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**DESCENT INTO THE DUAT: EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN DIASPORA AND  
HAUNTOLOGY IN IMMERSIVE THEATER**

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by

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## Table of Contents

<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE FIRST NIGHT .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>THE SECOND NIGHT .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THE THIRD NIGHT .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>THE FOURTH NIGHT.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>THE FIFTH NIGHT.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>THE SIXTH NIGHT .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>THE SEVENTH NIGHT.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b><i>AMDUAT: THE 12 HOURS OF RA</i> .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>122</b>

## List of Figures

1) <i>Isis spells the Soldier and Agent into a waltz</i> , feat. Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton.....	10
2) <i>The American Agent and Egyptian Soldier hold a gun to the Curator's head</i> , feat. Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton, Luka Salib, Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange.....	12
3) <i>Sinbad and Ali Baba face off</i> , feat. Claudia Pilch-Caton, Angus Leslie.....	19
4) Al Naddaha lures Fouad, feat. Celeste Legrange, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton....	23
5) <i>Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra</i> Ground Plan.....	28
6) <i>The Curator tells a knock knock joke</i> , feat. Luka Salib, Claudia Pilch-Caton, Angus Leslie.....	34
7) <i>The Curator is wrapped in linen bandages by the baboons</i> , feat. Luka Salib, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton.....	38
8) <i>The Curator declares their identity</i> , feat. Luka Salib, Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange, Drew Vander Wheele, Emmanuel Ross Hartway, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton...	41

## Abstract

# **Descent into the Duat: Egyptian-American Diaspora and Hauntology in Immersive Theater**

Laura Boutros

Through an immersive multi-media performance, my project has situated my diasporic Egyptian-American identity by repossessing Egypt's appearance in Western media and museum spaces through interrupting the narrative of the Ancient Egyptian story of Ra's twelve-hour Duat journey of death and rebirth. In doing so, I examined the nonlinearity of Ancient Egyptian myth by creating a new myth and narrative that captures the liminal perspective of my multicultural experience. Using "the mummy" as the lens through which death is examined, audiences have been called to examine their relationship with Egyptian aesthetics—especially in the museum space where mummies are most often seen—as I unwrapped and stitched parts of my identity to the spectator's experience. As the twelve hours progressed, time and reality became more complicated as the digital reacted to the live and vice versa as fantasy became reality, and reality, fantasy. This project answers the questions: who am I and how do I distill this identity into an experience through a critical framework?

## Acknowledgements

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# Descent into the Duat: Egyptian-American Diaspora and Hauntology in Immersive Theater

## Introduction

The Christian Bible opens:

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.<sup>1</sup>

The first day of diaspora for an Egyptian-American begins from the moment they are born—when their parents begin to greet the baby in Arabic while the hospital staff crow to each other in English—and that newborn continues into a life spent parsing out the Arabic from the English, the East from the West, and the fiction from fact. Many days later, I, as an Egyptian American, began to address some of this diaspora through the writing and directing of an immersive theatrical experience called *Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra*. My work attempts to restitute Egyptian aesthetics from the West and recraft these narratives through an informed lens. Staged in the eXperimental Theater of UC Santa Cruz, *Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra* (A12) was framed as a ‘docent’ tour, with the audience called to transition into the Duat—the ancient Egyptian afterlife—and interrogate their status as “mummies,” beings that

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<sup>1</sup> (Authors n.d., Genesis 1)

retain consciousness of their prior life or, in the case of the audience, consciousness of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> While experiencing mummification and rebirth, parts of my own life are sewn into the dramatic exploration as a means of foregrounding the sincere human occurrences in the supernatural tales and addressing my diaspora as an Egyptian-American.

*Amduat* finds its foundation in my desperate need to understand not only myself, but why immersive artistic experiences have been more fulfilling to me than sedentary audience engagements. Thus, I began to separate light from darkness through, first, research and writing, and then through directing and designing a world of my own. I questioned what it means to be stripped of all contexts of your history and grow up “creating” a relationship with my ancestry across the globe. Using what I know of the West, as my main frame of reference, I filtered American media depicting Egypt and the autoethnography gained from being raised by Egyptian immigrants. Drawing on themes of circularity and liminality, Ra’s nightly twelve-hour journey to renew himself and the sun was pieced together with the Curator’s journey to understand themselves. What results from this line of questioning, it seems, is a fragmented and layered group of choices that must literally be unwrapped throughout one’s life.

*A12* is broken down into twelve scenes, to match the twelve hours of Ra’s journey, with an additional orientation to the museum and this world preceding the start of the ‘Hours’. The Museum Orientation, held in the lobby of the theater

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<sup>2</sup> (Gilroy 2019, 179)

welcomes the audience and vaguely warns them of what is to come. The audience is then loosed into the main playing space to explore and interact with the other tour guides. Hour 1 - The Jubilation of the Baboons, introduces the audience to a pair of clowning baboons that become the changeable human touch points in *Amduat*. Here, the Pharaohs and gods also begin to introduce themselves, and the Curator and Director argue over the manifestation of the show, outside of time. Hour 2 covers the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the importance of the various languages used by rulers in Egypt, and Cleopatra's successes as ruler. The Curator and Director continue their argument from Hour 1, debating the appearances of colonialism in their museum. In Hour 3, Sinbad and Ali Baba argue over their 'Arabian Nights,' as their tales from 1001 Nights are dissected and the Curator wonders about editing dreams and history in a nightmare about a mummy. Movie mummies and Egyptian representation in media are chronicled in Hour 4, while the Curator and Director carry on their debate, speaking of their inability to be categorized as Western or Eastern. Hour 5 covers the tricky dichotomies of being Egyptian-American in a post 9/11 and ISIS Western world. A somber meditation, Hour 6 asks the audience to declare their innocence to Ma'at in the Hall of Judgement while the Curator debates who he is through knock jokes. We return from intermission to Hour 7; Ra has now awoken to lead the audience through the mists of the Wernes where Al Naddaha lurks. Stuck in the digital now, the Curator tells stories of his grandfathers who inspired him to make art while Ra offers moral quandaries for judgement. Hour 8 studies obelisks, specifically Hatshepsut's obelisk at Karnak, the Washington Monument, and the

Vatican Obelisk. Picking up where they left off in Hour 4, the Curator and Director now debate the function of legacy in depictions of Egypt, and the supremacy that comes with it. In Hour 9, the ten plagues of Egypt offer a visceral view into movement of sin, while the Curator questions his belief in higher powers. Hour 10 covers two different processions of a cache of famous mummies, interrogating the silencing of the common Egyptians in their transfer. The argument of the Director and Curator cuts off this Hour, finally taking center stage. The Director grants the Curator's wish of staging his show, but not without accusing him of having an inflated ego first. Moving forward, the Curator questions his fear of heights and his urge to leap while Ra and Apophis tell the story of St. Mary of Zeitoun in Hour 11. Judgement finally arrives in Hour 12 as the Curator finally claims his name and identity in a culmination of declarations, as the Pharaohs had to start the show. In short, *Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra* is the myth of the Curator.

Now every good myth needs a monster, something 'unhuman' that people love to hate, and naturally, my Egyptian myth included a mummy. But the real monster of *Amduat* was not the mummy, not really. In fact, mummies are just well-preserved dead people—the Victorians and Hollywood turned them into monsters. The real monsters are those that uphold the current status quo of institutions and prevent them from progressing. Western museums or universities—both institutions tout the ways of tomorrow, the way forward from oppression while upholding the legacies of white supremacy. The real monsters sustain the efforts of colonialism while hiding the tough labor done by people of color in their underbellies. *That* supremacy, and

those monsters are what *I* fear, that thing that goes bump in the daytime, because only during the cover of night have marginalized people been able to navigate and negotiate ways to defeat these institutions. The night is where the injuries from the day can be healed and worked through and as God created the world in seven days, I created *Amduat* in seven nights—seven moments of synthesis that work towards making the mummy content in its identity as both a dead body and living being. Seven nights of searching for identity while a monster chased me.

## The First Night

Creating balance in my Egyptian American diaspora required a great deal of contextualization. Historically, I drew from Andreas Schweizer's *The Sungod's Journey Through the Netherworld* and Jan Assmann's *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* to best depict a potentially historically accurate representation of Ra's netherworld journey. Schweizer's text was particularly useful in ordering space and deciding which rituals were integral to my work while Assmann offered valuable context for the more ritualistic aspects. Dramaturgically, Charlie Gere mentions in "The Hauntology of the Digital Image" that French film critic and theorist André Bazin "propose[s] that 'at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex,' a need to preserve the living body against death and the flux of temporality."<sup>3</sup> Bazin's mummy complex is in direct conflict with the fluid nature of Ancient Egyptian mythos as Schweizer explains; for me to create a fixed structure would be to work in opposition to the source material. Assmann states, even, that these myths were "not a coherent story but rather a sequence of scenes" and that "the only texts that furnish us with a continuous narrative are written in Greek, by Diodorus and especially by Plutarch. But in the coherence of their narratives, in their care about a single, meaningful, stimulating story, these authors seem to have strayed far from the Egyptian form of myth."<sup>4</sup> To create an ordered piece would be to betray the very thing I wish to grasp—my Egyptian identity. *Amduat* options to the

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<sup>3</sup> (Gere 2016, 205)

<sup>4</sup> (Assmann 2005, 23)

audience, four tour experiences in varying degrees of linearity to emphasize Assmann's interpretation of Egyptian myth structure. Each of the fixed scenes, as generally unrelated folktales, also emphasize the lack of coherence, with only the Curator's search for identity linking the events together. Drawing on Western dramatic structure, the Curator is put through a version of the "Hero's Journey," of answering the call to action, failing at the deepest point of the journey, and returning home once more as an enlightened man. It should also be noted that the "Hero's Journey" also finds purchase in myths of Egypt's Middle Kingdom, in writings such as "Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" as well.<sup>5</sup> However, a great deal of resistance is put against the dramatic journey as fabricated myths threaten the 'order' of the narrative which emphasizes the disordered feelings of diaspora.

In this work, I am defining diaspora as my feeling of displacement both in America and in Egypt, unable to feel comfortable occupying either space entirely. In cobbling together my thoughts on diaspora, Stuart Hall's writing on identity became a guide: "Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption"<sup>6</sup> and later on, more pressingly "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions."<sup>7</sup> This suturing of my fragmented identity was the guiding force behind my project. *Poetic Operations* by micha cárdenas introduces a

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<sup>5</sup> (Lichtheim, et al. 1973)

<sup>6</sup> (Hall n.d., 3)

<sup>7</sup> (Hall n.d., 4)

similar concept of cutting, stitching, and shifting, stating that “While trans people of color in digital media make shifting visible as a survival strategy, it is also an existential condition for everyone. Like the variables in an algorithm, we are in flux within a set of parameters.”<sup>8</sup> Both Hall’s fragmentation and cárdenas’ suturing are lenses through which to interrogate the balance of my diasporic identity. How to combine my Egyptian and American heritage without pigeonholing myself in one or the other? The boundaries between heritage sites are broken within my body, each territory encroaching on the other in every decision, every lived aspect, never able to settle their dispute. Balance, it seems, is unattainable, or at the very least, constantly shift weight in the *attempt* to balance.

Later on, in “Who Needs Identity?,” Hall provides another answer, “identities arise...partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmic field.”<sup>9</sup> This idea motivated the use of mythological texts as the crux of the real pieces of history, both personal and at large. The fantasy becomes the cross stitch between myth and my truth. Stitching autoethnography with historical ethnography through the museum space is reminiscent of cárdenas’ explanation of “travesti” in that it “could be read as describing the act of cross-dressing the museum, or of transforming the museum through healing rituals of performance.”<sup>10</sup> Hauntology is highlighted by the performance of Egyptian rituals preserved and uplifted by the museum space. The act

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<sup>8</sup> (cárdenas 2022, 18) It is also worth noting that I am not trans.

<sup>9</sup> (Hall n.d., 4)

<sup>10</sup> (cárdenas 2022, 6)

of bringing the mummified artifacts to life “cross-dress” the space of colonization into one of glorification. Cross-dressing the museum creates a fantasy where the identity is graspable, definable, and whole.

I put a great deal of effort into emphasizing Egyptian mythmaking, and foregrounding the new mythmaking being done by current Egyptians. One of the goals of *Amduat* is to ensure that Egypt does not remain Ancient Egypt and Modern Egypt in the minds of audience members, but to acknowledge the time in between, when colonialism masqueraded as discovery. It puts diasporic Egyptians in center stage and highlights their little discussed struggles. Outside of content, I want my work to bring entertainment, as I do not believe in shirking amusement for the sake of ‘valuable’ or ‘serious’ art making. Brechtian scholar John Willett proves this concept stating, “Generally there is felt to be a very sharp distinction between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful, but only the second is pleasant... Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse.”<sup>11</sup> My admiration for such things stems from a youth spent in theme parks, learning the behind the scenes of spectacles in shows like *Waterworld* in Universal Studios Hollywood, and experiences like the Backlot Tour in the same park. Not to jump the gun on the conclusion or anything, but a great number of people who witnessed the piece exclaimed their entertainment and education, which helps me to conclude that *Amduat* is certainly a place for learning and amusement.

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<sup>11</sup> (Willett 1957, 72-73)



*Isis spells the Soldier and Agent into a waltz, feat. Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton*

## The Second Night

The distortion of media, the shifting of perspective, the grappling with the diasporic space—all are modes of interrogation I utilized in *A12*. The depictions of trauma, without fetishizing it, made from a singular personal angle offers a chance to “...bring audiences into those experiences—not to build empathy, but to work toward solidarity” as micha cárdenas writes in *Poetic Operations*.<sup>12</sup> British translator and scholar John Willett explains a similar theory when synthesizing Brechtian technique,

As the ‘background’ came to the front of the stage so people’s activity was subjected to criticism. Right and wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it.<sup>13</sup>

Each time the audience is called to decide, suddenly, they are forced into the position of the theater makers, to literally speak up and effect change with a live body.

Footage was intercut reporting on 9/11 and various ISIS attacks with a live actor’s calling to reclaim the name ‘Isis’ and fabricate live breaking news in regard to various terrorist attacks. The scene is modeled after interrogations condoned by the Patriot Act, calling for The Curator to choose a nationality, but asks the audience to literally pick one for the protagonist. Passive observation no longer becomes an option; the

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<sup>12</sup> (cárdenas 2022, 23)

<sup>13</sup> (Willett 1957, 72)

audience must take ownership of the result of the West's interference in the Middle East. The Curator cries to them:

Well? Who wins? *Isis* or *ISIS*. Soldier or Agent? Egyptian or American? Don't prolong the inevitable. My life is in your hands.<sup>14</sup>

In truth, the question is whose fault is it that the name *Isis* was turned into a weapon and no longer useable to express familial pride? Further even, if I am to be considered both, how is it possible to not be warring inside myself?



<sup>2</sup>*The American Agent and Egyptian Soldier hold a gun to the Curator's head*, feat. Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton, Luka Salib, Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange

The topics of my project, of death, mythology, and rebirth in Ancient Egypt, brought to “life” in a performance space are an implementation of hauntology. As

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<sup>14</sup> See Pg 84

described by Charlie Gere in “The Hauntology of the Digital Image,” hauntology is a concept introduced by Derrida as something “neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes’. [In media there is] always a trace of something either potentially or actually absent, all representations are hauntological.”<sup>15</sup> What is absent in my work are the souls of those which are being represented by the actors—the souls of gods. These are unknowable creatures or forces of nature that I approximated through the bringing together of a number of myths and infused them with my handiwork. Thus, my hands also haunt the performance space, my essence and stories inserted, even my own handprint, but my physical body is not literally present within the diegesis. Unknowable is the identity, which haunts the Curator through the digital representations of Egypt as that is the way the country has been synthesized in his life, as my true self is unknowable to the audience. As different mediatizations bombard the Curator, he rips apart his consciousness, dies, and is reborn in the digital for the second act, all to find what haunts him.

Later, in “The Hauntology of the Digital Image,” Gere states, “The digital image is not more hauntological than its analog predecessors, but it does reveal the degree to which representations of any sort are more complex and less immediate than one might think.”<sup>16</sup> Media design performs as an actor as much as the physical bodies of my cast in *Amduat*, curating media from Egypt and the West as a further stitching together of my identity and mythos. I went through much debate over

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<sup>15</sup> (Gere 2016, 204)

<sup>16</sup> (Gere 2016, 204)

revealing my physical body in the show—putting a face to the words being spoken—but I soon found that the revelation of my physical body could or should never happen. So many of layers of representation had already been built—The Curator as Ra, The Curator as prisoner, as vulnerable, as unwavering—to interrupt that is to destroy the carefully crafted balance I sought to create in the first place. To keep order, amongst the interchanging of identities, adding a third dimension would tip the scales completely to chaos. And so I had to obscure myself in the Curator, bury myself so deeply that he, too, became a fragment of my identity rather than a summation. I wrapped and sutured myself into all of these characters, with bits and pieces poking out from the bandages of each one, knowledge of ‘me’ being the only way to unwrap those aspects.

Returning to mediatization, if the live becomes indiscernible from the mediated, it brings to question what will remain true to the consciousness of the audience. They will be haunted by the lack of linearity. Moreover, these ideas, and thus *A12*, operate within Postdramatic theater, “abandoning the attempt to *represent* reality from a single perspective within a fixed dramatic cosmos.”<sup>17</sup> Given the layers of story—my personal ethnography, the museum, the Pharaoh’s tours, and the gods’ stories—there is more than one perspective on their telling. The addition of arguments from various philosophers and academics within the text also emphasizes this point. New Egyptian myth creation, thus, is postmodern, decolonial, and perhaps even altermodern. To operate within a context in which technology is used to

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<sup>17</sup> (Crossley 2018, 10)

complicate time and space creates a new myth—my myth. Again, this concept also hearkens back to *Poetic Operations*' cutting, stitching, and shifting in that the new narrative has shifted into a conflicting temporality. Derrida calls “the virtualization of space and time” as I have through projection, “realtime” and “deferred time” which capture the difference between “living to the nonliving, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, *Amduat* harnesses real and deferred time to suture the legacy of Egypt and my identity by foregrounding the ghosts of both.

Take Hour 10, for instance. Tracking the procession of the same cache of mummies, the lineage of transferring mummies has held a multiplicity of tones and memory drivers. The 2021 procession evoked the long-lost ritual grandeur of Ancient Egypt, mixed with the mediatization of the 21st Century. The opulence was specifically derived to attract the West, given that the text descriptors were written in English and the locals barred from the event. In short, the ghost of Ancient Egypt, and the colonialism that destroyed it are all present in realtime. *Al Mummia*, the other procession mentioned in Hour 10, shows the original procession of the same cache of mummies. Nonwestern and lacking opulence, *Al Mummia*'s procession sits in stark contrast to the modern event. Also, as a narrative rather than factual documentation, time and reality in the procession are necessarily altered. The dramatic cosmos are unfixed by the two processions coexisting in the same Hour but stitched together to make one myth.

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<sup>18</sup> (Gere 2016, 223)

## The Third Night

To be in dialogue with other artworks that critique the Museum as an institution, one must track those legacies. A number of artists have used the institution itself to satirically foreground the problematic power dynamics that come from sterile environments rooted in violence. A few such artists, such as Andrea Fraser in “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk” and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena in “The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West” place themselves directly in the museum to highlight the complacency of museumgoers and the unquestioned reverence for such institutions. More specific to Egypt, I sought inspiration from more pointed interactions with the archives of Egypt strewn across the globe. One of the main artifacts is the bust of Queen Nefertiti held in the Neues Museum in Berlin. A number of artists interact with her image, and she has become a figurehead for those working in the African American diaspora. Often claimed as broadly African, this aligns her narrative as aligning Egypt with the colonial ramifications of the American slave-trade of the African West rather than the cultural pillaging and indentured servitude Egypt was actually subjected to. Claiming Egyptians as Africans, while geographically accurate, often results in Egyptian erasure. This topic is much grander than what can be covered here, but worth noting that the continent we call Africa was also decided by the West.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> More on this from scholars such as Jussi Laine, Emmanuel N. Amadife, and James W. Warhola.

One of the more pointed responses to colonial theft of the bust of Queen Nefertiti is the work of German-Iraqi artist Nora Al-Badri and German artist Jan Nikolai Nelles. Together,

In February of 2016 [the] two artists secretly 3D-scanned the heavily guarded bust of Queen Nefertiti at the Neues Museum in Berlin and released the files to the public as a free download. [They] framed their clandestine project as an act of cultural repatriation since the museum kept scans of the bust hidden from the public and even banned visitors from taking photos of it.<sup>20</sup>

Calling their work, The Other Nefertiti,

Later they displayed a 3D printed reproduction of Nefertiti's bust in Cairo as part of their project, suggesting that only a high-tech heist allowed them to bring this part of Egyptian history back to its rightful place (German archaeologists took it from Egypt in 1912 and have never given it back. Ever since Germany has consistently denied loan requests from the African country's cultural institutions).<sup>21</sup>

Their scan is as greatly detailed as the Neues museum's scan and through the publication of their theft, they highlighted the irony in the institution's indignation around theft of property. However, reporting on the event surfaced new evidence or rumors of evidence that the scans Al-Badri and Nelles distributed were made by the museum itself and not the artists. Nevertheless, the result remains the same, as with

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<sup>20</sup> (Voon 2016)

<sup>21</sup> (influencers n.d.)

Ali Baba, the pair “stole” from thieves, and further, through digitization, they were able to translate the digital into physical to give Egypt something tangible as restitution.

The legacy of restitutive Egyptian art is not limited to physicalizing artifacts. VJ Um Amel’s *From Gaza to Cairo: Mobilizing the Body Politic* (2013) addresses networked communities turning grief into action, a progression from depiction into synthesis.<sup>22</sup> The work was made in response to the 2010 Egyptian Arab Spring accompanied by the Trayvon Martin verdict, which were both effective, in part, through the use of social media. *From Gaza to Cairo* weaves Egyptian and Western footage to build a tapestry of events, or rather, it cuts and stitches the footage to create an affect beyond classic narrative catharsis. This live performance remixing the social media engagement from the Arab Spring is projected simply on a screen, including the riots in Tahrir Square, a male-bodied person atop a lamppost waiving the Egyptian flag, an unidentified belly-dancer, and an interconnected map naming major cities sound-tracked with classic Arabic vocals and a modern synthesized beat. While these were only a few of the features in this complex work, it paints a vivid, interconnected picture of docile life and violent uprising. The repetitive, often associated with Western science fiction, beats occasionally interrupted by longer strokes, lulls the audience into a sense of unease, especially as the singer’s voice sits above the percussion untouched. The fish-eye lens and overlaid images that mar the surface of professional footage and graphics forces the audience to be simultaneously

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<sup>22</sup> (Amel 2013)

too far and too close to the action. VJ Um Amel pushes the audience to confront that violence while reminding them that these are the same people capable of creating exceptional art and beauty through architecture and performance.



<sup>3</sup>*Sinbad and Ali Baba face off*, feat. Claudia Pilch-Caton, Angus Leslie

In *Amduat*, this same synthesis of violence and beauty became the grounds for Hours 3. In Hour 3 - Arabian Nights/Arab Spring, the scene centers the clean, child-pleasing animations of Disney's *Aladdin* and Dreamworks' *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. The imagery mimics the actions of Sinbad and Ali Baba on stage—moments of sword fighting and violence—but soon the media becomes displaced by footage of the riots in Tahrir Square. Suddenly the bodies on screen become real, and the beauty of the Orientalist animations can no longer cover up the harsh reality of modern Egypt. Time is truncated for the audience by crashing together 16th Century piracy and 21st Century civil unrest, but both hold legacies of hopefulness alongside

their violence. The Arab Spring removed the dictator Mubarak from power, giving Egyptians everywhere hope of a new governmental structure, while these pirates promised exceptional folktales of adventure while nurturing the exoticized aesthetic of the Ottoman Middle East. In short, Hour 3 attempts to subvert the Orientalism that was trained into Western youth of my generation.

## The Fourth Night

It would be impossible to discuss the politics of putting Egypt on stage without addressing Orientalism as discussed by Edward Said, scholar of comparative literature and popularizer of the term. “The Orient,” Said writes, “was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”<sup>23</sup> Haunting becomes associated with depictions of Egypt as a means of preserving the romantic image of Ancient or Victorian Egypt for modern audiences. Who or what haunts spaces in which Orientalism is battled? Who or what dies in that process?

For context, Said defines the Orient as,

...not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.<sup>24</sup>

In essence, all things—math, science literature, etc.—were taken, rewritten and claimed for the West. As someone born and raised in the West, one might even say that I, too, am participating in Orientalism to create *Amduat*. In fact, as it is considered “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” that qualifies my mythmaking as such.<sup>25</sup> What is not accounted for in Said’s writing, however, is intention. My intention in restructuring the Orient for the West is an act

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<sup>23</sup> (Said 1979, 1)

<sup>24</sup> (Said 1979, 1)

<sup>25</sup> (Said 1979, 3)

of artistic restitution. In staging Orientalism, as with Hour 3, there is an effort to overshadow colonial aesthetics with Egyptian self-advocacy i.e. the Curator speaking over Sinbad and Ali Baba, and the Arab Spring drowning out *Aladdin*. The scene ends, however, with Sinbad and Ali Baba, played by white actors, silencing the Curator to emphasize that this is a constant battle and white supremacy is still pervasive despite efforts against it.

The legacy of silencing Egyptians is long and, as with Orientalism, finds its roots in Western supremacy. Said gives an example:

There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her.<sup>26</sup>

Al Naddaha in Hour 7 is a very similar character. As a siren figure, she represents men's lusts and Ra tells of her story. A man speaks for her for the majority of the scene, only allowing her to utter Arabic phrases, or call out names. Even within the sound design, the vocalizations are not made from the actor's body, but drawn from the designer's voice, silencing her further. Now none of these follies were purposeful, as I had written the scene a year prior to reading Said or knowing that the Curator would become male, but in doing so, it proves my Western upbringing—that I too, "fall into the same aesthetics as these Westerners."<sup>27</sup> This struggle with superiority is

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<sup>26</sup> (Said 1979, 6)

<sup>27</sup> See Pg 102

especially difficult given that “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.”<sup>28</sup>



<sup>4</sup>*Al Naddaha lures Fouad*, feat. Celeste Legrange, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton

By placing these moments on stage that I did not live, but bore witness to despite my distance, it calls into question what level of Western supremacy I have inserted into *Amduat*. When my primary point of reference—my parents—have now lived in America longer than they lived in Egypt, does that mean that I am now silencing primary sources by making my voice louder than theirs?

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<sup>28</sup> (Said 1979, 7)

## The Fifth Night

When making informed art, it is also important to study foundational works in a given medium—in this case, notable immersive theatrical works. Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* is a loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that emblematized a subgenre of experimental theater known as “immersive theater.”<sup>29</sup> Moving through a series of floors in what appears to be a recently remodeled hotel, audiences interact—mostly nonverbally—with interpretations of *Macbeth*’s characters embodying the aesthetics of a 1930’s noir film. In content, “most of the Punchdrunk productions have been based on familiar dramatic texts, [but] these texts are so cut, fragmented, and dispersed that only ‘ghosts and echoes’ of the original text remain. How much of the ‘text’ a spectator experiences will clearly vary.”<sup>30</sup> Barret, one of the directors and designers of Punchdrunk even states about their location choices, “Once [the building has] been empty for a while, ghosts and echoes start to infect it.”<sup>31</sup> This is all to say that the “haunting” of the space and text influences the immersive experiences Punchdrunk curates, by allowing the individual audience member to decide how much of the action they want to discover. Wandering the halls for hours at a time, the actions of *Macbeth* occur three times over during the course of the audience’s stay, with optional objectives granted by particular characters for certain audience members to complete within each cycle. Carlson argues that by granting these additional objectives, as well as through the locative quality of *Sleep No More*,

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<sup>29</sup> (Carlson 2012, 17)

<sup>30</sup> (Carlson 2012, 18)

<sup>31</sup> (Carlson 2012, 18)

Punchdrunk believes that it is “creating, presumably, a more holistic physical and emotional experience”<sup>32</sup> and that by being ‘part’ of the action, the audience is able to better curate their engagement with the work. This curation, however, is “a dynamic at the center of modern reception theory but allowing the audience actually to move about to gain different perspectives calls new attention to this general process.”<sup>33</sup>

*A12* follows both these lineages, of ‘ghosts and echoes’ and ‘immersive curation’ through the use of my personal hauntological connection with museums to structure the “docent” scenes. My family’s most common pastime, especially when abroad, is frequenting museums. I was reading of Van Gogh and Cuneiform tablets at the same time as Harry Potter and Camp Half-Blood and marveling at both in equal measure. It was rare to spend less than three hours, covering every inch of the Louvre or Getty, taking a seat in the middle of yet another Sackler room or gallery only when my feet felt bruised from standing. The challenge in *Amduat* became how to capture that eternal stroll of curiosity from my youth and yet not halt the trajectory of the piece as a whole. What was evidently sacrificed was the leisurely pace. Instead I drew from my time studying abroad under the instruction of Roger Bowdler, ex-Director of Listings at Historic England. Using London’s most popular museums, we spent class time exploring the structure and importance of their most notable works and artifacts and the discourse around their exhibitions. In doing so, Bowdler left no time for air between stops in the galleries as he sped through his tours and had very little patience

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<sup>32</sup> (Carlson 2012, 20)

<sup>33</sup> (Carlson 2012, 22)

for a mind or eye that wandered. I drew his ire often, my eye wandered to the loud, usually Italian<sup>34</sup>, teens shouting across the halls. My rebellious nature ensured that the ‘docent’ scenes captured Bowdler’s breathless trajectory while purposely distracting the eyes and ears of the audience with the reasoning for the gallery’s existence. The intersection of the orderly docent lectures and linear arguments of the Curator and Director crash together to create chaos, much like the Italians had during Bowdler’s tours.

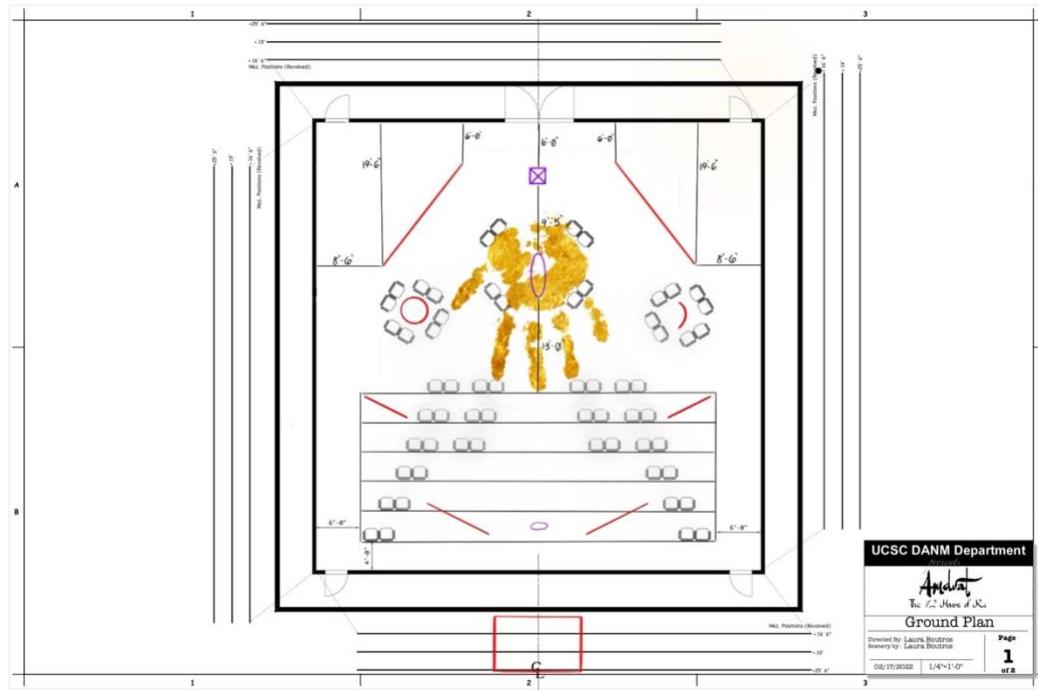
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<sup>34</sup> A statistical marvel, truly

## The Sixth Night

*Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra* was viewable, in person, on the weekends of May 20th-29th in the eXperimental Theater of the University of California, Santa Cruz campus. A recorded version of the project will be available to view online but it offers less choice to the audience in video format. I would consider the online documentation to be more curated and viewed in a way that more closely resembles the script as it was written than the in-person experience. During the show, audiences are grouped based on a specific Pharaoh, and led on a ‘tour’ around the theater. Depending on the tour group, the show can become increasingly fragmented as time progresses, as some Pharaohs guide the tour backwards, leading the audience to only hear fragments of important conversations, unless the audience chooses to wander the space, reject their guide, or find their own paths.

The eXperimental Theater is a black box theater. For *Amduat*, a set of risers took up a third of the space closest to the technical booth. Scenically, the space is meant to resemble a circle, or clock, of sorts. At the twelve o’clock position sits a golden nine-foot obelisk painted to resemble Hatshepsut’s obelisk in the temple of Karnak. Across from it, at the six o’clock position and seated atop the risers is a golden Rosetta Stone. Between the two artifacts is a golden sarcophagus—well more like a coffin made to resemble a sarcophagus—we affectionately dubbed the ‘sarcoffin.’ Atop the risers, pairs of seats fan out in a V to resemble an uncapped pyramid, and on ground level, three sets of diamond-oriented seats make pockets of playing space for the performers. The floor is mostly black, save for the giant golden



<sup>5</sup>Amduat: *The 12 Hours of Ra* Ground Plan  
 hand—my giant golden hand, that covers the center of the stage with the middle finger stretching like the hand of a clock towards the Rosetta Stone.

Projection surfaces sit around the perimeter of the space, acting as the conduit to the “museum out of time” my team and I created. A12’s media design was constructed to live in two worlds: that of mythological Egypt, and that of the Egyptian Wing of the Museum of Historical Preservation and Modification. Physically, the scenic design splits these worlds through the placement of projection surfaces, with the Act 1 divide being upstage of the risers as “mythos” and Downstage as the “institution.” Act 2 begins to confuse this divide as the gods begin to overtake their human avatars in the physical world, and therefore, the media design begins to take on the chaos of humanity in both form and content. When planning this world with the media designer, it was necessary to establish when the spatial divide

was a clear separation, and when the proverbial line was crossed and the two worlds were shifted or uncooperative for the Curator.

The choice of a design team was arguably a harder set of people to nail down. A cross departmental project, *Amduat* was not offered the same level of technical support as other Theater Arts productions. Thus, the hunt for designers and assistants fell mostly to me, and a fair amount of negotiating was levied to convince those designers to join my show. The courting of the crew cost me time, and as the Curator says “the clock moves ever forward”<sup>35</sup> meaning I entered the beginning of production without a full team constructed. Missing a Scenic Designer, a number of design assistants, and a Composer, the rituals of courting continued. I was finally able to secure all but a Scenic Designer, for which those duties fell upon myself.

Within this sphere of work, there were a number of obstacles to their immediate success. We were missing a number of projection surfaces at the start of rehearsal(originally, we planned to use a series of LED televisions to balance the space) and what we had in mind was beyond my scenic abilities. Thus a Scenic builder had to be acquired, and once I had (with very little convincing), I swiftly put him to work building the obelisk and a new Sarcophagus lid. The coffin we began with could not bear the weight of the blocking, so a new one had to be cut, with a special hole made where the face would go so that a miniature speaker could be positioned under the face. Once built, of course, these objects had to be adorned which I did so desperately, without the quality I normally uphold. Time was no friend

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<sup>35</sup> See Pg 66

to their completion, with the last coat of paint drying only hours before final dress.

The lighting design follows a similar line of thought as the media, of creating distinct worlds. ‘Cleaner’ white light was used to mimic the sterile museum environments for moments when the audience members were moving throughout the space. Favoring saturation for the fight lights, the lighting designers pushed for textured orange, which symbolizes the chaotic human world, and clean purple for the orderly mythological world. Act 2 calls for obstruction of vision, as the human world gets thrown into the digital space, so the implementation of fog comes into play for a number of scenes. Coming from the gaps in the risers, the fog curls at waist height, encouraging the performers to float and drift physically in the space, bringing the dreams from Act 1 to life.

The sound design shows the ease with which order can slip into chaos. Knocking is the main motif that echoes throughout the show, in reference to the knock knock joke from the monologue in Hour 6. The raps often come from the inside of the sarcophagus, indicating the hour to the audience, but beat like a heart, steady and continuous until they are cut off by the flow of time. In scenes like Hour 9, simple sounds of Ancient Egypt build into a crescendo of chaos as the ten plagues descend upon our characters, but quickly drop off when the orderly heartbeats of knocking begin. During the docent scenes, the murmuring mimicking a filled museum creates a hypnotic texture that orders the audience with familiarity of space; we know what a museum sounds like, more than we could know the sounds of Biblical Egypt. Musically, the Composer worked to blend classical Egyptian rhythms

with Western form to create a fusion similar to the Egyptian American experience.

The greatest asset and innovation of the *Amduat* rehearsal process was the use of technical qualities—media, sound, and lights—from the beginning of production. Designers witnessing the show being staged and using the work the designers had done to shape the blocking made the whole piece cohesive and precise. Moments of innovation could be cultivated on both sides simultaneously, allowing to the design to live and breathe as deeply as the bodies on stage. Tech from night<sup>36</sup> one also fostered stronger relationships of respect between designer and actor, each guiding the other in their craft from a distance. For example, during the ‘docent’ scenes, the argument that the Curator and Director have around the space is punctuated by tracking lights that guide the actors’ blocking. This also helped guide the audience around their chaotic movements, but actors and designers worked together to anticipate timing and obstacles. Another example are the knocks from the sarcophagus that represent the Curator’s attempt to escape the confines of death function as the timekeeper, which is further emphasized by the Timekeeper’s constant indication of the Hour. When the Curator is physically in the sarcophagus, his knocks worked in tandem with the sound design to help confuse whether he was dead or alive, digital or corporeal. Further still, the media, especially in Hour 9 holds a distinct moment of digital puppetry. Ra appears to be physically going through the formation of man, as the digital Curator does the same, but neither is certain who is puppeteering whom.

As with most theater productions at UCSC, *A12* required a cast of characters—

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<sup>36</sup> Rehearsals were from 7:10-10:10pm

eight to be specific. The casting process was fairly smooth, considering I have worked with or was familiar with the majority's repertoires. However, when it came to casting The Curator, the challenge was much different than what I had anticipated. Originally, I wrote The Curator as a woman, already knowing that a male British Egyptian would be cast as The Director. The Curator was a woman not just because she functioned as my conduit or self-insert character, but because I wanted to balance the show; everything requires balance and order in Egyptian mythos, casting included. That being said, Egyptian nationality, or at the very least choosing someone of color was incredibly necessary for the show's success as a work of diasporic restitution. However, the casting pool of UCSC is not known for its ethnic diversity, and a man of Egyptian-American heritage that lived a life very similar to my own strolled into the audition room and blew me away. The choice of switching genders suddenly became a simple effort of switching some pronouns around, and all could proceed accordingly, the balance of the project tipping in favor of talent over accuracy...or so I thought.

As a woman, I learned from a very young age that my anger would be received differently than a man's, and that vulnerability is something to hide in a man's world. *Amduat* is vulnerable, the Curator spends much time pleading and begging with the audience to be understood and heard, the frequent plight of many women. During the rehearsal process, I kept telling myself that it was working, that those emotions would be read the way I wrote them if only the actor could contain the anger that veered towards violence rather than indignation. The more I sat and

listened to the final monologue of Act 1,

Knock Knock  
Who's there?  
Identity.  
Identity who?  
Identity who?  
Maybe you open the door and there's nobody there and maybe there was never a door in the first place and those knocks were nothing more than your heart beating in your ears as you realize that no matter who or how you ask, there's no answer to your questions and there's no way to fight it or *that* or *this* and so you stand *there* or *here* and so you wait for the knocking to stop because one day it will and you'll finally know that death is a comfort because nobody questions if you're dead or not or if there's a door or a person or a knocking or when your heart stops beating because all they want to know is who that body belongs to...what their name is...what their identity is. Who they were...Who they are...Who they're trying to be...Who I'm trying to be...Knock knock...Who's there?<sup>37</sup>

It angered me that no amount of explanation, short of actually reading for the actor, would make him grasp the feeling of smiling through the tears, of being helpless to the cards you are dealt, simply for being a woman of color unable to succeed in a white man's world. Those tumbling words ripped out of you like sobs from your throat said in rage and desperation, but inspiring sympathy instead of fear, *that* experience that feels exclusive to women. This moment alone made it clear that any

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<sup>37</sup> See Pg 92-93

following iteration of *A12* must be led by a woman, and that this iteration will always fall short of that vulnerability.



<sup>6</sup>*The Curator tells a knock knock joke*, feat. Luka Salib, Claudia Pilch-Caton, Angus Leslie

For the majority of rehearsal, the cast and crew were still working with a live script, as changes were being made as we worked through the intricacies of overlapping text, fight choreography, and simultaneous scenes. This fatigued the whole production, myself included, as I wrote and rewrote text while managing the number of other duties that were required of me. A live script was a necessary evil, however, as this is a new work, and when discussing the dramaturgy of something that has yet to be tested, plot holes are discovered and able to be amended. When working through some of those issues, it became a matter of transferring something to the digital space or moving lines from the digital space to “meat space” as we began

to call it. In some of the earlier table reads, we found that drawing attention to the fact that only two Egyptians were cast, and the rest of the cast was white was something the white cast members wanted more of in the script. We all felt it necessary to immediately address the problematics of white-washing Egyptians, and to do so, it led us to the farcical versions of the Pharaohs and earnest ammunition for the Curator and Director's arguments.

A great deal of time was also spent in meetings pitching the project proposal I believed to already have been approved months prior to this year's season. This led to sizable confusion and frustration on both sides, and while it was never overtly stated to myself, I became aware that this project was a point of contention. Before this process, I had never felt overt pushback on works that covered my race and nationality, but any and all protests were touted in *A12*'s direction disguised as polite remarks. For whatever reason, my show, and therefore I, was problematized, despite my best efforts to problem solve as early as possible. This culminated in a number of microaggressions, such as referring to the show as a "thing" for the duration of pre-production process, and myself as an "interesting specimen" on more than one occasion.

I will not mince words. I was treated unfairly. I was discriminated against—the reasons inconsequential to the fact that it happened and happened often. My protests were met with glibness or simply not responded to at all by the infracts. I note these events because at least 50% of the setbacks in making *A12* were not artistic, but bureaucratic, and integral when documenting the artmaking practices of people of

color. *Amduat* existed and *succeeded* despite efforts to down trod, demean, or neglect it. I would like to note however, the exceptional work that exceeded the call of duty on this project. My designers and the technical staff in both departments spent countless hours of their time aiding myself and the production despite the bureaucracy that undermined their official capacities. The university was not able to undermine their personal beliefs that I should be supported to the best of their abilities. These incredible people are the reason *Amduat* reached its full potential, for which I am indebted to them forever.

In many ways, *Amduat*'s critique of the museum as an institution was a response to my relationship with the university. I am competent and professional but I am still a student. This is a learning institution, but any moment I fumbled or made mistakes, opportunities to learn from those mistakes were met with threats and condescension that fostered the opposite. Those threats and condescension nurtured anger, betrayal, and a great deal of mental anguish towards those I am meant to respect and admire. They were revealed to be the monstrous, while othering me as “not one of *their* students.” Whether this treatment be racially motivated or not, these actions sent a clear message that my stories, as a young woman of color, are not valued by this institution, nor deserving of respect. By doing so, the university told me that I do not belong, that I am “unworthy of time.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Pg 48

## The Seventh Night

The audience spread was intriguing, as was their reaction to the work. None of these testimonies were sought out by myself as research, however there they help give broad impressions from reviewers not intimately aware of my thesis. Many students reacted much as I had when watching *The Odyssey* directed by Kimberly Jannarone my first year at UCSC. The immersive, locative quality offered, at the minimum, a new unique event for inexperienced theater goers, and they simply spoke of how ‘cool’ that was to see. Simply asking the audience to untrain themselves from sitting down for the entirety of a work can create autonomy as their bodies become active components in the viewership. Other diasporic audience members spoke to their relatability with the plight of the Curator and expressed their appreciation for hearing it frankly expressed. Egyptian audience members voiced their appreciation with seeing their culture and language on stage.

As an audience member myself, it was fruitful watching others experience *A12* as there were a number of things I did not account for in regard to participation. The audience was more than eager to get out of or into their seats with little to no prompting from the actors. Sometimes they were overly excited to sit as I failed to account for the precedent of seating oneself during a theatrical production. This superseded any of my own, or my actors’ desires to keep them standing. They are a well-trained audience. Many nights, they immediately rushed to find seats when first let into the House rather than look around the space. In the same way, I thought that getting them out of the seats would pose a challenge, but every audience proved eager

to follow their guides around, and seat themselves immediately when told. Moments of silence were greeted differently, however. Unsure of the level of participation, some audience members shouted out responses during the show, for instance, with the “Knock Knock” of the Curator greeted by an audience member’s “Who’s there?” I got a sense, at least during Opening Night, that the audience was not sure that it was over during the final black out, whether that be because it was in the round or that they wanted to witness more. Perhaps the instructions from earlier in the show are necessary until the very end of the show.



<sup>7</sup>*The Curator is wrapped in linen bandages by the baboons*, feat. Luka Salib, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton

*Amduat* could have been improved by having more personnel in general. I took on too many roles that were not my own for a number of reasons, but ultimately, that decision was too much. I drove myself into the ground, and that's not a sustainable art practice. The script, also, could have used a few more rewrites, I think

it went over well, but so many choices were my first, and I should have gone back and fine-tuned more things. While this set of actors were fairly self-sufficient as far as improvisation was concerned, and their input was invaluable in setting up some of the bigger audience interaction moments, it certainly could have benefited from performers whose expertise was crowd work. However, much of the comedic timing was a credit to their ability to think on their feet and be bold with their choices, for which I am thankful.

I also fought the pandemic to make *Amduat* happen. Try as we might to feel like we're moving forward, COVID-19 was a problem for the mounting of this production. I knew that proximity to actors necessitated that they wear masks and immediately contracted a fabricator to make artistic interpretations of each character. This show necessitates in person interaction to capture the immersive quality of ritual and museum visitorship. What I didn't account for was myself getting 'sick'. The three days I spent isolated because of a false positive derailed my rehearsal plans. My stellar assistant directors picked up the slack while I was stuck online, but nothing beats being there in person, as we learn time and time again. The use of fabricated masks was also a bit of a last-minute challenge. Sculpted, weighted pieces that also complied with the correct regulations became a challenge as design conflicted with logistical use and vice versa. Access to the actors and more diligent scheduling could have circumvented some of these challenges, but after enough edits were made, the masks became the necessary clarification of character needed for the production.

As I mentioned earlier, I wanted the audience to experience both amusement and education from the piece. In hindsight, the overlapping of certain moments of text detracted from some of the more historic educational content, but it was in the service of character development and the themes at large. Confusion was needed to exemplify chaos, and general entertainment came from grand performances and intricate media. The next iteration certainly should be done in a museum, or at least in a more locative world than a single black box. My original intent was to host a real walking tour but budget and personnel constraints prevented me from pursuing that idea further, and after much deliberation, being granted a shapeable space, I made a sketch of a much larger project. As much as I needed this to be a personal journey, following one main character, there is something to be said for depersonalization, and questioning the institutions of museums using the facets of the institution itself.

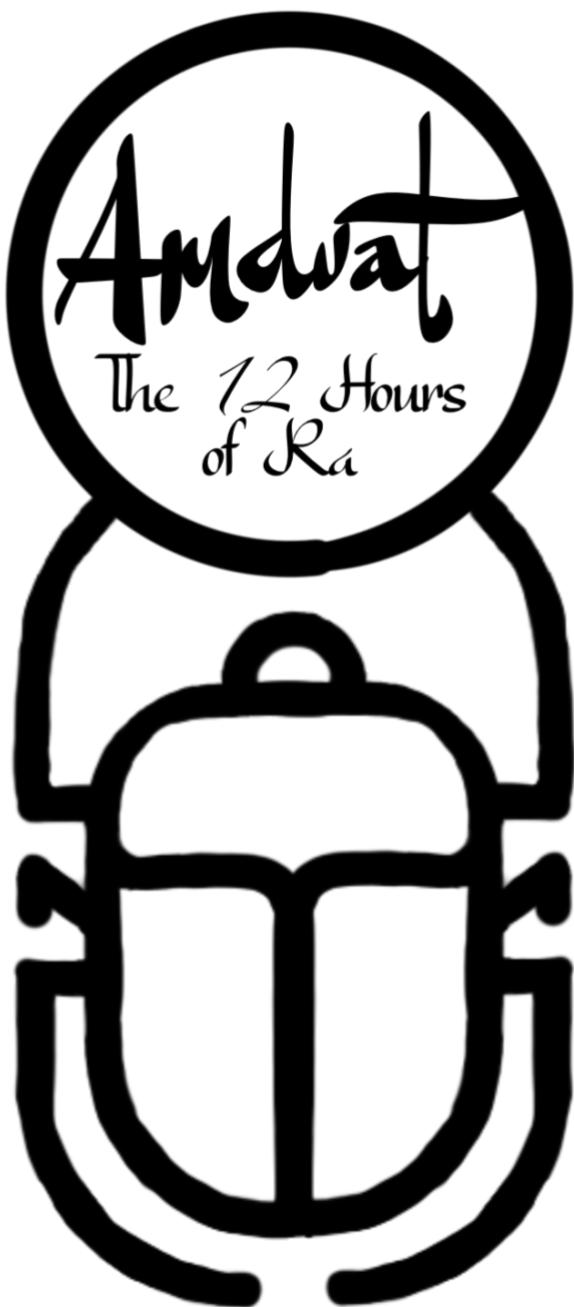
This work stems from my senior thesis film *Enlightenment*, which also sought to connect the past and present Egypt. It truncated time and confused the order that we experience events through memory and discovery. It was also about self-naming, which *Amduat* implements heavily. In the future, I am sure I will continue making works in the service of understanding myself and my diaspora and clarifying the image of Egypt as I see it developing. I am not sure, however, that this goal will be as apparent per say in my future work, but my journey making this piece will certainly influence the way I go about future projects.



<sup>8</sup>*The Curator declares their identity*, feat. Luka Salib, Jackey Genna, Celeste Legrange, Drew Vander Wheele, Emmanuel Ross Hartway, Angus Leslie, Claudia Pilch-Caton

The legacy of this work, I hope, will be the way it haunts UC Santa Cruz. I leave this university more whole than when I began, and the university is more fractured. I hope that this work sets a precedent for Digital Arts and New Media cohorts who work within the Future Stages concentration so that they do not have to fight as hard to have their work be presented in Theater Arts. I hope, also, that other diasporic students and people are able to find comfort in what I have made. As with most senses of self, *Amduat* will continue to develop over time as I continue to unwrap facets of my identity. The memory of the work will also change and documentation develops and people's memories of it alter. Memories haunt us; they find associations at the strangest of moments and alter each time we recall them. Memory is like myth. Perhaps witnesses of *Amduat: The 12 Hours of Ra* will view it, too, as a myth, ever changing and chaotic, yet ever haunted by the memory of a

sequence of scenes with no fixed narrative—haunted with the memory of their descent into the Duat.



By

Laura Boutros

<b>INTRODUCTION (PRE-SHOW)</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>MUSEUM ORIENTATION</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>HOUR 1 - THE JUBILATION OF THE BABOONS - WHO AM I?</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>HOUR 2 - ROSETTA STONE - NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT A</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>HOUR 3 - ARABIAN NIGHTS/ARAB SPRING - YOU WILL DROWN IN THIS SILENCE.</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>HOUR 4 - MOVIE MUMMIES - WE HAVE FORGOTTEN MORE THAN YOU WILL EVER KNOW.</b>	
	<b>71</b>
<b>CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT B</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>HOUR 5 - ISIS &amp; 9/11 - YOU DID THIS TO ME.</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>HOUR 6 - MA'AT (BALANCE) - I DON'T BELONG TO EITHER, I AM GUILTY.</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>INTERMISSION</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>HOUR 7 - AL NADDAHA - CALM WATERS DISTRACT FROM MURKY DEPTHS</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>HOUR 8 - MUMMYMANIA - THE EDGE OF A COIN</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT C</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>HOUR 9 - PLAGUES - IT'S DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE.</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>HOUR 10 - THE PROCESSIONS - WHAT IS A LEGACY?</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT D</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>HOUR 11 - URGE TO LEAP - I AM BOTH.</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>HOUR 12 - JUDGEMENT</b>	<b>120</b>

Character Breakdowns

Curator - Ra

Director - Apophis - Reporter

Akhnaton - Thoth

Cleopatra - Bast - Al Naddaha

Ramses II - Sobek

Hatshepsut - Isis

Luxor - Sinbad - Soldier - Fouad

### **INTRODUCTION (PRE-SHOW)**

One of the four PHARAOHS leads their tour group into the lobby.

PHARAOH

Hello, my name is [name] and I'll be your guide for tonight. If you'd like a copy of tonight's program, you can find a physical version here, or scan this QR code right here. For the hearing impaired, a pdf of the text is available here. Please make sure your personal devices are set to silent and that your flash is turned off so as to not to disturb the other guests. Your masks should always remain on to comply with COVID regulations. A pair of baboons will be loosed on you should you not comply. Be cautioned, performers will be making unexpected movements so please remain in the main playing space. If I, or another member of the museum staff request for you to move, please do so. The museum staff is outfitted in fezzes, much to their dismay. Compliment their outfits if you would like preferential treatment. We also request

that you do not touch the performers—once again, the baboons will not be kind if you do so. If you get lost, look for this symbol—

The PHARAOH holds up one of four symbols: an Ankh, Scarab, Lotus, or Cobra.

PHARAOH (CONT.)  
—here. We are the [symbol] group. You are not obligated to stay with the [symbol] group but joining another might disrupt the...balance. Do so at your own risk. Seating is available around the venue, but as this is a museum tour, “touring” the space is encouraged. There will be points where you are required to be seated for the performers and your safety. Please do not touch the performers as they are very sensitive. If for some reason you require other accommodations, or want to exit the tour at any point, please let me or one of the staff know, and we will direct you to the proper exit or personnel. Another warning: there will be loud noises, flashing lights, fog, swords, a gun, references to xenophobia, terrorism, and suicide. Questions before we begin? (pause) If there is nothing else, please follow me.

The Pharaoh leads the tour group into the venue. The main playing space is centered around a sarcophagus. An obelisk sits upstage and the Rosetta Stone opposite. Projected are the walls of an Ancient Egyptian tomb. As the groups trickle into the space, the PHARAOHs invite the audience to look around. The PHARAOHs bicker across the space as more audience groups trickle in.

## MUSEUM ORIENTATION

Once all of the tour groups enter, LUXOR and ASWAN come screeching into the space, calling to their master, THOTH. THOTH waves his hand to silence them. LUXOR and ASWAN go wild instead, motioning to the projections of the sun as it moves through the sky. They screech pointing, but the roar of APOPHIS cuts them off. A projection of a massive snake opens to swallow the sun. APOPHIS speaks with a primordial distorted voice. The PHARAOHS don't notice.

RA (VO)  
Wel-come-to-my-you-r-judge-  
ment.

APOPHIS  
(PROJECTED) PHARAOHS  
You are unworthy of time.  
It is time.

The four PHARAOHS move to a cardinal direction. The CURATOR's image is projected around the space.

CURATOR  
Good evening, folks, and welcome to the Egyptian Wing of the Museum of Historical Preservation and Modification! We have in store for you an exciting night of performance, discovery, and adventure. Tonight, is about the wonders of the Ancient Egyptian Afterlife. In 1842, German Egyptologist Karl Richard Lepsius discovered what we now call the Book of the Dead<sup>39</sup>, and 200 years later we are bringing it to life. Our lovely cast and crew have worked very hard to make a

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<sup>39</sup> (Britannica, Book of the Dead n.d.)

night you'll never forget, so please be sure to leave us rave reviews. As Curator, I am honored to chronicle the unique history of Egypt's mythology. This is a journey through time and space, a meeting point of the East and West, modern and ancient. Our artists and historians have mixed tradition and technology to bridge these gaps in reality to craft a new reality, if you will. Remember, "study of non-Western cultures provides more than just another perspective: it can challenge the most basic assumptions of both our theoretical and empirical approaches."<sup>40</sup>

Tonight's foremost examination is that of the life and legacy of Ancient Egypt's most prominent figures. How were their lives memorialized after their death? How did history remember them physically and spiritually? One of the prime symbols of Egypt's dead, especially in popular media, is the "mummy," a 'zombie' of a different breed, come to life through a curse of old. Although the classic 'zombie' is described by British historian and theorist Paul Gilroy, as "a

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<sup>40</sup> (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, 19)

body without a consciousness,"<sup>41</sup> Mummies retain their past selves, becoming a relic filled with knowledge of their former identity, and perhaps a divine power beyond even their own consciousness. My goal with this was to create an experience that provides audiences with the opportunity to do the same, to come to life, not as a zombie, but as a Mummy. Will you make choices that deem you worthy of entering the Duat, the afterlife? This is a journey of judgement, wherein chaos one finds order and in order, chaos. Where the sands of time, continue to fall. It is not for the faint of heart...Without further ado, welcome to *Amduat: The Twelve Hours of Ra*.

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<sup>41</sup> (Gilroy 2019, 179)

## **HOUR 1 - THE JUBILATION OF THE BABOONS - WHO AM I?**

Once the audience is settled, the lights dim. Suddenly the sarcophagus rumbles, a moan is heard from within, and a clock strikes one. LUXOR and ASWAN screech and clap, jumping up and down.

PHARAOHS

Hour One: The Jubilation of  
the Baboons - Decent into  
the Duat.

Spotlights go up on the PHARAOHS, one at a time.

CLEOPATRA

On an unknown date-

RAMSES

On an unknown date-

CLEOPATRA

On an unknown date-

HATSHEPSUT

On an unknown date I was  
found.

CLEOPATRA

On an unknown date-

AKHNATON

On an unknown date I was  
buried in my tomb.

CLEOPATRA

On an unknown date--

HATSHEPSUT

On an unknown date I was  
found buried in my tomb.

CLEOPATRA  
On an unknown date!

RAMSES  
On an unknown date in 1881  
I was found buried in my  
tomb.

CLEOPATRA  
You don't even exist!

RAMSES  
Well you're not even  
Egyptian, so ha!

AKHNATON  
Please you two, not this  
again.

HATSHEPSUT  
Let them bicker, it's quite  
fun.

LUXOR and ASWAN chirp. AKHNATON waives for  
HATSHEPSUT to continue her lines.

HATSHEPSUT  
Very well. On an unknown  
date in 1903 I was found  
buried in my tomb.

AKHNATON  
On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1907, I was  
found buried in my tomb.

CLEOPATRA  
On an unknown date-

AKHNATON  
On an unknown date-

RAMSES  
On an unknown date-

HATSHEPSUT  
On an unknown date-

CLEOPATRA  
On an unknown date, I will  
be found!

ALL  
I will be found on an  
unknown date.

Their voices begin to overlap, cutting each other  
off slightly. LUXOR and ASWAN nudge them inward as  
they speak towards the sarcophagus.

RAMSES  
Pharaoh Ramses II

AKHNATON  
Pharaoh Akhnaton

HATSHEPSUT  
Pharaoh Hatshepsut

CLEOPATRA  
Pharaoh Cleopatra  
Philopator VII

RAMSES  
The third ruler of the 19<sup>th</sup>  
dynasty.

AKHNATON  
The tenth ruler of the 18<sup>th</sup>  
dynasty.

HATSHEPSUT  
The fifth ruler of the 18<sup>th</sup>  
dynasty.

CLEOPATRA  
The last ruler of the  
Ptolemaic dynasty.

RAMSES  
"Ruler of Rulers," the  
Great Ancestor.

AKHNATON  
Known as Amenhotep IV.

HATSHEPSUT  
"Foremost of Noble Ladies."

CLEOPATRA  
"The Lady of Perfection."

RAMSES  
Son of Seti I.

AKHNATON  
Husband to Nefertiti.

HATSHEPSUT  
The rightful ruler, the  
heirless queen.

CLEOPATRA  
Consort to Marc Antony and  
wife to Julius Caesar.

RAMSES  
Called Ozymandias.

AKHNATON  
Worshiper of Aten.

HATSHEPSUT  
The body that launched a  
thousand theories.

CLEOPATRA  
The glory of her father.

RAMSES  
The greatest ruler of all  
Egypt.

AKHNATON  
The creator of a new Egypt.

HATSHEPSUT  
The Savior of Egypt.

CLEOPATRA  
The end of Egypt. And this  
is my sarcophagus!

HATSHEPSUT  
No! This is my sarcophagus!

AKHNATON  
It's mine!

RAMSES  
No, it is mine!

A thunderous voice interrupts their bickering. They cower. LUXOR and ASWAN howl. The CURATOR's face flickers, morphing into RA's.

RA (PROJECTED)  
This is my sarcophagus.

LUXOR and ASWAN screech and clap.

THOTH  
Enough. Either behave or I  
send you back to *Masr*.

They chirp bashfully. The CURATOR and DIRECTOR storm through the space arguing.

DIRECTOR

I'm sorry, but this exhibit isn't something we want to back. The doners don't find it...relevant enough.

CURATOR

Relevant? This is an Egyptian Museum! These are Egyptian stories. Those are my ancestors! What more do you want?

DIRECTOR

What *I* want is not relevant, and neither is what you want. And to that point, look at them! Look at this charade. Look at their skin, look at their faces, look at how *not* Egyptian they are.

CURATOR

I'm trying to tell a story. I've made some concessions but *this- this* is my identity! Who I am!

DIRECTOR

Yes, but who are you really?

The other Pharaohs step back. LUXOR and ASWAN stand on either side of THOTH. They start echoing his movements and words as best they can.

THOTH

I am Thoth, Djehuty, the Ibis, Hermes Trismegistus... None are my real name, the name weighed on the scales of Ma'at. In death, an

Egyptian's true name is written in the scrolls of Ma'at, a record of their passing, allowing them into the Hall of Judgement.<sup>42</sup> 42 laws, 42 names, they must recite to Anubis as he weighs their hearts against the feather of truth. If their hearts are lighter than the feather, and their words ring true, if the right name is given, they enter the Field of Reeds, to live eternal. Their lives are much the same as in this world, although prosperous. If they fail the judgement, if the wrong name is written, they are swallowed by the great chaos, Apophis.

LUXOR and ASWAN screech in fear as the projected APOPHIS swallows the light.

RA (PROJECTED) & GODS  
I am your guide.

GODS  
Mummification, the process of ceremonially preserving a human being or animal by removal of the internal organs, treated with natron and resin, and wrapped in linen bandages.<sup>42</sup>

RA (PROJECTED)  
I am called Ra. I am order.

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<sup>42</sup> (Mummification n.d.)

APOPHIS (PROJECTED)  
I am called Apophis. I am  
chaos.

RA & APOPHIS  
I am called dead. I am  
alive.

THOTH  
What are you called? What  
name shall Ma'at write in  
her book of judgement?

SOBEK  
You. Name yourself.

AUDIENCE  
[name]

BAST  
Now you, name yourself.

AUDIENCE  
[name]

THOTH  
In our land, it is not the  
name granted to you by  
another that is tested in  
the Duat, but the name you  
give yourself—that heart  
which is weighed on the  
scales of Ma'at.

The sarcophagus knocks one time.

PHARAOHS  
Oh, the next hour! [Symbol]  
group please come join me,  
the tour is about to begin!  
Come, come!

The Pharaohs lead their groups to Hours 2, 4, 8, or 10 which happen simultaneously. These Hours can be witnessed in whatever order but are displayed linearly here. In all cases LUXOR and ASWAN screech and dance on the sarcophagus.

**HOUR 2 – ROSETTA STONE – NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED**

The group is brought before the Rosetta Stone.

PHARAOH  
Hour Two: First Encounter  
with the Psychic Totality –  
Creation and Destruction.  
Ra reaches The Field of  
Reeds—a land of fertile  
crops and abundance of  
warmth and earthly beauty.  
“Four wishes are expressed”  
by the dead: “to have  
power, to share in the  
blessings of the gods  
(plowing and reaping), to  
be provided with food and  
water, and to participate  
in the continuity of life  
(having intercourse).”<sup>43</sup>  
It is 1799. Napoleon  
Bonaparte’s Commission des  
Sciences et des Arts  
discovers the Rosetta Stone  
in Rashid, Egypt while  
making repairs to Fort  
Julien.<sup>44</sup> Soon after the  
Stone is transferred to the  
Institut d’Égypte in Cairo  
to begin work on its  
translation. Eighteen  
months after Napoleon  
departs Egypt, the British  
land at Aboukir Bay,

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<sup>43</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 51)

<sup>44</sup> (What is the Rosetta Stone? n.d.)

forcing the French to retreat to Alexandria, the Stone along with them. After the French's surrender in battle, they refused to surrender the artifacts they'd pilfered during their expeditions to the British. One French scholar declared that they would rather burn their discoveries than turn them over to the British Crown, ominously referring to the destruction of the Library of Alexandria. A year later, the Rosetta Stone was moved to the British Museum where it still resides today. Many conquerors have imparted their language upon the Egyptian people, forcing them to adopt all manners of dialects and languages to conform. Communication of ideas between the ruling class became crucial to the end of the Pharaonic rule. In 305BCE the Ptolemaic dynasty began with Ptolemy I Soter, a companion of Alexander the Great, beginning a reign of Koine Greek speaking rulers. It is 196 BC: On behalf of King Ptolemy V Epiphanes, a decree is issued in Memphis, Egypt establishing the divine cult of the new ruler. It is the very same Rosetta Stone found in that resides in the British Museum. It is notable, however, not for the

contents of the decree, but for the three-tiered inscription. Topped with Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the second level is written in Egyptian Demotic, the precursor to Coptic and a phonetic interpretation of written hieroglyphs, and finally, Ancient Greek towards the bottom. Popular knowledge states that this was the first evidence of ancient hieroglyphs written alongside a translatable Western language, however, scholars soon found evidence to the contrary. This legacy of language holds true for the Ptolemaic rulers down to the fall of their line in Cleopatra VII Philopator. It is 51BCE, and after a tumultuous civil war with her brother and co-ruler Ptolemy XIII, Cleopatra claimed more power through her...alliance with Julius Caesar and his Romans. Her true legacy, in the hearts of the people, though, was that she learned the Egyptian language, the only Ptolemaic ruler ever do so. Politics tend to forget this aspect, her romantic endeavors overshadowing the comfort she gave her people.

## CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT A

They stand next to Hour 2.

CURATOR

Sir, this exhibit is a chance to explore the breadth of Egyptian history, not just of Ancient Egypt.

DIRECTOR

That's all well and good, but this personal angle you're using, that's not what museums are for. We display facts and history, nothing more, nothing less.

They stand next to Hour 4.

CURATOR

Facts! What about all of the colonialism—what England and France and the Ottomans and Italians took from us—where is that fact in your precious museum?

DIRECTOR

Come now, we acknowledge the colonialism. And even if we didn't, people would come anyway. People come to see the wonders of *Ancient Egypt*, they don't care about the modern Egyptians, least of all the displaced ones.

They stand next to Hour 8.

CURATOR

You're wrong. You know you're wrong, I can see it

on your face. I know you  
don't believe that; you're  
Egyptian too! How can you  
sit by while nothing  
changes? Don't you care  
about your people?

DIRECTOR

They're both my people, of  
course I care. This is the  
price I must pay to keep  
the peace.

They stand next to Hour 10.

CURATOR

Keep the peace? You mean  
keep the same structures of  
imperialism. If we don't do  
something here and now, we  
continue the cycle.

DIRECTOR

Don't be naïve. Those  
imperialists own  
everything. If you want to  
live in their world, you  
must make some compromises.  
Insulting them is suicide.

CURATOR

Well maybe it'll be worth  
it.

**HOUR 3 – ARABIAN NIGHTS/ARAB SPRING – YOU WILL DROWN IN THIS SILENCE.**

A klaxon blares, lights flash. A haunting version of "Arabian Nights" begins to play. Weaving around the space and crowd are LUXOR and ASWAN as SINBAD and ALI BABA. Notably, their baboon faces remain. Mostly, they move elegantly, but occasionally they contort in ways that average bodies shouldn't. Dimly projected are sand dunes. Whispers of "Aladdin," "Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas," and "Ali Baba" can be seen in the dunes. The Pharaohs invite the audience to seat themselves. Cheers sound in the distance, growing louder as people situate.

The Pharaohs move the audience to their seats.

PHARAOHS  
Hour Three: Rowing on the  
Waters of Osiris –  
Manifestation of the New.

SINBAD and ALI BABA draw their swords.

SINBAD & ALI BABA  
Oh, imagine a land, it's a  
faraway place<sup>45</sup>

SINBAD  
Where the caravan camels  
roam

ALI BABA  
Where you wander among  
every culture and tongue

BOTH  
It's chaotic, but hey, it's  
home

APOPHIS (PROJECTED)  
Egypt cannot deny its'

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<sup>45</sup> (Smith 2019)

chaos-

The two come together in the front of the sarcophagus, mirroring their movements, still reciting. Footage of the protest in Tahrir Square is projected, matching the cheers. Flashes of the protesters being forced out of the Square are seen. The joyful footage battles the violent.

ALI BABA

When the winds from the  
East

SINBAD

And the sun from the West

ALI BABA

And the sand in the glass  
is right

APOPHIS (PROJECTED)  
-order is not in its'  
nature.

SINBAD

Come on down, stop on by

ALI BABA

Hop a carpet and fly

BOTH

To another Arabian Night.

The footage and sound crescendos, until only a whisper of the melody is left when APOPHIS appears. Dark raging water replaces other footage. RA's voice occasionally blends with the CURATOR's. SINBAD and ALI BABA peacock, circling the space as if to wrestle. ALI BABA and SINBAD's singing competes with the sound of the CURATOR/RA as they overlap. The CURATOR circles around them, hypnotized.

BOTH

Arabian nights  
like Arabian days  
More often than not are  
hotter than hot  
In a lot of good ways  
Arabian nights  
Like Arabian dreams  
This mystical land of magic  
and sand  
Is more than it seems...

CURATOR

Sometimes when I go **to**  
**sleep**, I dream about what  
could be.  
Sometimes when I go **to**  
**sleep**, I dream about what  
just was.  
Sometimes when I go **to**  
**sleep**, I change what is,  
was, and could be.  
Lucid **dreams**-to edit sleep,  
to try alternate paths along  
stretching hallways, rewind  
moments of bliss, experience  
**reality** again-the **reality** of  
the **dream**.  
But they can't-you can't,  
can you? Would you **relive**  
**reality** again, just to  
rewrite **history**? Change the  
outcomes of your **lives**?

With the song over, SINBAD and ALI BABA continue their mock battle, competing for the audience's attention. Water and sand battle for dominance on screen.

SINBAD

You might know our names  
and perhaps our tales.

CURATOR

The clock moves ever  
forward, or, ever forward,  
the clock moves.

ALI BABA

We are thieves of old, like  
the great Aladdin himself.

I had a **dream** tomorrow. Or  
was it, I had a **dream** last  
night? It was of a **mummy**  
chasing me.

SINBAD

Ali Baba and the forty  
thieves!

The fear, it **drowned** me.  
I knew how to defeat it, I  
needed to say its' **true name**  
to banish it from this  
earth, but I didn't know it.

ALI BABA

Sinbad and the seven seas!

SINBAD

Crooks, heroes, legends.

ALI BABA

One choice, one treasure.

BOTH

One theft!

SINBAD

Ali Baba has stolen from  
the forty thieves the name.

BOTH

One treasure, one name.

ALI BABA

It was Sinbad, see how he  
attacks like a guilty man!

SINBAD

It was Ali Baba, see how  
that sword is wielded by a  
thief!

ALI BABA

A life of leisure just  
wasn't enough.

SINBAD

You couldn't resist a few  
simple words.

ALI BABA

A sailor who shipwrecked  
constantly.

I kept insisting, if only I  
had the **name**, this  
unstoppable force couldn't  
hurt me.

I hid, knowing the mummy  
would find me. **Dead. Rewind:**  
I grabbed a plank of wood  
for defense. **Dead. Rewind:** I  
would hit it in the eyes,  
except the sockets were  
empty... **Dead. Rewind:** I would  
hit it in the groin...except  
there's nothing there. **Dead.**  
**Rewind.**

ALI BABA

Sinbad has stolen from the  
seven seas the name.

CURATOR

No matter how many times I  
rewound my **dream**, it always  
came, and no matter what I  
would **die**. But then I gasped  
awake and stared at the  
sliver of **light** coming from  
the cracks in the door  
frame. **The weight** of fear on  
my chest echoed the **heat**  
coming from the vent above  
the door. I closed **my eyes**  
to shy away from the  
blinding light and  
suffocating heat. **Darkness**  
overtook me once more.

SINBAD  
A brother so feeble in his  
conviction.

ALI BABA  
Look how he deflects!

SINBAD  
Look how he deviates!

ALI BABA  
Say the words then.

SINBAD  
Open Sesame!

Their battle comes to an end suddenly, pointing to  
the CURATOR. RA speaks but no sound comes through.

BOTH  
(pointing) Guilty!

BOTH  
(pointing) Guilty!

LUXOR  
Aswan?

ASWAN  
Luxor?

LUXOR  
Aswan.

ASWAN  
Luxor.

CURATOR  
Wait!

LUXOR ASWAN  
Wait! Wait!

CURATOR  
Who named me? Who named me?

LUXOR  
I named you!

ASWAN  
I named you!

LUXOR ASWAN  
I named you! I named you!

CURATOR

BAST claps, and RA disappears. The CURATOR begins circling angrily.

BAST  
Enough. It was not meant to  
be clear. If all things  
were simple—  
straightforward, we would  
not continue to fight. (To  
audience) So who is it  
then? Rise and name the  
guilty party.

Whether the audience speaks or not, a long pause follows.

SOBEK  
You will drown in this  
silence.

The CURATOR mutters from the back of the crowd.

CURATOR

You Westerners took from us  
the only traditions we had.  
So we made new ones—adopted  
new ones—from our  
conquerors, from our  
captors, from our invaders.  
Reduced down to our bones  
we endured, as all harmed  
people do. Destroyed by  
gold and guns, *for* gold and  
guns. Garish displays of  
empire, and for what? Where  
is your precious empire  
now?

The CURATOR stares for a moment at the sarcophagus,  
and trudges off, head down. The sarcophagus knocks  
four times.

PHARAOHS

Ahem. If the [symbol] group  
would come this way, the  
next hour is beginning.

**HOUR 4 - MOVIE MUMMIES - WE HAVE FORGOTTEN MORE THAN YOU WILL EVER KNOW.**

PHARAOH

Hour Four: The Snake-Land of Sokar- The Dark Night of the Soul. "In the fourth hour of the night, we enter an entirely new region of the netherworld...the stream of life runs dry, and there is not enough water to carry the sun barque over the shallows...The stream of the netherworld, which was previously clear, is broken up into a confusing, zigzag path."<sup>46</sup>

Movie Mummies—Likely many of your first, possibly only, exposure to the concept of the Egyptian mummy. Allow me to take you through the brief history of movie mummies. Now, mind you, I'll be using the words "mummy" or "the mummy" a ghastly number of times in the next few minutes. To ease your ears let's name our fictional mummy. Any suggestions?

The audience can offer a name. Bracketed mummies will be replaced with that name.

PHARAOH

[Mummy] it is! The first major "movie [mummy]" originated with Karl Freund's *The Mummy* in 1932. This pre-Hayes Code film horrified audiences as

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<sup>46</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 78)

Universal Pictures star, Boris Karloff, donned a grotesque set of bandages.<sup>47</sup> In light of Karloff's success as "the [mummy]," Hollywood did what Hollywood does and attempted a few spiritual successors to the 1932 film in the early 1940's and again in the 60's and 70's. It would be another twenty-eight years before audiences see a [mummy] on the silver screen.

The mummy is the representation of the monster in the exotic. What we fear about [mummies] are our own bodies coming to life again. More so, we fear retribution for all the treasure hunting that has happened and currently still happens. Filled with moans and groans all previous humanity is stripped away from Hollywood's [mummies]. So what does it mean for a [mummy]'s humanity to be stripped away? It means that our understanding of Egypt and its relics becomes monstrous. It divorces the past—Pharaohs and their living bodies—from the present—the pillaging and simplification or erasure of their lives. [Mummies], it can be argued, are shorthand for Egypt. Egypt

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<sup>47</sup> (Britannica, The Mummy n.d.)

today cannot not be depicted as living and breathing, only as once dead. Egypt today cannot be granted complexity, only simple "others" that the Westerners must save. Egypt today cannot speak, only moan. And so, if the people cannot speak, it is easy to have *The Mummy* (1999)'s Rick O'Connell save Egypt and the world from the [mummy]. It is easy for the characters to ignore the warnings of Egyptians like Ardeth Bay and Dr. Terrence Bey. It is easy to get so lost in the hunt for treasure that suddenly the Egypt's people become the enemy.

The casting of the Medjay, too, is of note, in that Oded Fehr who plays Ardeth Bay, is of Israeli descent. In fact, every other major Egyptian character in a film, set in Egypt, is played by a non-Egyptian actor. The [mummy] himself Imhotep is played by South African actor Arnold Vosloo, with the only credited Egyptians playing the Hangman and the Camel Trader. What of the other Western Egyptian films? Cleopatra. No Egyptians. Gods of Egypt. No Egyptians. Night at the Museum. One Egyptian. That's something. The Prince of Egypt. No Egyptians. Stargate. No

Egyptians. Indiana Jones  
and the Raiders of the Lost  
Ark. No Egyptians.  
Moonknight. One half  
Egyptian. This show?  
[Insert number] Egyptians.  
Grim, I know.

## CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT B

They stand next to Hour 10.

DIRECTOR

Our people have forgotten  
more than you and I will  
ever know by *enduring* these  
conquerors. Kings and  
empires fall, but Egypt  
always remains.

CURATOR

Exactly! That's all I want  
to do. I want to remember.

DIRECTOR

Then remember your place!

They stand next to Hour 8.

DIRECTOR

You want to conquer the  
conqueror. You want to raze  
their nation as they have  
razed ours. Won't you miss  
your home when you're done  
with this fool's errand?

CURATOR

This place might have  
raised me, but it only  
claims my legacy, not *me*.  
I'm choosing to claim a  
different legacy—one that  
sees both sides.

They stand next to Hour 4.

DIRECTOR

You think you see both  
sides, but there isn't a  
both, there aren't just  
two. You and I don't get to

choose heads or tails, or even the ridges along the edge, we must choose a different coin entirely. Neither side, neither dichotomy applies.

CURATOR

I understand that, but-

They stand next to Hour 2.

DIRECTOR

We are not mutts, made from two breeds, but bred to survive a new environment. Perseverance is our lifeblood.

CURATOR

There's more to life than survival.

DIRECTOR

Enough! You're destroying their legacy.

**HOUR 5 – ISIS & 9/11 – YOU DID THIS TO ME.**

The room is dark except for the spotlight on the fifth hour, where a chair sits. The sarcophagus knocks five times.

AKHNATON  
Hour Five: The Mystery of  
the Cavern of Sokar-The  
Regenerative Force of  
Depression.

The projectors come to life. A single paragraph glitches on the black screens. A faint static hum accompanies the phrase.

If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear—never to see them again—you send them to Egypt.

—Former CIA case officer,  
Bob Baer<sup>48</sup>

Luxor, as an Egyptian SOLDIER, and Aswan, as a CIA AGENT, drag the CURATOR's limp body between them.

AGENT  
Out of my way!

They deposit him by the sarcophagus. The projected text is replaced with footage of a “still” Egypt, general life of the day-to-day citizen, and the image of the Director as the REPORTER.

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<sup>48</sup> (Mayer 2005)

REPORTER (PROJECTED)

Breaking news: I understand we have reports that a plane has just hit the north tower of the World Trade Center.

BUSH (PROJECTED)

Today we take an essential step in defeating terrorism, while protecting the constitutional rights of all Americans. With my signature, this law will give intelligence and law enforcement officials important new tools to fight a real and present danger.<sup>49</sup>

The AGENT begins to roll up their sleeves, pacing in front of the CURATOR. The SOLDIER drags another chair in front of the CURATOR. Projected on the walls are the names of falsely detained prisoners under the Patriot Act. Interspersed are convicted prisoners in bold/red. A compilation of reporters saying "ISIS" interrupts her broadcast.

ISIS

Darkness broods. We live in terror.

CURATOR

Please! I've done nothing wrong. I don't know anything!

SOLDIER

*Eskot! Khalaas!*

The SOLDIER slaps the CURATOR across the face.

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<sup>49</sup> (Archive 2013)

AGENT

What are you doing?! He  
might be a threat, but this  
is still an American  
citizen!

SOLDIER

What? You brought him here,  
to *Masr*, so that we can  
deal with him the Egyptian  
way.

AGENT

Just hold on. Let us at  
least ask questions without  
violence first.

ISIS

*Isis, ISIS.* Once I was a  
goddess, a terrifying  
mother, now the mother of  
terror.

The AGENT sits in the chair across from the CURATOR.

AGENT

Egypt is your mother  
country, correct?

A case file for the CURATOR is displayed, her name  
is blurred. Her nationality keeps flickering between  
Egyptian and American.

CURATOR

Yes! No! No, wait! I mean  
was born in America. But  
I'm Egyptian also. I am  
American-Egyptian! I'm  
Egyptian-American! I'm  
Amergyptian! I'm Egyprian!  
I'm-

SOLDIER

*Ya ibn il kelb! Traitor,*

infidel!

SOLDIER & AGENT  
You betrayed your country!

SOLDIER  
You say you are Egyptian,  
where is your birth  
certificate?

CURATOR  
No! No! I'm both. I swear.  
My father, he just didn't  
get one for me! You can  
check, he is Egyptian, my  
mother is Egyptian. I was  
born in America, but *that*  
makes me Egyptian. My blood  
makes me both. I'm both. I  
can be both! Please!

Footage of the Bush and Mubarak administrations are overlaid with the REPORTER's announcement. The SOLDIER and AGENT interrogate the CURATOR simultaneously with the report.

SOLDIER  
Liar! You don't have proof. Your parents—they did not make you Egyptian. I only see an American before me.

AGENT  
American born, but not by blood. A child of immigrants. We don't know where his loyalties lie. He has no roots. He was Egyptian first.

CURATOR  
I'm both! I swear!

*The SOLDIER slaps the CURATOR across the face, twice. The AGENT pulls him back.*

REPORTER (PROJECTED)  
"On January 27<sup>th</sup> [2005], President Bush, in an interview with the *Times*, assured the world that 'torture was never acceptable, nor do we hand over people to countries that do torture.'" (Glitch) "Rendition was originally carried out on a limited basis, but after September 11<sup>th</sup>, when President Bush declared a global war on terrorism, the program expanded beyond recognition—becoming, according to a former C.I.A.

AGENT

Stop! I told you to wait!

*The CURATOR begins to laugh softly.*

CURATOR

Amrica, America. The land of the free. The land I call home. Look at me. Do I look free to you? Go on, you join him. Be free American Agent, you're both the same. Neither ready to claim their bastard child. Show me you think I am guilty.

official, 'an abomination.' <sup>50</sup> "The largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel, Egypt was a key strategic ally, and its secret police force, the Mukhabarat, had a reputation for brutality. Egypt had been frequently cited by the State Department for torture of prisoners. According to a 2002 report, detainees were 'stripped and blindfolded; suspended from a ceiling or doorframe with feet just touching the floor; beaten with fists, whips, and metal rods, or other objects; subjected to electrical shocks; and doused with cold water [and] sexually assaulted.'" <sup>51</sup>

The AGENT pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and hands it to the CURATOR. The CURATOR stares at the handkerchief numb.

AGENT  
What is your name?

CURATOR  
You have it in your file.  
Why don't you just look?

AGENT  
I want to hear it from you.

CURATOR  
(beat) You think this makes you seem kinder? Makes you seem human? I don't care how you learn my name, it's all the same. My name-

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<sup>50</sup> (Mayer 2005)

<sup>51</sup> (Mayer 2005)

ISIS (LIVE &  
PROJECTED)

My name is not my own.

ISIS compilation again. The CURATOR is suddenly isolated, he looks at the audience.

CURATOR

My grandmother's name was Isis, *Isis*. I wanted to name my daughter after her. I can't anymore. I'm being punished.

ISIS

"Punishment always presupposes crime, my [boy]. There are no innocents."<sup>52</sup>

AGENT

Hey!

The lights return, the SOLDIER punches the CURATOR.

CURATOR

What have I done to deserve this?

The AGENT grabs the SOLDIER's hand to stop him from beating the CURATOR further. The AGENT and SOLDIER's case files are projected.

CURATOR

(To the audience) Please! Please help me. I will give you-your justice! Anything. I'll give you anything. Just please help me.

AGENT

I'm not looking for justice. I'm looking to stop planes from hitting buildings in my country.<sup>54</sup> I'm looking for-

REPORTER (PROJECTED)

ISIS, the jihadist militant group that dubbed themselves "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,"(glitch) some political figures, including the president of the United States, Barack Obama, use the acronym ISIL (glitch) The English word closest in meaning to "al-Sham" is the dated name for a slightly overlapping geographic area: the Levant.<sup>53</sup>

REPORTER (PROJECTED)

(glitch)-and that is a completely sound strategy, to fight terror with terror- (glitch)<sup>55</sup> -summer of 2003 at Guantanamo Bay. There were the guards who...beat him so badly they broke his ribs...drenched him in ice water to deny him sleep for months on end. The mind-numbing isolation in a darkened cell-<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> (Feitlowitz n.d., 9)

<sup>53</sup> (Britannica, Is it ISIS or ISIL? n.d.)

<sup>54</sup> (Mayer 2005)

<sup>55</sup> (English 2017)

<sup>56</sup> (Rosenberg 2021)

SOLDIER

Enough! We need real answers. Move.

ISIS (PROJECTED ONLY)

We are trapped in this cycle.

The SOLDIER pulls the gun from the AGENT's holster and points it at the CURATOR. The AGENT attempts to stop the SOLDIER again, but they physically fight over the gun. The CURATOR, composed now, addresses the audience.

CURATOR

"We ask and we tell and we cast the spell that we are under, which tells us what to do and how we shall be moved, here, where we dance the war of apposition. We're in a trance that's under and around us. We move through it and it moves with us, out beyond the settlements, out beyond the redevelopment, where black night is falling, where we hate to be alone, back inside to sleep till morning, drink till morning, plan till morning, as the common embrace, right inside, and around in the surround."<sup>57</sup> (pause) Well? Who wins? *Isis* or *Isis*. Soldier or Agent? Egyptian or American? Don't prolong the inevitable. My life is in your hands.

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<sup>57</sup> (Harney and Moten 2013, 19)

SOLDIER and AGENT continue their slow-motion fight. The TVs all show "American" and the projection screens "Egyptian."

THOTH

You are witnesses, you must choose for him. Stand and make your judgement.

The audience cast their votes, but it does not matter. The projections changes to a closed case file, stamped "Executed." The SOLDIER and AGENT hold the gun together to the CURATOR's forehead, the chime of the sarcophagus clock rings six times, and the CURATOR drops his head back.

**HOUR 6 – MA’AT (BALANCE) – I DON’T BELONG TO EITHER, I AM GUILTY.**

The scales of Ma’at sit empty. The beating heart of the CURATOR is placed on the scales, and it thuds with the weight. A dull knocking echoes in the distance.

PHARAOHS

Hour Six: The Corpse of the Sungod and the Rebirth of Light- Re-Union of the Opposites.<sup>58</sup>

CURATOR

Those of us who live in the middle can claim neither. We are guilty of impurity.

DIRECTOR

As Director of this institution, we thought it necessary for our audiences to experience the transition into the Duat to the fullest extent. Upon entering the Hall of Judgement, humans wishing to pass into the Field of Reeds are required to recite 42 laws to Ma’at—balance—before their heart can be weighed against the feather of truth. We will distribute for you here in a moment, those very same laws, and wish for you to join us in reciting them as the Egyptians would have.

The PHARAOHS begin distributing the laws to the audience. They speak while doing so.

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<sup>58</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 119)

### CLEOPATRA

"At the deepest point in the realm of the dead, the point where we reach the very edge of the primeval waters of Nun and their primordial darkness and where the domain of Apophis threatens creation with chaos and nonbeing, there lies a huge, ouroboric, multiheaded serpent with many faces, encircling the corpse of the Sungod in his form of Khepri."

### AKHNATON

What we are witnessing here is "the mystery of the awakening of the dead in the hereafter." This is the same "*mysterium coniunctionis*, the mysterious union of the opposites...[that] the alchemists searched over the centuries [for] in their attempts to produce their philosophical gold."

59

### RAMSES

Khepri—the scarab beetle form of Ra is also "the newborn solar child who is greeted at daybreak"<sup>60</sup> who must merge with the god's body. To do so, Ra is shown to be dismembered like Osiris, god of the dead but also child of Ra, before

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<sup>59</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 120)

<sup>60</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 46)

and after him. "Painful though it might be, this dismemberment is inevitable, for it necessarily precedes the union and regeneration: complete dissolution precedes complete renewal."<sup>61</sup>

#### HATSHEPSUT

"The Sungod can be understood as the incorporation of luminosity—a principle of consciousness in the collective unconscious. His corpse represents, however, the sum of all that has ever been made conscious in the past, all the cultural achievements of the human race in the course of millions of years that have sunk into oblivion, or into the realm of unconscious."<sup>62</sup>

Once all of the laws have been distributed, the PHARAOHS and DIRECTOR lead the audience in a recitation to the beat of the knocking heart.

#### AUDIENCE/PHARAOHS/DIRECTOR

I have not committed sin.  
I have not committed robbery with violence.  
I have not stolen.  
I have not slain men and women.  
I have not stolen grain.  
I have not purloined offerings.

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<sup>61</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 122)

<sup>62</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 125-126)

I have not stolen the  
property of the gods.  
I have not uttered lies.  
I have not carried away  
food.  
I have not uttered curses.  
I have not committed  
adultery.  
I have made none to weep.  
I have not eaten the heart.  
I have not attacked any  
man.  
I am not a man of deceit.  
I have not stolen  
cultivated land.  
I have not been an  
eavesdropper.  
I have slandered no man.  
I have not been angry  
without just cause.  
I have not debauched the  
wife of any man.  
I have not debauched the  
wife of any man. (to a  
different god)  
I have not polluted myself.  
I have terrorized none.  
I have not transgressed the  
Law.  
I have not been wroth.  
I have not shut my ears to  
the words of truth.  
I have not blasphemed.  
I am not a man of violence.  
I am not a stirrer-up of  
strife or a disturber of  
the peace.  
I have not acted or judged  
with undue haste.  
I have not pried into  
matters.  
I have not multiplied my  
words in speaking.  
I have wronged none, I have  
done no evil.

I have not worked  
witchcraft against the King  
or blasphemed against the  
King.  
I have never stopped the  
flow of water.  
I have never raised my  
voice, spoken arrogantly,  
or in anger.  
I have not cursed or  
blasphemed god.  
I have not acted with evil  
rage.  
I have not stolen the bread  
of the gods.  
I have not carried away  
the *khenfu* cakes from the  
spirits of the dead.  
I have not snatched away  
the bread of the child, nor  
treated with contempt the  
god of my city.  
I have not slain the cattle  
belonging to the god.

The CURATOR is wrapped in linen by LUXOR and ASWAN.

CURATOR  
Knock knock.  
Who's there?  
Identity. Identity who?  
Identity who?  
Yeah, identity who?  
Whose identity?  
What identity?  
Where identity?  
Okay so, my hair? That's  
definitely Egyptian.  
But my clothes? All  
American.  
My skin, Egyptian.  
My taste, a bit of both.  
When you have to make a  
decision, do you think with  
your Egyptian brain or your

American brain?  
What values do you use?  
Because I really struggle  
with that.  
I have to weigh my pros and  
cons.  
Will it disappoint my  
parents?  
Will it affect my mental  
health?  
Will that decision make me  
seem more Arab or less  
Arab?  
Am I white-washing myself?  
If I choose to make a  
burger instead of koushary  
does that make me less  
Egyptian?  
In America I'm seen as  
Egyptian first, then  
American, but when I'm  
abroad, they hear my voice  
and so I'm American and  
then Egyptian.  
When I go into a museum,  
should I feel kinship or  
sorrow?  
Should I feel bad that I  
dated the child of  
colonizers as a child of  
the colonized?  
Did you know that the only  
reason the Pyramids aren't  
in the British Museum is  
because they were too heavy  
to pick up?  
"So as a brown person"--I  
have to say sometimes--  
It makes a good joke too--  
"Wow you laughed when I  
tripped? That's pretty  
racist of you."

The CURATOR is picked up by the GODS, LUXOR, and ASWAN and walked around the space.

CURATOR (CONT.)

Where's the separation  
between a joke and the  
truth?  
At what point is it that  
there's no separation?  
That two halves make a  
whole?  
That neither battle for  
supremacy?  
That there's balance?  
Where in the world do *I*  
belong? Where *this*  
experience is all there is?  
Where duality is the only  
balance?  
Is it a myth?

The CURATOR is placed at the foot of the  
sarcophagus.

Knock knock.  
Who's there?  
Identity.  
Identity who?  
Identity who?  
Maybe you open the door-

The lid of the sarcophagus is opened.

CURATOR (CONT.)

-and there's nobody there  
and maybe there never was a  
door in the first place and  
those knocks were nothing  
more than your heart  
beating in your ears as you  
realize that no matter who  
or how you ask, there's no  
answer to your questions  
and there's no way to fight  
it or *that* or *this* and so  
you stand *there* or *here* and  
so you wait for the  
knocking to stop because

one day it will and you'll finally know that death is a comfort because nobody questions if you're dead or not or if there's a door or a person or a knocking or when your heart stops beating because all they want to know is who that body belongs to...what their name is...what their identity is. Who they were... Who they are... Who they're trying to be...Who *I'm* trying to be... Knock knock...

The knocking stops. The CURATOR is placed inside the sarcophagus.

CURATOR (CONT.)  
Whose there?

The lid is shut. The lights go out.

## **INTERMISSION**

**HOUR 7 – AL NADDAHA – CALM WATERS DISTRACT FROM MURKY DEPTHS**

Mist shrouds the room fully. The sarcophagus is now wrapped in fabric. A few of the TV screens flickers on, like an old television. The CURATOR is projected, blinking slowly. The clock strikes seven.

HATSHEPSUT

Hour Seven: The Wernes –  
Experience of Love through  
the World of Psychic Image.

On the opposite side of the room, RA enters.

RA

My people believe that the mortal is the mirror of the immortal—that a person is the miniature of the cosmos. Millenia ago it was called Alchemy—they used it to place everything in relation to Egypt. Later, the earth became the battle ground of heaven and hell, the underworld a metaphor of their sins. Like my journey—the eternal rising and setting of the sun used to keep the cosmos in check—their rationales changed.

“Humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return. To obtain, something of equal value must be lost.”<sup>63</sup> The world is cyclical, like the Ouroboros—the serpent eternally eats his own tail. Perpetuity, rebirth...purification.

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<sup>63</sup> (Funimation n.d.)

A column of light falls elsewhere in the space. Cleopatra, as AL NADDAHA, steps into the column, and begins to hum a haunting melody.

CURATOR  
(PROJECTED)  
Do you hear that?

RA  
Do you hear that?

RA  
Al Naddaha wails in the mist. Each night, on the seventh hour, she calls me away from my path. Calling for my name, for my ka. You sit outside of my barge, cosmic miniatures, creating her calls in your dreams. Your unbridled lust for love summons her, begging her to end the world, to ensure the sun never rises.

RA  
In the land of the living, (PROJECTED)  
Al Naddaha, haunts the Nile. She appears to pairs "The Caller" of men walking along the fertile banks.

Aswan, as SAMY, and Luxor, as FOUAD walk side by side a distance away from AL NADDAHA. FOUAD begins to be drawn in by AL NADDAHA's singing. The Nile banks are projected on the left, and the West Coast on the right, along with famous sirens in media, and *Paranormal* (2020). Interrupting the projections are bombs are falling stars and paint strokes.

RA

The sirens you know would sing for both men, but Al Naddaha is more discriminate, more (pause) balanced. She entrances one of them, speaking their name-rendering them dumb and obedient.

AL NADDAHA

Fouad.

(singing) Fouad. Ya habib elby. Fouad behibik ehwy. Fouad ana ayzek te naam maiya. Oum naam. Fouad...momken Fouad. Oum naam.

The CURATOR suddenly gets much closer to the screen.

CURATOR (PROJECTED)

My *Giddo* Fouad-Fouad, was ten years old during World War II. My mom would tell me that during the war, when bombs were dropping, he would sit on top of their apartment building in Xindereya and just watch them fall. In my head, in my dreams, that was always a sort of romantic image, like falling stars, calling to me.

RA

The hypnotized man is led into the waters of the Nile, leaving his partner with two options. To leave Fouad at the mercy of Al Naddaha, or...to try to save his friend from the clutches of the singing Djinn. Those of moral character would say there is an obvious choice: save the man from death. But my people believe in the magic

of balance. To save his friend, Samy is cursed to be Al Naddaha's next victim.

FOUAD  
Samy...

CURATOR (PROJECTED)  
*Giddo Samy, though, he traveled the world teaching, but it was his oil paintings that lived in my dreams. Exquisite pieces that captured the simple beauty of the Egypt he loved. I would stare at the twin frames of a basket weaver and a café patron hoping to live in their colorful worlds. I wanted what was inside of those frames. I was called.*

RA  
Equivalent Exchange. To save one man's life, another must be put at risk. Should Samy leave his hypnotized friend, he may live out the rest of his natural days. Should Samy choose to save his friend, Al Naddaha will begin to call *his* name instead, and Fouad is spared.

AL NADDAHA  
Fouad...

FOUAD  
Samy...

The CURATOR sits back again.

CURATOR (PROJECTED)

Samy and Fouad are my grandfather's names. Both of them are dead now—of uh sickness, one now, the other later. They were both engineers in the Egyptian Navy. I'm not sure why that's important. They uh lived the sort of lives that became my bedtime stories. Samy and Fouad. They spent their lives on the other side of the globe, and then they died, and I never knew either of them, not really. I was nine. No, I was twelve. They were stories, they were dreams, they were—

RA

Strangers...so, who to save? The sober man now, or the hypnotized man later? Fouad or Samy? Will you save your friend out of love? Condemn yourself? Spare the lustful man? How will you be judged before Ma'at's scales? Now or later. That is the test of the seventh hour. Now or later? Decide.

The sarcophagus knocks eight times.

RA

Hmm, spared of the choice.

## HOUR 8 – MUMMYSANIA – THE EDGE OF A COIN

The tour group is lead to the obelisk.

### PHARAOH

Hour Eight: The Sarcophagus of the Gods. "The sun barque has safely passed the deepest point of midnight...and the order of creation has regained a concrete structure." There is a "desire to 'become flesh' and assume concrete shape."

Obelisks, a sign of a Pharaoh's power and a dedication to the gods. Before you is a small-scale replica of "the obelisk of Hatshepsut, built in the year 1457 BC, during the XVIII dynasty... second biggest of all the ancient Egyptian obelisks. Made of one single piece of pink granite" the obelisk stood 30 meters tall.<sup>64</sup> It's matching pair crumbled in an earthquake. Hatshepsut was a controversial Pharaoh, becoming queen after she married her half-brother Thutmose II and then acting as regent for her infant stepson Thutmose III upon Thutmose II's death. Rather than rule as regent, she soon claimed co-ruler of Egypt and assumed the full powers of a pharaoh. To defend her controversial power grab,

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<sup>64</sup> (The Obelisk of Hatshepsut 2006)

Pharaoh Hatshepsut, or as us guides like to call her, Pharaoh Hot Chicken Soup, ordered that "she be portrayed as a male pharaoh, with a beard and large muscles."<sup>65</sup> We like to separate the past from the present, but the Ancient Egyptian legitimization of power is structured much the same as our own. Male is what matters. Despite her handicap, Hatshepsut's most major feat, went on to build one of Egypt's most famed temples: Deir el-Bahri, at the base of the Valley of the Kings (where she was buried. Being named king paid off. It is at the Wadjet temple of Karnack, however, that her twin obelisks sat. Throughout the years of colonizing Egypt, a number of other obelisks were plundered and taken to various Western cities. Paris, Rome, London, later New York, and even The Vatican, to name a few, all display stolen obelisks proudly in the center of squares or parks. Few acknowledge the function of obelisks to the Egyptians—that they were religious dedications, usually to Ra, and a commemoration of their Pharaoh. Seems rather ironic to place another religion's dedication to a

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<sup>65</sup> (Hatshepsut 2006)

different god in the home  
of Catholic religion,  
right?

The desire to plunder  
Egyptian artifacts in  
Europe reached an all-time  
high during the late 1800s  
and early 1900s. "During  
the Victorian era, the  
Western world was seemingly  
subject to an all-  
encompassing obsession with  
everything Egyptian, to the  
extent that the land of the  
Nile came to influence  
fashion, architectural  
style, gothic literature,  
and even the form and  
design of tombstones and  
mausoleums."<sup>66</sup> This  
obsession was soon named  
Egyptomania, or Mummymania.  
And such appropriation of  
Egyptian aesthetics  
continues today. In our  
very own capital sits one  
of the largest obelisks to  
date. Built to honor George  
Washington, the Washington  
monument is a feat of early  
American engineering. One  
must wonder if it, too, is  
a memorial of deification  
to a ruler as Hatshepsut's  
obelisk was to her.

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<sup>66</sup> (Baber 2016, 60)

## CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT C

They stand by Hour 8.

CURATOR

Their legacy? What legacy?  
Look around you, why don't  
we worship any of these  
gods anymore? Know that  
language anymore? Remember  
our history anymore? I'm  
trying to continue their  
vision! That's their  
legacy.

DIRECTOR

A legacy is *preserving* the  
past in the present. You're  
creating an alternate  
reality. Why are these  
Pharaohs not played by  
Egyptians? Because this  
fantasy is just that, a  
fantasy.

They stand by Hour 2.

CURATOR

(pause) Look at them  
feeding into the same  
aesthetics as the  
Westerners. They'd be at  
home amongst the Empire.

DIRECTOR

You think you know better  
than the Egyptians  
themselves? You're just  
like the Turks; you think  
they're ignorant. You are  
just as much a Westerner as  
the British you claim to  
hate.

They stand by Hour 10.

CURATOR

I don't hate them; I hate  
what they've done. I'm  
trying to create a future!  
A future free from that  
colonial legacy.

DIRECTOR

This is ignorance, not  
freedom. Leave the past  
alone to be dead and stay  
dead. You've made your  
point. Bury these  
delusions. Let everything  
return to as it once was.

They stand by Hour 4.

CURATOR

You know I can't do that.

DIRECTOR

Then accept your fate.

## HOUR 9 – PLAGUES – IT'S DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE.

The sound of the ocean lapping the sand rushes in. Whispers texture the waves. The sounds of Biblical Egypt rise above the whispers. The sarcophagus moans nine times.

AKHNATON

Hour Nine: The Primeval  
Waters of Nun, creator of  
creation. Please, sit, if  
you would like.

SOBEK saunters around the space, lecturing.

SOBEK

These chaotic shores are where those who have lost their lives to the Nile are carried away by the current forevermore.<sup>67</sup> Our people questioned how bodies and souls not given the ceremonial rites and burials would fare in the netherworld. You see, "The Egyptian word for 'to moor'—that is, to go ashore—also has the meaning of 'to die.' The deceased wished to 'land,' to arrive safely, to be moored securely at the shore of the other world. Such [is] everyone's wish, but it [held] special meaning for those whose bodies were in danger of vanishing in the endless expanse of the primeval waters."<sup>68</sup>

SOBEK stops in front of the sarcophagus. It moans and shakes in response. The CURATOR is projected on

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<sup>67</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 166-167)

<sup>68</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 169)

screen, as if recorded by a webcam, during a Twitch stream. The chat appears on screen. RA stands in front of the Twitch stream, appearing to puppeteer the CURATOR. Their dance mimics the creation of man and the introduction to the seven deadly sins. The sounds of the Egyptian natural world begin to create music. SOBEK reads from a Bible, like a sermon.

SOBEK

By this you will know that  
I am the Lord: With the  
staff that is in my hands I  
will strike the water of  
the Nile, and it will be  
changed into blood. The  
fish in the Nile will die,  
and the river will stink  
and the Egyptians will not  
be able to drink its  
water.<sup>69</sup>

The sounds abruptly stop. Drums begin building. The water turns red. The sounds of frogs layer over the drums. LUXOR and ASWAN begin to harass the CURATOR's projection.

SOBEK

Let my people go, so that  
they may worship me- The  
Nile will teem with frogs.

CURATOR (VO)

You are not him. You are not  
the Pharaoh. You are not  
that God. You are not *my*  
God.

Frog sounds are added into the music.

RA

We are all the same, child.  
This god, that God, your  
God. What difference does  
it make? We are all  
unknowable to you.

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<sup>69</sup> (Authors n.d., Exodus 7:17-18)

SOBEK

Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.

CURATOR (VO)

But if I don't know *that* God or *these* gods, then how do you expect me to believe in either?

Animal screams and the buzzing of flies layer over the frog sounds.

SOBEK

Wild animals or flies will destroy everything in their path.

CURATOR (VO)

I have to see you to believe that you exist.

SOBEK

Let my people go—the hand of the Lord will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field—

RA

The divine—chaos, order. It is everywhere. It haunts all things. Surely, *this* destruction is proof enough?

SOBEK

-festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land.

CURATOR (VO)

No, this is not how it happened. Go back. I want to go back. I order you to go back.

APHOPHIS laughs. The CURATOR appears to leave her webcam and enters projections around the space, searching. RA continues the dance. A thunderous lightning storm layers over the other happenings.

SOBEK

Let my people go, so that  
they may worship me- there  
is no one like me -for this  
very purpose-my name might  
be proclaimed in all the  
earth-hail fell and  
lightning flashed back and  
forth.

Projected is APOPHIS rearing back his head to strike  
the CURATOR. At the same time, APOPHIS enters to  
stand in front of the sarcophagus, face to face with  
RA.

APOPHIS

You still don't understand,  
this is your tomb as much  
as theirs.

Locusts have entered the chat, bleeding onto all of  
the other screens.

SOBEK

How long will you refuse to  
humble yourself before me?  
-I will bring locusts-  
something neither your  
fathers nor your  
forefathers have ever seen  
from the day they settled  
in this land till now.

CURATOR

My tomb as much as  
theirs...my tomb... My tomb?  
I'm going to die...Am I going  
to die? How will this  
become my tomb? Answer me!

Everything goes black & silent, APOPHIS exits.

SOBEK

So Moses stretched out his  
hand toward the sky, and

total darkness covered all  
Egypt for three days.

The clock "turns" 3 times. RA drops his head forward.

SOBEK

Every firstborn son in  
Egypt will die—There will  
be loud wailing throughout  
Egypt—worse than there has  
ever been or ever will be  
again.

The CURATOR screams in conjunction with the PHARAOHS. Ten bangs are heard from the sarcophagus.

CURATOR (VO)

I will die because of my  
denial...as they did. I do  
nothing and time continues  
to move forward.

## HOUR 10 – THE PROCESSIONS – WHAT IS A LEGACY?

### PHARAOH

Hour 10: Provision Clothes – Religious Renewal. Here, “the blessed dead are provided with new clothing” and Ra’s boat makes its way towards morning and renewal.<sup>70</sup> They contemplate time, clothed anew, and how to spend it. “Proper time is time spent and used in harmony with one’s heart and soul. Proper time is inspired time.”<sup>71</sup>

Saturday April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021, “22 mummies were moved from a museum where they had resided for more than a century to a new home, transported atop custom-made vehicles in a glittering, meticulously planned procession.”<sup>72</sup> “The lavish, multimillion-dollar spectacle saw 22 mummies – 18 kings and four queens – transported...to the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in what is called The Pharaohs’ Golden Parade.”<sup>73</sup> “The ancient royals who were on the move included Ramses II, the longest reigning pharaoh, and Queen Hatshepsut, one of Egypt’s few female pharaohs.”<sup>74</sup> “While ancient

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<sup>70</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 152)

<sup>71</sup> (Schweizer 1994, 175)

<sup>72</sup> (El-Naggar 2021)

<sup>73</sup> (Hussein 2021)

<sup>74</sup> (El-Naggar 2021)

mummification techniques originally preserved the pharaohs, for the move they have been placed in special nitrogen-filled boxes to help protect them against external conditions. Roads along the route have also been repaved to keep the journey smooth...The mummies were discovered in 1881 and 1898 in two caches in the ruin of Thebes, Egypt's ancient capital - modern day Luxor in Upper Egypt...While it is seen as a grand- and even fun - event, Egypt's mummies have historically been associated with superstition and foreboding."<sup>75</sup> "Moving the mummies has reignited talk of a pharaoh's curse, particularly on social media, after [Evergreen] blocked the Suez Canal, a train crash killed dozens late [March] and a building collapsed in central Cairo. Egyptian archeologist and ex-Minister of Antiquities, Zahi Hawass, states "The curse is good for TV, for movies and newspapers, but it's not true. There's no curse at all."<sup>76</sup> Some sources even claim that Howard Carter fashioned a curse based on Shakespeare's epitaph to simultaneously deter grave

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<sup>75</sup> (Hussein 2021)

<sup>76</sup> (Charlene Gubash 2021)

robbers and keep the press away from the dig site, although others credit this fabrication to the press themselves as there is no firsthand evidence to support such claims.<sup>77</sup> Curse or not, the superstitions surrounding the moving of mummies persisted, however the only people harmed in the events have been locals. The neighborhoods surrounding the three-mile procession were entirely blocked off, and locals were asked to return to their homes to watch the procession on television by the authorities. One could cite the pandemic to motivate such an instruction, but the media event was designed to reinvigorate tourism for the country despite the rising numbers. Even the original procession, the bodies handed over to the Ottoman Turks in the 1880s, created disappointment in the local people. Shadi Abdel Salam's depiction of the event in *Al Mummia* or *The Night of Counting the Years* (1969) highlights the contradiction Egyptians live in. The film follows Wannis, son of the clan leader, as he struggles whether to disclose the whereabouts of a cache of mummies or keep the

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<sup>77</sup> (Radford 2014)

location secret so the tribe can continue to sell the mummies' artifacts to the black market to keep the village afloat financially. It becomes a mostly silent meditation on what it means for an Egyptian to honor the past or present. Eventually Wannis decides to give up the mummies to the antiquities group, leading to a procession radically unlike the 2021 event. Cloaked in white fabric, the bodies are moved somberly, as if a secondary funeral procession to the boat which would move them to Upper Egypt to Cairo. Historical preservation cost this village their livelihoods, and although *Al Mumia* was not fully factual, it begs the question, what did this new procession cost the Egyptian people?

**CURATOR AND DIRECTOR ARGUMENT D**

They stand by Hour 4.

CURATOR  
Accept your fate? Is that a  
threat?

DIRECTOR  
If you don't start to  
create some order out of  
this chaos soon...

They stand by Hour 10.

CURATOR  
What? You'll fire me? This  
is what audiences want.  
I'll find some else—I'll  
find a way to do this right  
without all this pushback.  
What will happen to your  
precious museum if it  
suddenly loses its Curator?

DIRECTOR  
(pause) I was like you  
once. Filled with hope, but  
these institutions, these  
museums only feign chance  
to appease those calling  
for it. It's all an  
illusion.

They stand by Hour 2.

CURATOR  
But look at us. So close to  
the sun and not burning. We  
are the people on the  
ground making the change.  
Why not simply beg for  
forgiveness later?

DIRECTOR

Very well, then answer me  
one thing.

CURATOR

Anything.

DIRECTOR

If I let you do this, will  
you be satisfied? Will this  
ever be enough? Because if  
it is not, do not claim it  
to be something it isn't.  
Make clear to me and to  
them that this is not all  
there is—that there will  
never be an ultimate  
solution. That when the sun  
rises tomorrow, you will  
understand that you made  
this experience to feed an  
insatiable need to  
understand the  
unfathomable. Answer me.

**HOUR 11 - URGE TO LEAP - I AM BOTH.**

The CURATOR is projected standing on the balcony.

PHARAOHS  
Hour Eleven: The Renewal of  
Time

CURATOR (PROJECTED)

It's funny, I've always had a fear of heights. I get that from my father. He suffered silently—the only evidence: the tensing of his hand around my small one. He would warn me away from cliffs, from ledges, from danger. But up here, now, it's the view I'm focused on. You, the crowd. My audience. A mass of bodies all equipped with a consciousness and souls. All of you listening to me. Watching me. If I fell, would you catch me? If I jumped? Because that's what it is right? This fear of heights? It's fighting my urge to leap from this balcony right now. It's not about the possibility of falling, but my fear that I might choose to jump someday.<sup>78</sup> When I was a baby, I would look down from great heights—every couch is a mountain when you're that young—my head too heavy for my shoulders, letting the curiosity rule my instincts, finding

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<sup>78</sup> (Sartre n.d.)

myself freefalling, if only  
for a moment, of the ground  
becoming the sky and legs  
finding no purchase in the  
air. I felt the urge to  
leap then, what's changed?

APOPHIS stands at the head of the sarcophagus. A map of Egypt moves and zooms across the three opposite projection screens in tandem with RA's story.

CURATOR	APOPHIS
(PROJECTED)	You.
Me.	You must understand that
I must understand that rebirth is a constant process.	death is a constant ending.
Live as both.	Die as both.
Unafraid.	Afraid.
Leap.	Fall.

RA  
Two Muslim bus mechanics  
sit at a café, sipping  
their coffee in the Zeitoun  
district of Cairo, April 2<sup>nd</sup>  
1968.

APOPHIS  
Do you feel the urge  
because you're already  
falling?

RA  
Across the street is a  
large garage-their place of  
work-and next to that a  
Coptic Church. Mass is held  
inside when the two men  
spot a young woman on  
standing atop the garage.

APOPHIS  
Already leaping?

RA  
Thinking she would jump;  
they call to the girl. She  
offers no response. Worried  
for her safety they call  
paramedics.

APOPHIS  
Already standing on that  
cliff?

RA  
Still, she would not answer  
their cries of concern. She  
drew crowds and soon mass  
ends, and the congregation  
joins the growing crowd.

APOPHIS  
Already reached the floor?

RA  
Six glowing doves appear  
around her-a true sight to  
behold.

APOPHIS  
Already doing all that you  
prevent yourself from  
doing?

RA  
And then the sun rose,  
blotting out her image. She  
appeared the next night,  
and the next and the next.

APOPHIS  
Already know who and what

you are?

RA

The Virgin Mary, she was declared that night by the Copts, come to visit Egypt as she had all that time ago.

APOPHIS

Already have the answers?

RA

Come to warn of strife or come to bring it?

APOPHIS

Already?

RA

Soon after she stopped appearing, began the Yom Kippur War.

APOPHIS

Already?

RA

And so she continues to appear in a beam of light in times of violence for the country.

APOPHIS

Already?

RA

A blessing or a warning?

The CURATOR's image on the balcony fades. The sarcophagus knocks twelve times.

RA

LUXOR and ASWAN screech into the space and begin to jump on the sarcophagus. RA removes his headdress and hands it to APOPHIS. The baboons open the sarcophagus and RA steps inside.

CURATOR (VO) APOPHIS  
I am already alive. I am hereafter dead.

## **HOUR 12 - JUDGEMENT**

The audience is directed to watch a clip from "Bittersweet".

PHARAOHS  
Hour Twelve: Judgement.

UNCLE  
How are you Masry?

MASRY  
I'm fine.

UNCLE  
How's your father?

MASRY  
Uncle Hilal...my dad is dead now. He wanted to spend his last days here, but he didn't make it.

UNCLE  
Those people are strange. They migrate, waste their lives abroad, and at the end of the day, they say: I want to go home and be buried there. As if this country is a big cemetery. May his soul rest in peace. He was a good man. Tell me then, do you want to be buried here or abroad?

The film appears to reach the end of the reel, we hear it flip over itself for a moment before the projector powers down. The PHARAOHS have returned to their cardinal positions. Thudding and muffled screams come from the sarcophagus.

PHARAOHS  
It is time.

RA (VO)  
You are worthy of time.

PHARAOHS  
On this date, we were  
found.

CLEOPATRA  
On this date-

AKHNATON  
On this date-

RAMSES  
On this date-

HATSHEPSUT  
On this date-

PHARAOHS  
On this date, he will be  
found.

The PHARAOHS approach the sarcophagus. LUXOR and ASWAN lift the lid. The CURATOR steps out, silently, staring at the crowd. He takes a deep breath.

CURATOR  
On this date, I was found.  
I am American born,  
Egyptian bred. I am both.  
The legacy of Egypt. The  
future of America. A child  
of immigrants, grandson to  
Isis, Samy, and Fouad.  
Revealer of truth and  
creator of myths. I am  
called the Curator, and I  
know who I am. My name is

Ramy Bishai, and I am  
worthy of your time.

Lights out.

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