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## Chapter 9

# Cultural leadership and audience engagement

## A case study of the Theatre Royal Stratford East

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### Background

The Theatre Royal Stratford East's (TRSE) artistic director, Kerry Michael, initiated the Open Stage project, a comprehensive two-year consultancy with members of the East London community, to open a discussion with them about what they want to see on the stage. In particular, audiences and volunteers from the community will become co-programmers of the company's season in 2012.

The Open Stage project is dedicated to democratizing theatre, to listening to the voices and stories of those in the community who are not often heard, and to building a sense of empowerment and ownership of the theatre by the local community. And this process of empowering audiences involves, what the Artistic Director Kerry Michaels refers to, as 'giving up our power' by 'sharing it with people who want to come along to that party' (Michael interview 2011). By looking to their community and asking them what they want to see in the theatre, the TRSE is turning on its head the traditional cultural authority of the arts organization and the role of its creative leadership.

This chapter looks at the Open Stage project not as a manifestation of the individual accomplishment of the organization's Artistic Director, but as part of a whole-of-organization process, and as a critique of dominant patrician power relations that exist between many arts organizations and their audiences or communities. The Open Stage project, and the thinking that underpins it, can be

seen as a critical response to a cultural and political context in which arts organizations may operate as effective apartheid entities, separating artists from audiences. Such a regimen is reinforced in the cultural sector through a cult of leadership; artistic directors are specialists, visionaries, holders of special knowledge and expertise, whose work is appreciated only by aficionados and those 'in the know'. In the arts and cultural sector there is a sense of the exaggerated agency of its leaders; exaggerated because it tends to be leader-centric and focused on the achievements of individuals. Rather, this chapter argues that the task of facilitating and developing the engagement of audiences in the performing arts, requires new thinking around networking and public participation which in turn requires new models of distributed arts leadership, leading to organizational renewal.

### **Romanticized leadership**

The notion of the heroic or visionary leader comes from mainstream management theory and, in particular, theories of transformational leadership. In the arts and cultural sector, leaders tend to be in the transformational mode with a focus on charisma, inspiration, stimulation and individuality (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe 2005). Arguably, in considering the role of artistic directors and the gap that many arts organizations reproduce between artists/art-making and audiences, there is a tendency to romanticize arts leadership; artistic directors can be seen as having a quality of mystical allure. Research on romanticized leadership suggests that this occurs when there is a distance between leader and follower and where leaders maintain a 'magical' image of themselves that inspires 'follower worship' (Bligh and Schyns 2007, p. 237). As Fairhurst (2007) has argued, leader-centrism produces a view of dependent followers and the promulgation of the belief in 'the power of one' and the primary significance of individual action.

In her analysis of dominant notions of leadership, Sinclair (2007) identifies a range of conventional assumptions, including that leadership is about an individual performance despite the evidence that followers contribute to performance (2007, p. 28-29). The leadership in evidence in the current case study is of interest because it evidences a focus on followers. A recent contribution to theories of leadership has developed the notion of 'aesthetic leadership'. This is a shift away from thinking about leaders as charismatic and visionary individuals who identify and define meanings for followers, towards the notion of leaders creating events and opening up opportunities for felt-meaning ('sensory knowledge') so that those involved experience emotional attachment (Hansen *et al.* 2007, p. 545). The Open Stage initiative involves the creation of an opportunity, or series of opportunities, where the meanings that may be derived from participation are diverse, affective, and build attachment to the organization. Whether or not the leadership of this project is best encapsulated by the notion of 'aesthetic leadership', there is some evidence that the task of enhancing engagement in the performing arts through public participation requires new distributed leadership models. Jennings and Jones (2010) argue that there is an urgent need for such new forms of cultural leadership. As this case study evinces, leadership to enhance

public participation in the arts needs to democratize the decision-making process, provide opportunities for dialogue, and enable audiences/participants to become involved in shaping the experiences on offer (2010, p. 25).

In opening up a dialogue with audiences and community members, the Open Stage project can be seen to be informed by both a UK cultural policy emphasis on the relationship between arts and social inclusion, and new discourses within arts marketing focusing on audience experience and engagement. Durrer and Miles argue that these two forces are inter-connected – that marketing for arts institutions, dedicated to attracting wider audiences, is an explicit response to ‘the social inclusion agenda within British cultural policy’ (2009, p. 225). In their study of UK arts managers working for institutions which address ‘socially excluded’ audiences, Durrer and Miles found that new approaches to marketing depend on ‘a personalized approach that promotes dialogue, trust and relationship building and is maintained by...gatekeepers entrusted with the task of attracting ‘socially excluded’ individuals into arts institutions’ (2009, p. 226).

However, to see the Open Stage project solely in terms of either social inclusion or as a marketing exercise, provides a limited and largely instrumentalist rationale. What is striking about this case study is that it suggests a new model for leadership based on a democratic (and ethical) understanding of the responsibilities of arts organizations to the individuals it serves.

Leadbeater (2009) describes how, in a commoditized world, organizations tend to do things *to* and *for* people based on a number of deeply-rooted assumptions: ‘Knowledge and learning flows from experts to people who are dependent or in need. Organizations are hierarchies based on the power and the knowledge to make decisions. Authority is exercised top down. The aim is to define what people lack – what they need or want that they have not got – and then deliver it to them’ (p. 3). In Leadbeater’s admittedly generalized account of the way artists and cultural organizations tend to work, the artist is often seen as working in a field marked by ‘separation and specialism’ that allows an ‘uncompromising vantage point outside everyday society’ to produce ‘special insight into the world he stands apart from’. Such a view is long and deeply held within a profession that often requires ‘special training and self-belief’, but ‘often it seems modern artists are self-indulgently talking to a narrow coterie of followers’ (p. 4). It often produces, he says, art that is ‘done to us, as us and for us, but not *with* us’.

Leadbeater’s point is to assert the collaborative potential of the web and its capacity to ‘alter the way art is made and the roles of arts institutions, such as galleries’ (p. 5). This current research is not concerned with the web, but rather with the ethos and the imperative of arts institutions to invite us to ‘think and act *with* people, rather than *for* them, on their behalf or even doing things to them...to connect with other people with whom we can share, exchange and create new knowledge and ideas through a process of structured lateral, free association of people and ideas’ (Leadbeater, 2009 p. 5). Rather than perpetuate the distance between artists/arts managers and audiences, TRSE demonstrates how new

modes of arts leadership democratize the arts and open doors to new participants as part of organizational renewal.

### Approach

The notion of distributed leadership is useful as a way of understanding the leadership style at TRSE. It has previously been used by Hewison and Holden (2011) to encapsulate the recent radical changes at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). The RSC's move away from hierarchy ('with coercive, reward and information power concentrated at the top') towards a flatter and more organic management structure with an explicit shared leadership between artistic and management roles, provides a working example of a distributed leadership model (2011 pp. 38-40). As Hewison and Holden go on to show, distributed leadership is directed to the embedding of leadership within a wide group, and entails sharing leadership roles (2011 pp. 38-40). The TRSE's Open Stage project also exemplifies distributed leadership; Kerry Michael, as Artistic Director, has developed an agenda for the company around audience collaboration and dialogue; he has embedded this goal into the center of the organization (rather than turning it over to a separate department such as marketing, education or community outreach), and he has facilitated the building of networks that allow for new ideas and information to flow in and through the organization. In this way, the leadership role entails articulating and maintaining the organization's core values, building a sense of shared purpose across all areas of the organization and identifying and facilitating connections between people and ideas.

### Open Stage: Theatre Royal Stratford East

The TRSE began its life in 1953 as a political theatre collective called the Theatre Workshop, under the artistic directorship of Joan Littlewood. Dedicated to producing theatre for the working class, the TRSE repudiated the middle-class monopoly of theatre, and sought to produce popular politically informed plays under the banner: 'The great theatres of all time have been popular theatres which reflected the dramas and struggles of the people' (Eyre & Wright 2000, p. 261). For Littlewood a 'popular' theatre was one which reached non-metropolitan and non-middle class audiences and sought to inform and entertain them.

The TRSE continues to see itself in terms of its relationship to its community with the aim of 'reflect[ing] the concerns, hopes and dreams of the people of East London' (TRSE Annual Report 2008). East London's Newham Borough has a large immigrant community with over 100 languages spoken, and is London's youngest borough with a youth population of 68 percent (TRSE Annual Report 2009-10). Under the artistic directorship of Kerry Michael, the company sees itself in the role of empowering the communities it serves by 'giving voice to stories rarely heard', by developing young talent (including writers, directors and performers), and by producing new work which reflects the cultural diversity of the community (TRSE Annual Report 2008, p. 7).

In 2010, TRSE launched its Open Stage project – a two-year initiative designed to hand programming control over to the public to determine what will appear at the venue in the lead up to the London Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012. The Open Stage project aims to ‘research, devise, deliver and evaluate a new model of public engagement’ through dialogue, the embedding of partnerships with local people and organizations, and the empowerment of new audiences (Handel 2010).

### **What would you like to see in Open Stage?**

Open Stage began with recruiting 25 ‘co-programmers’ and over the two years of the project this has increased to 50. Co-programmers are volunteers from the community whose roles involve the development of relationships with local residents and organizations. Volunteers are cross-generational and from diverse ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the East London community. They were recruited through a range of channels including the theatre company’s website and email list, community and volunteer organization contacts, and word of mouth. Once recruited, the team of volunteers has engaged in a range of skill development programs including interview and communication techniques and administering questionnaires. The questionnaires were drafted with input from the staff of the TRSE, including Front of House, Marketing and Youth Arts and Education departments and the volunteers. The questions changed during the course of the project as a result of volunteer feedback (Handel Interview 2011).

On the pilot weekend the team of volunteers went out in pairs into the streets of Stratford to interview the public about what they would like to see on stage. Interviews took place in commuter and shopping areas, the library, bus stations, cafes, bars and in the mall. A total of 229 people were interviewed (from a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds) and were asked a number of questions about their awareness of, and interest in, the work of the theatre. In particular, respondents were asked, ‘What would you like to see in Open Stage?’ Once people had been interviewed in the street they were invited to come into the building, to meet the volunteers and the staff of the organization (Handel interview 2011).

The responses of interviewees delivered some specific information about topics of shows they’d like to see but generally the feedback was in the form of suggestions of genres people wanted to see on stage – pantomimes, real-life stories, comedy and musicals were the most frequently mentioned. This has led to the development of partnerships with other arts organizations involved in producing or creating works for children and families, dance companies, and comedy and music producers.

Since the pilot weekend, the community has continued to be consulted through surveys, questionnaires, interviews and online engagement about the programming of the theatre in 2012. From November 2010 to January 2011 volunteers and staff asked around 1,000 audience members and local residents for their views on what they would like to see. In May 2011 the

volunteers entered a phase of training in programming with the intention of using their research to curate a six-month season of works from January-July 2012. Their professional development included training in casting actors, licensing script rights, script development and collaboration with artists. In addition, facilitated sessions addressed decision-making processes, working as a team and project planning.

Specifically, the volunteers addressed the complexities of programming through skill development sessions with the artistic director. This involved a critical interrogation of the genre of musicals as this had been the most frequently suggested programming option that emerged through the consultation process. This process of interrogation meant that the volunteers were asked to reflect on the range of possibilities that the genre of musicals might include. At the same time, volunteers considered a range of operational issues such as budget and financial resources, facilities, target audiences, selling point and scheduling.

The excitement generated by the process also had the effect of encouraging TRSE staff to take ownership and build their active engagement in the project. Out of 33 staff members, 15 volunteered their time to take part in the project. They reported that spending time with the community volunteers was the 'highlight' of the experience. The feedback from staff generated an understanding of the importance of building the volunteers' sense of ownership of the building and the different spaces and activities that occur throughout it. Visiting directors and writers based at TRSE have been encouraged to give volunteers access to their rehearsal rooms and have invited the volunteers to participate in different stages of the creative process.

## Challenges

### Artistic directors and audiences

In an interview with this author, TRSE Artistic Director Kerry Michael identified a number of key contextual factors which informed the decision to undertake the project. In particular the TRSE is a major arts organization with the closest proximity to the 2012 London Olympics Games, and Michael and his team felt that they needed a project that would 'empower our community...to have some ownership of culture during [the Olympics]' (Michael interview 2011). By building and extending its community engagement, 'our conversations with the community', the TRSE would have a better understanding of the short and long term impact of the Olympics. While community engagement is a long-standing priority of the company, there is a need to 'put extra effort' into building community connection and outreach for the period following the Games, particularly in the light of the changing demographics of East London.

Beyond the immediate pressure of the Olympic games on the local community, Open Stage has been designed to 'test the organization's DNA' (Michael interview 2011). Michael sought to review the assumptions and practices of the TRSE; to 'not rest on our laurels' as an organization already well-known for its audience

engagement: 'If you keep doing the same thing in the same way, actually how do you know it still works, and how do you know it's the right way of doing things? By doing this program we have to deconstruct all that shorthand and we have to explain it again...and just remind ourselves of what we're doing'. Michael also identified the need to provoke debate about the role of arts organizations and their publics: 'I wanted to do something that was big enough and significant enough [to cause] debate amongst our peers and our funding bodies, and our sector about who's here for whom? Who's here to serve whom? Who's our paymaster?' (Michael interview 2011). The development of Open Stage as a co-production project has been developed as a challenge to conventional assumptions around the role of arts organizations and their publics.

The notion of co-production is not in itself new. Brown & Novak-Leonard (2011) identify a raft of practices within the arts which encourage a 'more immersive and interactive experience' for audiences and where 'the line between creator and observer' is obscured (2011, p. 6). Within the museum sector, partnership projects, public consultation, and advisory groups have become an accepted way of working particularly in the UK. Although there is a range of interpretations of co-production, Davies (2010) writes that '...it differs from a traditional process of production in that the producers and consumers work together in a joint process of production' (2010, p. 307). There are a number of distinctive features to the TRSE's Open Stage co-production project: the use of volunteers as cultural intermediaries; the whole-of-organization approach to audience development; and, of particular relevance to this chapter, the role of network-building as a key component of the organization's activities. All these features suggest possibilities for a new model of cultural leadership. While Michael is a key figure in the process, he is not the sole driver of it; he has had a leadership role in conceptualizing and articulating the relationship between the values and mission of the project to those of the organization as a whole. Along the lines of distributed leadership models described above, Michael's role has been to facilitate the entry of both more lateral and external voices into the process of generating and selecting ideas.

It may be that new thinking around arts and cultural leadership is overdue. Bourdieu identifies how familiarity with high culture is a scarce resource distributed along class lines (2000, p. 359). Following Bourdieu, scholars have noted the elitism of arts and cultural organizations where the gatekeepers facilitate entry for the like-minded: those who possess the cultural competence to decode works of art. It has been noted, for example, that within the cultural industries, and despite the variety of cultural forms and activities within the sector, the key decision-makers are frequently drawn from a narrow band or grouping, reflecting 'a very particular class background and habitus' (Negus 2002, p. 512). In his study of the British music industry, Negus found that the decision-makers are middle class white males who represent 'in condensed form, the preferences and judgments of a small, relatively elite educated, middle-class, white male faction' (Negus 2002, p. 512). In much the same way, Curran's (2000) study of the cultural values and social networks amongst magazine and

newspaper literary editors, publishers and novelists finds a similar, relatively small but dominant network of gatekeepers and aesthetic arbiters. In the museum sector, Durrer and Miles find that museums and galleries are often traditionally elitist institutions accessible only to individuals with the 'appropriate' cultural, social and economic capital (2009, p. 226).

Bauman discusses the role of arts institutions in policing the boundaries of taste: '... bric-a-brac promptly turns into works of art once it is transferred to a gallery whose walls and gates separate good art from bad (and, for the cognoscenti, art from non-art) (2008, p. 209). Bauman's uncompromising metaphor sees the walls of arts organizations as part of the 'cage/shelter' that defines the 'difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside' in the arts' (2008, p. 214). The caging (or sheltering) of art (in Bauman's terms) can make arts organizations tend to turn inward. Sterngold identifies how over time, many mainstream organizations, 'become preoccupied with their products ... become overly dependent on aggressive sales and promotion efforts ...and have a tendency to become myopic and inward looking over time ...' (2010, p. 78).

The inward gaze of arts organizations also has consequences for audiences; as Bauman indicates, arts institutions work for the cognoscenti to differentiate 'art from non-art'. Dervin's research confirms that such insularity delimits the organizations' apprehension of audiences. The arts sector tends to focus on 'arts aficionados' who 'mirror the characteristics of the very same individuals who administer the arts ...white, highly educated, professionals, upper middle and upper class' (2010, p. 246). This means, Dervin suggests, that 'arts companies are putting their efforts into a group with whom they already share a worldview ... '[with] common perspectives and assumptions' (2010, p. 246). For Dervin, this is principally a problem of communication which the arts sector needs to engage with more effectively (along with other service providers competing for attention); arts managers are 'beset by challenges around communicating their offerings to publics whenever those publics are not among the initiated' (2010, p. 245). For Davies (2010), the issue in museums is that museum staff tend not to have the necessary formal and informal networks into communities and that therefore 'if the museum's workforce does not reflect the population that it seeks to serve it will be more difficult for the museum to make links with that population ... personal networks appear to play a role in determining who the museum works with [and] it seems probable that museums with workforces that are markedly different from the audiences they target will be at a disadvantage' (2010, p. 317). One of the key features of the Open Stage project is its engagement in the task of network-building. It is doing this by using both formal and informal networks to recruit and involve external parties.

## Outcomes

### Leadership and networks

Bauman points out that the network (unlike the hierarchical organization) is notable for its flexibility and the 'extraordinary facility with which its composition ... tends to be modified' (2008, p. 13). Networks come about in the course of action and are repetitively recreated through iterative communications. Arguably, the kind of fluid, flexible, responsive and infinitely changeable nature of the networked organization is an antidote to the dominant view of arts organizations as places where information and ideas flow from the center first downwards and then outwards; from cultural gatekeepers to the initiated. Rather, TRSE can be seen to respond to Holden's call for cultural institutions to shift their focus from 'product to people' and 'to put in place measures to attract, educate and listen to a wide public' (2010, p. 60).

In sociology the social network literature examines social phenomena as activity across a network of 'actors' with various ties between them. 'Actors' refers to individual people or groups, and 'ties' refers to relationships characterized by a flow of resources which can be material or non-material (Williams 2005). Previously it had been assumed that strong ties between individuals and groups lead to social cohesion, and conversely that weak ties lead to alienation. Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1983), a major contributor to the literature on network theory, theorized that strong ties by themselves generate fragmentation as sub-groups in a community become isolated from each other, and weak ties lead to community integration and provide connections between sub-groups.

According to social network theory, where strong ties bring social support, weak ties bring new information. Granovetter posits that 'weak ties' are those that form a low-density network around individuals and organizations. An individual or organization with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the system, and the information he/she does receive will be localized and provincial, and as such insulate the individual or organization from new ideas. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to conduct an actor-network analysis of the operations of the TRSE; however my argument here, to extend Granovetter's approach, is that many arts organizations are focused on their strong ties; the intimate circle of stakeholders and cognoscenti (or fans) who understand and identify with the goals of the organization. The problem with this focus on strong ties and the absence of a more diffuse network of weak ties is that new ideas spread slowly and organizations can become inflexible and narrowly focused. This is relevant to the current case study which provides an exemplar of the diffusion of ideas through the connecting medium of weak ties, and shows the strength of weak ties in reaching socially distant and previously unknown targets. Many arts organizations place the Artistic Director at the top of a hierarchy with connections to the public through various departments such as education and marketing. The current case study suggests a different organizational model

where the community volunteers sit within a network that reaches out to the Artistic Director, the Open Stage team and TRSE staff in all departments, visiting artists, residents, audiences, other arts organizations, community organizations and funders and philanthropic partners. Ideas flow in and around all the 'actors' in the network which, in turn, evolves to accommodate and build on the information it gathers and disseminates.

Looking at arts organizations in terms of their capacities as networks focused on the strength of weak ties may seem an unlikely application of Granovetter's research (1983) which was specifically addressed to the process of getting a job and the role of personal informal ties in helping to secure a position. However, weak ties are also an efficient means for the communication of cultural ideas and symbols. Theatre companies tend to operate within small, closed and intimate social circles; TRSE's Open Stage suggests that the opposite is not only possible but desirable if the goal is to deepen and extend the audiences' engagement.

Mintzberg sees a key role for new models of leadership to enhance the possibilities for networked organizations: 'A robust community requires a form of leadership quite different from the models that have it driving transformation from the top. Community leaders see themselves as being in the centre, reaching out rather than down' (2009, p. 142). Hewison and Holden (2011) have noted, in their analysis of the radical restructuring of the RSC that there is something of a paradox in having a new co-operative and non-hierarchical organizational culture that has relied on 'the direction and coherence' provided through organizational leadership. The same paradox could be identified in the case of the TRSE where leadership has been a key factor in the move towards a decentered and networked organization.

## Conclusion

Audience participation and engagement projects are not beyond criticism. Indeed, to be successful, such projects need to be underpinned by critical thinking and the testing of assumptions. Freshwater argues that the belief that participation empowers audiences has become a 'compelling orthodoxy' in theatre and performance studies, an orthodoxy that is often 'reductively and uncritically' applied (2009, p. 56). She gives the example of UK theatre critic for the Guardian, Lyn Gardner's description of the appetite of contemporary audiences for active engagement and its connection to political empowerment: 'The audiences are already storming the barricades, it is up to the rest of us to give them a helping hand because the revolution has already started without us ...' (Freshwater 2009, p. 56). For the current chapter the argument is not that there is an automatic equation of participation with empowerment or political agency, rather that the Open Stage project, in fostering the active participation of community members, is taking a leadership role in reviewing and reassessing the assumed cultural authority of arts organizations.

Just as there is nothing inherently politically radical about audience participation, there is no guarantee that all exercises in audience engagement are of equal

quality. Lynch (2011) documents how in the museums and galleries sector, for example, there have been cases where community partnership programs have been unsuccessful. Lynch cites cases where insufficient effort was made to gather knowledge of local needs; in some cases community partners felt that the museum's claims of community collaboration were exaggerated or that they felt 'used by their museums...as a means to access further funding' (2011, p. 6).

In Lynch's research, key factors in successful community engagement projects are committed leadership, the active embracing of the values of the project by the whole organization, and the embedding of the organization within the local community whose members are understood not as beneficiaries but as active partners (2011, p. 7). Lynch's benchmarking of good practice underscores the quality of the Open Stage project; it is a long term commitment to produce not only an artistic product (in the form of a season of work in 2012) but also skill development for participants. The TRSE provides an example of the role of distributed or shared leadership. Following Mintzberg, the work of the leadership of the organization is, in effect, to embed a decentralized leadership across the organization; from its artistic director, to its project managers, and to the volunteers that are brokering relationships between the organization and its community. As Hewison *et al.* point out, such innovations in the leadership of an arts organization will help it to become 'sustainable, resilient, well-networked ...capable of growing its own capacity to act, and providing high-quality results for its customers, staff and funders' (2010, p. 117).

There is, finally, something poignant about the work of Open Stage coming to fruition at the same time and place as the 2012 London Olympics. Where the Olympics Games are defined by their appeal as an international showcase for elite, competitive, athletic performance, Open Stage sees its cultural role as explicitly local, aesthetic, participative and democratic. At this stage the benefits that might flow to the residents of Stratford East from the Olympics are not clear, however, it seems likely that those who have taken up the opportunity to participate in Open Stage at TRSE will have experienced an enhanced sense of community belonging. This is, surely, a good outcome for arts leadership.

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## Interviews

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Handel, C 2011, Manager Open Stage Theatre Royal Stratford East, interviewed 2 May 2011

Michael, K 2011, Artistic Director Theatre Royal Stratford East, interviewed 2 May 2011

## Questions

1. Discuss the model of leadership that the author describes as dominant in the theatre, and how the model described in this case study differs?
2. The Theatre Royal Stratford East has undertaken a different approach to engaging its audience in the process of theatre making. Discuss this approach and what might be its strengths and weaknesses.
3. In this case study, arts leadership is described as acting within a model of exclusiveness and privilege. What does the author mean by this, how might this be demonstrated, and what are the implications for arts leaders?

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