical purposes in the twenty-first century. This is because the ancient Egyptian performative, ritualistic, religious, and political aims of these dramas no longer exist in our current context, and as such they are no longer rituals. They are not performed by priests, but by actors imitating priests, and as such the utterances and gestures have lost their

effectiveness. But they remain dramatic performances. They remain *theatre*, and serve a new purpose.

The utterances and gestures may now be effective practical and pedagogical tools, teaching students and actors about ancient Egyptian performance contexts, content, and process. Theatre students learn about ancient Egyptian ritual, orality, and performativity by *doing*, by enacting the performance. And they learn something about ancient Egyptian theatre by performing these pieces for an audience in a context they recognize, connecting the ancient past with their present, and engaging them with the material in a new way.

Performing these dramas allows students who are not Egyptologists, who do not read the hieroglyphs or the hieratic script and who do not have the complex cultural and historical knowledge of ancient contexts, to learn and understand something about ancient Egyptian religion and tradition in a visceral, fundamental way, through *embodiment*. If I were to take my PAR experiment one step further, however, I would have them perform the dramas in their original ancient Egyptian dialect. I believe professional actors would benefit greatly from the experience of uttering the words as they were meant to be spoken (or in a manner as closely as we can ascertain that they were spoken), and in doing so they would learn something deeper about the culture. But again, Egyptological knowledge is not necessary to engage with and participate in this kind of learning as actor-students. They simply need to learn the words, understand their meaning, memorize the lines, and practice the pronunciation. The Egyptological knowledge is necessary for preparing the script, so it would fall to the dramaturg, director, professor or perhaps a consulting scholar to

deliver this. The work of preparing such a script might fall beyond the scope of my own knowledge and skill set at present. However, with the help of Kucharek and Coenen's latest publication, for instance, with full transliteration of the original ancient Egyptian text of "Lamentations," as well as the resources and colleagues I called upon for assistance with "*mi r pr.k*," I believe I could formulate a reasonable plan for creating such a script.

Finally, I would like to propose my own definition of theatre, one that I hope will serve to bring the answer to the question of ancient Egyptian theatre into sharper focus. *Theatre* is mimetic drama performed live before an audience to achieve an intellectual or emotional effect. This definition encompasses all manner of cultural performance including ritual, festival, commemoration, communal celebration or ceremony, recitation, dance, song, reenactment, as well as the performance of dramatic literature on a stage. The key is the *mimetic* aspect, which separates theatre from other forms of live, emotionally charged performances like competitive sports, or concerts given by a symphony orchestra. As for the latter, the audience may be moved emotionally by the music they hear but the live performers are not imitating music or imitating musicians. They simply *are* musicians, manually delivering complex sounds to their audience. Likewise, athletes are not imitating the sport they play. They are simply playing the game, but the game itself remains a compelling live performance and no less dramatic for the conflict inherent in competition. However, the mimetic quality of theatre—the illusion or "make believe"—allows for the *transportation* of its audience, as well as its actors, and this sets the theatrical experience apart from any other form of performance.

This begs the inevitable question of whether or not the ancient Egyptian dramatic texts called “The Triumph of Horus” and “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys” or “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” might indicate a theatrical tradition in ancient Egypt comparable to that of ancient Greece or to later forms of Western theatre. To this I cannot yet give a definitive answer. After all, one element of Western theatre that I believe sets it apart from other theatrical traditions is that Western theatre, for the most part, is performed for the sake of theatre alone—art for the sake of art—and while it might serve ancillary purposes, *that truly is* its main purpose. But once again, I have to interrogate my own conclusion. Is this a cultural bias of my own?

It is safe to say, however, that ritual drama is performed for the sake of the ritual—what the ritual is meant to achieve and nothing else. The spectator-participants attend the performance not necessarily to be entertained or to appreciate the artistry of the text or the performers. They attend to take part in the ritual, and receive the benefits that the ritual will grant them. Having reviewed the available evidence on the matter and after having staged “Lamentations” and “Triumph” in a full-scale theatrical setting, I can say for certain that these were indeed theatrical performances that served a larger ritual purpose. Still, these texts represent more than ritual performances. They represent dramatic performances. They belong to the two genres of a uniquely *Egyptian* theatre that emerged during the Pharaonic era: *funerary theatre* (as seen in the “Songs” and “Lamentations”) and *coronation theatre* (as seen in “Triumph”).

Let me be clear, however. Do I believe that these dramatic texts could be staged, performed and appreciated as theatre for its own sake today? Absolutely. I have proven this with my own production. As a result these texts qualify, in my opinion, for inclusion in the theatre history canon, and we should study, teach, and perform them as such. Which begs yet another question, that perhaps does not yet demand an answer. Can these dramatic texts be considered ancient Egyptian theatre *today*, regardless of their original context? My answer is an emphatic “Yes.”

Appendices

Appendix A – Theatre History Textbooks (in Chronological Order)

- 1903 Mantzius, Karl. *A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times*. Vol. 1, *The Earliest Times*. Authorized translation by Louise von Cossel, with an introduction by William Archer. London: Duckworth & Company.
- 1915 Ridgeway, William. *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races in Special Reference to the Origin of Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Reprint 1964 by Benjamin Blom (New York). Page references are from the 1964 edition.
- 1927 Nicoll, Allardyce. *The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginnings to the Present Day*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- 1928 Hughes, Glenn. *The Story of the Theatre: A Short History of Theatrical Art from its Beginnings to the Present Day*. New York: Samuel French.
- 1929 Cheney, Sheldon. *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting, and Stagecraft*. London: Longmans, Green and Company.
- 1932 Stevens, Thomas Wood. *The Theatre: From Athens to Broadway*. New York: D. Appleton & Company. HathiTrust Digital Library.
- 1941 Freedley, George, and John A. Reeves. *A History of the Theatre*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- 1952 Nagler, A. M. *Sources of Theatrical History*. Toronto: General Publishing Company. Reprinted in 1959 as *A Source Book in Theatrical History* by Dover Publications (New York). Page references are from the 1959 edition.
- 1955 Hunningher, Benjamin. *The Origin of the Theater*. Amsterdam: Em. Querido. First American edition published in 1961 (New York: Hill and Wang). Page references are from the 1961 edition.
- 1955 Macgowan, Kenneth, and William Melnitz, *The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- 1962 Roberts, Vera Mowry. *On Stage: A History of Theatre*. New York: Harper & Row. HathiTrust Digital Library. Second edition published in 1974.

- 1968 Brockett, Oscar. *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Internet Archive.
- 1968 Hartnoll, Phyllis. *A Concise History of the Theatre*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- 1969 Gassner, John, and Edward Quinn, eds. *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*. New York: Dover Publications.
- 1972 Berthold, Margot. *The History of World Theater: From the Beginnings to the Baroque*. Translated by Edith Simmons. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing. Reprinted in 1999 by Continuum (New York). Page references are from the 1999 edition.
- 1981 Arnott, Peter D. *The Theater in Its Time: An Introduction*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.
- 1984 Gillespie, Patti P., and Kenneth M. Cameron. *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival*. Macmillan Publishing.
- 1984 Vince, Ronald W. *Ancient and Medieval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- 1985 Grose, B. Donald, and O. Franklin Kenworthy. *A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 1989 Kernodle, George R. *The Theatre in History*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press.
- 1995 Csapo, Eric, and William J. Slater. *The Context of Ancient Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- 2001 Elam, Jr., Harry J., and David Krasner, eds. *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2002 Rozik, Eli. *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- 2003 Wilson, Edwin, and Alvin Goldfarb. *Living Theatre: A History*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. Page references from the fifth edition published in 2008.
- 2004 Banham, Martin, ed. *A History of Theatre in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- 2006 Zarrilli, Phillip B., Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams, and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei. *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. Edited by Gary Jay Williams. New York: Routledge. Second edition published in 2010.
- 2007 Csapo, Eric, and Margaret Miller, eds. *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 2008 Brockett, Oscar G., and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. 10th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- 2009 Gainor, J. Ellen, Stanton B. Garner Jr., and Martin Puchner. *The Norton Anthology of Drama*. Vol. 1, *Antiquity through the Eighteenth Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- 2017 Odom, Glenn. *World Theories of Theatre*. London: Routledge.
- 2017 Revermann, Martin, ed. *A Cultural History of Theatre in Antiquity*. Vol. 1 of *A Cultural History of Theatre*, edited by Christopher B. Balme and Tracy C. Davis. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- 2017 Westlake, E. J. *World Theatre: The Basics*. New York: Routledge.
- 2019 Pizzato, Mark. *Mapping Global Theatre Histories*. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2020 Cochrane, Claire, and Jo Robinson, eds. *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography*. London: Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury.

Appendix B – Program Text for “The Triumph of Horus”

The Triumph of Horus

Adapted by Allison Hedges from translations by H. W. Fairman, R. O. Faulker, and Miriam Lichtheim

Cast

Lector Priest	Margot Trouvé
Isis	Madeline Lomvardias
Nephthys	Maddie Osterman
Horus	Brian Wilson
Thoth/Demon Bull	Kevin Romeo Ortiz
Butcher	Alie Karambash
Chorus	Alie Karambash, Annabel Lee, Maddie Osterman, Sara Reilly

Creative Team

Director/Dramaturg	Allison Hedges
Stage Manager	Shermey Mueller
Assistant Director	Fraser Stevens
Technical Director	Christen Mandracchia
Lighting Design	Kelsey Diggs
Costume Design/Props	Kira Peck, Madeline Redding
Projections/Sound Design	Christen Mandracchia
Fight Choreography	Tara Demmy
Text for the Prologue	Allison Hedges
Creative Consultant	Q-Mars Haeri
Faculty Advisor	Franklin J. Hildy

Acknowledgements

Digital images featured the Temple of Horus in Edfu, Egypt, and the statuette of Osiris housed by the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Photos taken by Allison Hedges.

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Scene Breakdown

Prologue: The Story of Osiris

“The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys”

“The Triumph of Horus”

- Scene 1 The Harpoon Ritual
- Scene 2 The Battle with Seth
- Scene 3 The Defeat of Seth
- Scene 4 The Crowning of Horus
- Scene 5 The Dismemberment of Seth and the Jubilation

Notes on “The Triumph of Horus” and “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys”

“The Triumph of Horus” follows the falcon god Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, as he goes forth to battle his uncle Seth, god of chaos, for the Egyptian throne that is rightfully his. The ritual drama was performed annually in celebration of the Festival of Victory in Egypt, a renewal ceremony for the King. The play you see today is an adaptation of the ancient Egyptian text discovered on the walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu, where it was inscribed sometime during the second century BCE. The original text was translated and published in English by H. W. Fairman as *The Triumph of Horus: An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama* (University of California Press, 1974). Although the inscriptions date to the Greco-Roman period in Egyptian history, the annual reenactment of the battle between Horus and Seth is attested in earlier documents such as the Stela of Ikhnofret, dating all the way back to the twentieth century BCE. For this reason, Fairman and others have referred to “The Triumph of Horus” as the oldest play in the world.

Mj r(e) perek

“Come to your house.”

“The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys” is an ancient Egyptian funerary text that dates to the fourth century BCE. Like the “Triumph” however, its annual performance is attested centuries earlier, in celebration of the mysteries of Osiris during the month of Khoiak (“all souls”). The English translation you hear today was published by Miriam Lichtheim in *Ancient Egyptian Literature, vol. 3: The Late Period* (University of California Press, 1980), edited from an earlier translation by R. O. Faulkner in 1934. In our production the “Lamentations” serve as a prologue to the “Triumph,” to convey the depth of Egypt’s grief over the loss of Osiris, and to sound the call for justice that Horus will soon answer.

Appendix C – Initial Rehearsal Schedule for “The Triumph of Horus”

(Dated Sept. 6, 2019)

Tuesday, Sept. 10, 5:30–7:00 PM in Studio 1
Thursday, Sept. 12, 5:30–7:00 PM in Mullitz Studio

Tuesday, Sept. 17, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio
Wednesday, Sept. 18, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Sept. 24, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre
Wednesday, Sept. 25, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Oct. 1, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre
Wednesday, Oct. 2, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Oct. 8, 5:30–7:30 PM in Choreography Studio
Wednesday, Oct. 9, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Oct. 15, 5:30–7:30 PM in Choreography Studio
Wednesday, Oct. 16, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Oct. 22, 5:30–7:30 PM in Choreography Studio
Wednesday, Oct. 23, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Oct. 29, 5:30–7:30 PM in Dance Theatre
Wednesday, Oct. 30, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio

Tuesday, Nov. 5, HOLD (Currently no space is available.)
Wednesday, Nov. 6, 5:30–7:30 PM in Cafritz Theatre

Tuesday, Nov. 12, HOLD (Currently no space is available.)
Wednesday, Nov. 13, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio
Thursday, Nov. 14, 5:30–7:30 PM in Studio 2

Tuesday, Nov. 19, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio
Wednesday, Nov. 20, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio
Thursday, Nov. 21, 5:30–7:30 PM in Rever Studio

Monday, Nov. 25, 6–8 PM in Rever Studio

In the Cafritz:

Monday, Dec. 3–Thursday, Dec. 5 = TECH WEEK (Days/Times TBD)

Friday, Dec. 6, 7:30 PM = PERFORMANCE (Call Time TBD)

Saturday, Dec. 7, 2:00 PM & 7:00 PM = PERFORMANCES (Call Time TBD)

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