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Ilkhetnofret, a high-ranking vizier under Senwosret III, c. 1850 B.C., erected this elegant stele near the great temple of Osiris at Abydos. He placed it there in order to share in temple offerings after his death. He chose the more expensive basalt because it would last longer than the usual softer limestone. His discriminating taste is shown by the high level of artistry in the design.
The Ikhernofret Stela as Theatre: 
A Cross-cultural Comparison

Naomi L. Gunnels

This paper, in an interest to discover if ancient Egypt had theatre, sets out to define "theatre" and then use its definition(s) to compare an ancient Egyptian text called the Ikhernofret Stela to the medieval Cycle Plays. Throughout the paper similarities are brought to light, showing that these two events are easily put into the same category. As the Cycle Plays are considered theater, the Ikhernofret Stela may also be considered such.

The beginning of the Western tradition of theatre is traditionally dated from the Athenian festivals of Dionysos in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Our notions of drama, acting, physical theatre space, costume, mask and the relation between actors and audience can be said to stem from these festivals, their rites and ceremonies.1

Is Greek Theatre, encompassing the Athenian festivals of Dionysos, really the first theatre in the world?

I acted as his beloved son for Osiris Khentamenthes, distinguishing his great [image] which endures forever. –Ikhernofret stela,2 c. 1868 B.C.3

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1 Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre (New York: Methuen, 1988), 7.
2 Kurt Sethe, Aegyptische Lesestucke zum Gebrauch im Akademischen (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924), 70–71. For the reader’s knowledge the word stela and stone are interchangeable. In the true definition, ‘stela’ is the name of the carved standing stone-orthostat, and usually refers to just the writing, and the word ‘stone’ encompasses the entire tablet Ikhernofret wrote on.
The Ikhernofret stela, one of the most renowned Egyptian texts concerning the Osiris Festival of ancient Egypt, was written at least twelve hundred years before the Athenian festivals of Dionysos. In the first chapter of the theater history textbook by Oscar Brockett, in reference to the text on the Ikhernofret stone, he says, “As they [some scholars] see it, this was one of the most elaborate dramatic spectacles ever staged.”

The question of whether Greek Theater is really the first theater in history is of genuine concern to those who feel the Egyptians were an advanced culture. Why would a culture so advanced as the Egyptians not have a form of entertainment that has in some way or another been incorporated in organized societies for more than two thousand years, even when it was banned by monarchs and religious institutions? The journey to answer these questions begins by first reading and translating a stela from a time predating the Athenian festivals of Dionysos. One English translation in particular was useful to speed along the translation process and to see how differently this text can be translated. The differences in translation are the primary basis for the vastly differing opinions of scholars about the ‘theatricality’ of this text. A second basis for differing opinions is the very definition of the word theatre. In this case, to discover the Ikhernofret Stela’s theatricality, defined parameters that explain key terms must be used in this comparison. The definition of ‘theatre’ is of utmost importance in deciding if the Ikhernofret stela can be classified as theatre. There are many ways of defining this word, but we will use definitions from three recognized philosophers and scholars of theatre. These definitions will help compare and contrast the between the Christian Cycle Plays of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries and the Ikhernofret stela.

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4 See Brockett, 9.
5 Miriam Lichteim, Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom (Freiburg: Ruprecht, 1988), 99–100.
What is Theatre?

Plato felt that his young students should be wary of Homer’s *mimesis* or “impersonation, performance” of his characters in his poetry. According to Gerald Else, Plato felt that Homer was not merely representing his characters, but was actually pretending to be those characters.6 This ‘pretending to be someone you are not’ is what Plato defined as *mimesis*, and what is known today as imitation. When Aristotle becomes ‘Teacher,’ he is either much more ambiguous or more definitive, depending on one’s view of the necessity for details. He says three things can define imitation: medium—the “poet’s words, or the painter’s colors, or the musician’s sound”; object—imitation of an action, and manner—narration.7 If the medium and the object depict the same thing, then imitation may be done by “narration—in which case he [the poet] can either take another personality as Homer does, or speak in his own person, unchanged—or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us.”8

Two thousand years later, Victor Turner has claimed, “there is . . . theatre something of the investigative, judgmental, and even punitive character of law-in-action,” meaning that one of the purposes of theatre is to comment and make judgments about the society in which that play is taking place, “and something of the sacred, mythic, numinous, even ‘supernatural’ character of religious action.”9 It seems that Turner defines theatre as having elements that try to change civilian life as well as religious. Richard Schechner says, “A performance is called theater or ritual because

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8 Ibid., 53.
of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances.” He asks if the event is supposed to be ‘efficacious’ (“to effect transformations” = ritual) or ‘entertainment’ (theatre), and then supplies tenets of both types of events. For Plato and Aristotle the key is imitation, but Turner seems to allow both secular and religious characteristics, and for Schechner the results desired by those performing must be known.

The Challenge

Comparing the Cycle Plays to the Ikhernofret stela cannot be done without looking to outside sources for information on both texts. The Cycle Plays and the Ikhernofret stela tell but little of why each is considered a Cycle Play—what do those words mean? These words mean that theatre scholars have decided to categorize a certain kind of play and, because of their similarities, call them Cycle Plays. Cycle Plays were written in a certain time period, thus forming a genre. They all involve townspeople, guilds and the Church. They all seek to retell sacred time, while traveling to spots that have built sets prepared for the show around the town. Since the category has been developed and has several examples to give a ‘feeling’ for what a Cycle Play is, a comparison can be made. To test another sort of play against the tenets of the Cycle Play category is now easy. But the trick with the Ikhernofret stela is that the motive here is not to convince the reader that it is a Cycle Play, but rather that it is a play or theatre like the Cycle Plays. The Ikhernofret stela has enough similarities to the Cycle Plays that if one can consider the individual Cycle Plays theatre, they must also consider the Ikhernofret stela theatre as well.


11 Ibid., see Appendix A.
The Comparison

The Abydos Passion Play, as the Ikhernofret stela is called by Brockett, has a great many similarities to the Cycle Plays of England, but specifically, four similarities that can relate to our definitions of theatre. Both concern religious texts, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, as well as audience in general, and traveling to sacred spots in the city in which the event is happening, which can represent the idea that life is a journey and a cycle.

Although the length and scope of the dramas varied widely, they all dealt with the same basic subject matter: God’s ordering of the existence as revealed in the Bible, the Apocrypha, legends about biblical figures and saints, writings of the church fathers, and collections of sermons.

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12 See Brockett, 9.
13 Thank you to Michael Lyon for additional insights.
14 Brockett, 94. Even in the Cycle Plays there were just barely enough similarities to group them together.
The Cycle Plays had “imitations,” as Plato and Aristotle have defined it. Many Biblical figures were played by guild members who were urged to be worthy of their role. When the Cycle Plays were being performed, everyone had the day off and they all participated to show their loyalty to the church. This was demonstrated by receiving Communion in the morning in order to prepare them for their service. This action ‘saved’ all those who participated, as it represented Christ’s atonement for all mankind. Therefore the Christian Cycle Plays included ‘something sacred and mythical . . . of religious action,’ but the desired results were to ‘save’ the person and thus change them. Does that make it ritual? Brockett defines the Cycle Plays as “a less elaborate secular theatre.” Although the Cycle Plays are also referred to as “religious plays” they are, on the same page, referred to as “secular drama.” The word ritual is not applied to the Cycle Plays, neither is it even mentioned; but according to Schechner’s definition, these plays should be categorized as ritual especially since the participants—players and viewers—were re-enacting Sacred Time.

The Ikhernofret stela is also about a religious function. This festival was held in honor of the god Osiris at the Osiris temple in the sacred city of Abydos. The text is the description of the Osiris festival procession run by the temple priests. “I made the hour-priests of the temple [diligent] at their tasks, and made them know the ritual of every day.” When Ikhernofret, “the Prince, Count, Royal Seal-bearer, Sole Companion, Steward of the Gold-House, Steward of the Silver-House, Overseer of the Treasury,” wrote his

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15 Michael Lyon’s review.
16 Michael Lyon’s review.
17 Megan Sanborn, lectures, August to November 2000.
18 Brockett, 107.
19 Michael Lyon’s review.
20 From translation of the Ikhernofret stela.
21 Lichtheim, 99.
stela it was after “survey[ing] the works for the preparation of the Osiris-feasts” he also does such things as clothing “the god, in my office of Master-of-Secrets” and “act[ing] as ‘his beloved Son’ for Osiris.” In order to do these things he must have been a priest because he had to have access to the temple; only priests had access to the sanctuaries where some of these rites would have been performed. Not only did Ikhernofret perform rites as a substitute for the king, but so did the king. “Sethos I is himself represented as Osiris,” and “this play was [also] enacted by priests.” The scenes would have included the “re-enacting of the events of the life and death of the god.” This text fits Plato and Aristotle’s definitions of theatre because of the actions of the priests and Ikhernofret himself, as well as fulfilling the investigative, judgmental, sacred and supernatural part of Turner’s definition. But Schechner’s definition does not fit.

Under Schechner’s definition, theatre is fun, but results come from ritual. These words, applied directly to the Ikhernofret stela, define it as having no theatricality because its purpose is to effect resurrection, but there was great fun during the revelry of the procession.

A rivalry between Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi, two very famous playwrights, suggests that Schechner’s definition is invalid, and even wrong. His definition has failed to define certain theatrical events and genres as “theatre,” although these events have always been called theatre. Schechner’s definition would venture to suggest that these two men are not playwrights, an obvious fallacy.

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22 See Ikhernofret stela, ln. 15, 11.
23 John Gee, Egyptologist, lecture, from August to November 2000.
25 Ibid., 121.
26 Michael Lyon’s review.
Both of these men wrote plays during the time of the Commedia dell’arte (1545–eighteenth century).\textsuperscript{27} Goldoni started writing plays that addressed issues in order to bring about change, while also making the people laugh at moral jokes. Gozzi wanted to stick to the traditional Commedia dell’arte form which was, by this time, empty of any substance and existed only to make the audience laugh. So Gozzi had more emphasis on vulgar laughing moments, the ‘lazzi,’ which is a principle of Commedia dell’arte. He also tried to raise the audience’s level of morality by trying to offend with his plays and vulgar jokes.\textsuperscript{28} The controversy in this example was about levels of morality versus tradition, but the fact is that both men were trying to increase morality while allowing the audience to enjoy themselves. Are these men not considered playwrights then because their work desired results as well as fun? Schechner’s definition would suggest that they are not, and it would therefore also suggest the Ikhernofret stela is not theatre for it, too, was performed with specific results in mind.

The major theme and intention of the Ikhernofret stela is resurrection, which comes after the experience of life and death, forming a cycle of life, death and rebirth into a life very similar to the one experienced here but glorified. The Ikhernofret stela does not tell us about Osiris’ birth. We learn about it from other sources explaining the Osiris Myth. From one such book as this we learn that

\begin{quote}

it is thought [by scholars] that the acts mentioned on this [Ikhernofret] stela are given in the right order, since they are compatible with what is known of the Osiris Myth. . . . The ceremony was performed for the benefit of the deceased
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Brockett, 143–44. We do not know when the exact dates are but it had over 200 years of influence.

\textsuperscript{28} Megan Sanborn, lecture. We know little about these men and their intentions from their texts. Our information comes mostly from outside sources.
king and for the eternal resurrection of all worshipers of Osiris . . . [and] the complex of rooms dedicated to Osiris must surely have been the secret place where the resurrection of the god was experienced; here, the dramatic ritual reached its climax.29

Osiris was the “ruler of the netherworld” and “was the night form of the sun,” or the moon.30 With each month’s new moon, it was believed that Osiris had been resurrected, and with time Osiris became the principle of resurrection—his name and the word becoming one and the same. The reason Ikhernofret would have “act[ed] as ‘his beloved Son’ for Osiris” was because Sethos III, the king at that time, would have acted as Osiris the god, so that Sethos III could receive resurrection, a benefit of performing these rites for Osiris every year. But every king needed a ‘son’ to perform those rites for/to him, and in this text the “sole companion,” Ikhernofret, was that ‘son.’ The Egyptian Pharaohs desired “life, stability, dominion and health like Re for eternity.”31 The only way to share in that eternal life that Re, the sun god, had was to be resurrected. This is how the cycle relates to Osiris, who was synonymous with resurrection.

In a like manner, some of the Cycle Plays emphasized Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. One might say that the Cycle Plays were to effect change for the common people and that the performance in Abydos was only for the Pharaoh and therefore cannot be theatre, but at the time the Ikhernofret stela was written the performance actually applied to all in attendance.32

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29 See David, 121.
31 The “life, stability, dominion, and health like Re for eternity,” the most common formula, can be found in almost any Egyptian temple wall motif that talks about a Pharaoh, but its frequency should not blind us to its importance.
Efficacy (to effect transformations)\(^{33}\) was desired after this festival ended, but some of Schechner’s tenets of ritual again, do not apply. The “performer [was not] possessed, [or] in [a] trance,” rather the priests were always conscious of what they were doing and who was around them.\(^{34}\) Turner’s definition, with its call for rationale (investigation, judgement) and belief (sacred character of religious action), is satisfied in that there was action and consequence—perform the rites, receive resurrection. Faith in the “supernatural” and the sacred rites was also needed because only the priests could see and do them, and the people had to have faith that they would work on their behalf. In addition, the priests only acted in that priestly capacity for one month out of every four. The rest of the time they worked their land or were craft makers like everyone else. In actuality, much of the audience were at some time or another the performing priests.\(^{35}\)

The final similarity to discuss is the audience itself, and tied up in the audience is the issue of travel. By the Twelfth Dynasty “the pilgrimage to Abydos was now a very important feature of religious life.” A sacred cemetery now called the Umm el Qa’Ab, “Mother of potshards,” was the destination the priests traveled to while performing the ceremony written on the Ikhernofret stela. One approaches Umm el Qa’Ab by the “Pilgrim’s Way” or the wadi.\(^{36}\) Today the wadi is still the worn, dirt path that it was in the Twelfth Dynasty, and on either side are tall ridges, somewhat like hills, that the audience would stand upon to watch. It is called the “Pilgrim’s Way” because of all the devout followers who came to worship Osiris.\(^{37}\)

\(^{33}\) See Schechner, 120.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) John Gee, lecture.

\(^{36}\) See Lichtheim, pl. X.

The desert was then already crowded with tomb. . . . On the days of annual pilgrimage, which coincided with the great Feast of Osiris, the necropolis became like an overcrowded city. . . . The tardy . . . would have had to share space with vendors of ‘souvenirs of abydos.’

The people came from all over to witness the grand event, which had significant religious value, and had to fight for space with vendors. Usually vendors do not try to sell things at events that are not for entertainment. So significant were the sacred areas those who walked in the wadi on this sacred festival day and were not “priests going about their business” would be burned. This area was one of the most sacred spots in Egypt and no one was allowed to walk there unless they had clearance. Clearance was only given to priests who were performing their priestly functions at the time they walked there. There were actually guards stationed at the four corners of the wadi to keep trespassers out, and if the guards let people in who were not supposed to be there they could be burned too. (Being burned to death was considered one of the cruelest and most shameful ways to die because the Egyptians wanted their bodies for the afterlife, as we know by the mummies that are still preserved today.)

Just as the Egyptians had sacred spots in Abydos, the medieval people had sacred spots in their towns and cities, and everyone came into the city and the cathedral the days the Cycle Plays were performed. At the time of the Cycle Plays there was no such thing as the Catholic Church, the Church of England or any other Christian religion. There was only one religion—the Church.

The Cycle Plays were a grand event. They were performed with long intervals between them. Sometimes that interval could

38 Ibid., 28.
40 Ibid.
41 John Gee, lecture.
be ten years, and when it was performed it was performed several times throughout the city on that day, but not again for another ten years, unlike the plays we go to see today that play almost everyday for months. The medieval people got the days of performance off because they were holy days.\textsuperscript{42} It is logical to assume that because of the infrequency of these plays the shows were a huge social event. Everybody already had the day off to go to these plays, and they went adorned in new clothes designed to be nothing less than impressive. The Cycle Plays were most likely the biggest event of the year, or decade even, and in that way they are very much like the Osiris Festival. No other annual holiday was more important to the ancient Egyptian religion, and since the priests and their families were the audience it was probably the most important social event concerning salvation as well.

This last similarity in defining theatre agrees with Richard Schechner’s tenets of theatrical events. He asks if the audience is participating or watching. In the Ikhernofret stela, they are doing both. While the play is happening those up on the ridges of the wadi are bystanders, they do not interrupt or participate in any physical way, but every couple of months many of those bystanders become priests. Maybe he is a businessman or an artist or a shoemaker, but when his turn comes to participate as a priest in this festival he takes on the role of actor. But does that constitute ‘participation’ as Schechner meant it? According to his definition of theatre an event must have the tenets of one or the other.\textsuperscript{43} But in this situation, tenets from both sides fit. With Schechner’s definition we may not be able to define the Ikhernofret stela because it appears to be both theatre and ritual. Plato and Aristotle would say that it is a play because the actors ‘imitated’ someone at some time. Turner’s definition deals specifically with the text, and so is applicable to the matter concerning actors.

\textsuperscript{42} Brockett, 106.
\textsuperscript{43} See Appendix A.
Conclusion

Is the Ikhernofret stela theatrical or theatre? By the definitions used, some pieces of the Ikhernofret stela are theatrical. Some are not. Two of the definitions seem to say that the stela is theatre on a regular basis, but Schechner’s definition seems to concur only on the point of view of the audience. The only trouble is that in each similar situation the full view of the similarities cannot be seen without help from those who have written about the two subjects under comparison, and that makes it hard to judge concretely—the very reason why this controversy is still alive today.

The ultimate decision lies with the scholar and reader, though it seems that to the Egyptians this religious text, when enacted in the Festival, would have been theatrical. We cannot, and may never, fully understand their culture and therefore their absolute definition of theatre, for which there is no word in Egyptian. The Egyptians thought about life in completely different ways, in contrast to modern thought processes. Because of this, making comparisons between the twenty-first century lifestyle and the ancient Egyptian is extremely difficult and involves the arranging of many puzzle pieces. It would be as if two people were speaking two different languages with no translator. Communication is impossible without some level of understanding. Understanding requires similar mindsets and backgrounds. This common starting point of experience is sometimes called a language of intelligibility—some way of making up for a dissimilar view of life. In reality, the modern student cannot have a full comprehension of Egyptian society. Already, few can agree on the subject of what theatre is, deciphering this enigma is only compounded when ancient history is added in.
# Appendix A

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